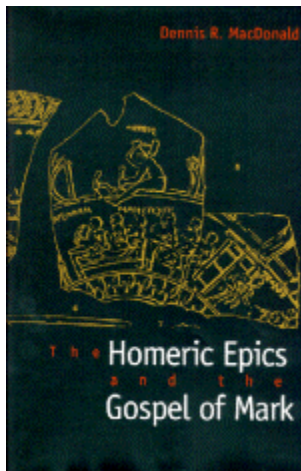


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MacDonald, Dennis R.

The Homeric Epic and the Gospel of Mark

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New Testament scholarship typically advances incrementally. Books and articles appear constantly that modify, refine, or develop established methods and dominant historical perspectives. Consequently, it is a pleasant surprise to read a book like Dennis MacDonald's *Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. It is a truly fresh, perceptive, and comprehensive interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, a remarkable accomplishment, given the considerable scholarly attention paid to this gospel of late.

MacDonald argues that the author of the Gospel of Mark used the Homeric epics, the *Odyssey* in particular but also the last three books of the *Iliad*, as his primary literary resource for composing his account of Jesus' life. To be sure, MacDonald has argued for Homeric influence on Christian writings previously (see especially his *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and the Acts of Andrew* [1994]; "Secrecy and Recognitions in the *Odyssey* and Mark: Where Wrede Went Wrong," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, edited by R.F. Hock, et al. [1998], pp. 139-53; and "The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul," *NTS* 45 [1999] 88-107). But to do so for an apocryphal writing or even for a single theme or story in a canonical one is not as significant for New Testament scholarship as doing it for an entire canonical gospel, and for the first one at that. For, if MacDonald's thesis is correct, then gospel scholars must not only rethink

their form critical model for the pre-gospel period but must also rethink their largely Jewish context for interpreting Mark's gospel story, In short, this is an important book that cannot be ignored.

MacDonald's book is made up of twenty-two relatively short chapters along with three appendices. More specifically, the structure of the book is comprised of an introductory chapter, then four chapters on major characters in Mark, then one on a theme in Mark, then ten chapters on specific incidents and minor characters in Mark, then five chapters on the passion account in Mark, and, finally, a concluding chapter.

The first chapter orients the reader to MacDonald's intertextual approach to Mark. He defines terms like "hypertext" and "hypotext," the latter being the text used in the former, so that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* become the hypotexts for Mark's hypertext. He then discusses six criteria for establishing Homer as Mark's hypotext: accessibility (the likelihood of Homeric stories being readily available to an author like Mark), analogy (the use of Homeric stories by authors other than Mark), density (a large number of similarities between the Homeric story and Mark's version), order (the same sequence of these similarities in both Homer and Mark), distinctiveness (details in Mark that appear only in Homer), and interpretability (problems of interpretation in Mark can be resolved by comparison with Homer).

In the following chapters MacDonald applies these criteria as he makes his case for comprehensive Homeric influence on Mark's gospel: on his major characters, settings, themes, incidents, minor characters, and on the passion narrative. The purpose of such imitation of Homer by Mark, as of ancient writers in general, was rivalry—an attempt to show awareness of a classic text but also to improve on it—so that for Mark Jesus becomes more compassionate, more powerful, more noble, more inured to suffering than were Homer's heroes, Odysseus and Hector.

Now for some specifics: According to MacDonald, Mark compared Jesus, not surprisingly, with Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*. Both are characterized as having "suffered much," Odysseus in Od. 4 and many times thereafter and Jesus in the so-called passion predictions (Mark 8:31; cf. 9:31 10:33-34). "Once the evangelist linked the sufferings of Jesus to those of Odysseus he found in the epic a reservoir of landscapes, characterizations, type-scenes, and plot devices useful for crafting his narrative" (p. 19).

MacDonald then turns to Jesus' disciples, whose less than flattering portrait has prompted various explanations. MacDonald suggests that Mark compared Jesus' disciples with Odysseus' equally disappointing crew. He compares Peter with Eurylochus, Odysseus' second-in-command. Eurylochus speaks for Odysseus' entire crew, tries to avoid danger and suffering, rebukes Odysseus, and was beguiled by a demon (Od. 12.277-95)—features that are paralleled in Peter's characterization in Mark. MacDonald

also intriguingly suggests a Homeric parallel for two other disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who are nicknamed “Boanerges,” or “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). They are comparable to another pair of brothers, the Dioscuri, sons of Zeus. Zeus is often associated with thunder, and the sons are depicted iconographically as on the right and left of an enthroned deity, similarly to James’ and John’s request to sit at the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom (Mark 10:37). Jesus’ opponents are then compared with Penelope’s suitors, whose violent confrontation with Odysseus when he arrives home (Od. 22) parallels Jesus’ confrontation in the cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11: 15-18).

MacDonald then turns to a major theme in Mark’s gospel, one long known as “the messianic secret,” a baffling set of passages that either encourage or inhibit people from making Jesus’ identity known. Again, various explanations have been offered, but MacDonald makes better sense of this secrecy theme than most by comparing it to a similar secrecy theme in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, like Jesus, must keep his identity secret from those who oppose him but can reveal it to those who are his allies.

The bulk of MacDonald’s book—ten chapters—compares individual stories in Mark with similar incidents in the *Odyssey*. Here’s a brief sample: the stilling of the storm story (Mark 4:35-41) with the story of Odysseus and Aeolus’ bag of winds (Od. 10. 1-77); the exorcising of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) with the story of Polyphemus (Od. 9.105-566); the murder of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-30) with the murder of Agamemnon by his wife and her lover (Od. 3.254-308; 4.512-47; 11.404-34); the two feeding stories (Mark 6:3 5-44; 8:1-10) with the two meals prepared for Telemachus, one at Pylos (Od. 3.293-94) and one at Sparta (Od. 4.1-295); the response of Peter to the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2-10) with Telemachus’ first meeting with his father Odysseus (Od. 16:154-307) and the figure of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) with the blind Teiresias (Od. 11.90-151).

When MacDonald turns to the passion narrative, however, he leaves the *Odyssey* and compares Jesus’ death and burial with the death and burial of Hector, the Trojans’ supreme warrior, as narrated in the last three books of the *Iliad* (22-24). Parallels abound: both Jesus and Hector are in the end abandoned, not only by their human allies (Mark 14:50; 11. 22.1-6) but also by their divine ones (Mark 15:34; Il. 22.208-13, 294-303); both have women mourn their deaths from a distance (Mark 15:40-41; Il. 22.405-7, 430-36), both have someone retrieve their body (Mark 15:42-47; 11. 24.322-691), and both have deaths that are understood as leading to the fall of a city (Mark 15:38; 11. 22.408-11, 727-32).

This brief summary touches only on the highlights of MacDonald’s intertextual reading of Mark—a reading that at many specific points is discerning, insightful, and even brilliant, such as the linguistic detail that both Priam and Joseph “dared to go” to request the body of Hector and Jesus (Il. 24.519; Mark 15:43) (p. 155). To be sure,

MacDonald's reading is not always convincing. The comparison between the death of John the Baptist and that of Agamemnon strikes me at any rate as the least persuasive (pp. 77-82), and on occasion the comparisons become difficult to accept because the comparison itself shifts. For example, in the stilling of the storm Jesus is first compared to Odysseus, then to Aeolus (p. 60); in the exorcism of the demoniac he is compared first to Odysseus, then to Circe (p. 66); in the feeding stories he is compared first to Telemachus, then to Nestor and Menelaus (p. 86); and in the request for a donkey (Mark 11:1-7) he is compared first to Odysseus, then to Athena (p. 110).

Nevertheless, on balance this book is worthy of serious attention and may well be right. At two basic levels MacDonald is on the right track. On the one hand, Homer's epics were a staple of education at all levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—so that any author, including the gospel writers, would have had a detailed, profound, and life-long familiarity with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is difficult for us today to appreciate how thoroughly literary Greco-Roman culture was, and Homer was the literary text *par excellence*. Consequently, it is likely that Mark and his readers would have known the Homeric epics better than virtually any New Testament scholar does today, and hence the epics could have served as a hypotext. At many points it is Homer, not Jewish scripture, - that provides the parallel, as in the important phrase “to suffer much” (p. 16; cf. p. 189).

On the other hand, MacDonald's thesis also conforms to trends in the study of Mark itself, as scholars increasingly are approaching this gospel as a story—indeed, as “a self-consciously crafted narrative, a fiction, resulting from literary imagination,” as Mary Ann Tolbert puts it (*Sowing the Gospel* [1989] 30). And it is here that MacDonald and some Markan scholars are challenging the dominant form critical model of the pre-gospel tradition, in which Mark, it is thought, received all his stories from Christian tradition and merely redacted them into a narrative whole. MacDonald, however, is probably right when he denies this view: “before Mark . . . no one had heard of Jesus stilling the sea, manifesting his glory to three disciples, sending disciples to follow a water carrier, or agonizing all night about his death” (p. 190). In short, Mark probably knew a lot less about Jesus than a form critical model would have us believe. Whatever tradition there was, it was formulated or handed on as a creed (1 Cor 15:3-5), hymn (Phil 2:6-11), or epitome (Matt 5-7), not as narrative. Consequently, Mark had much to do to make Jesus the subject of a biographical narrative, many gaps in setting, characterization, plot and so forth to fill in plausibly and possibly from the narrative *par excellence*, the Homeric epics.

The one problem I have with MacDonald's argument is with the book's structure which treats characters and then stories. This structure, however, does not take Mark's narrative form seriously enough. For in order for the thesis to work we have to be able to answer these questions: how soon, how obvious, and how frequent are the Homeric flags in the opening chapters so that the reader would be clued into Mark's use of the Homeric epics as a hypotext? As it stands, Jesus' characterization as one who would suffer much

does not come until 8:31, and the parallel stories do not really begin until the stilling of the storm story in 8:35-41. MacDonald does address the opening verses (1:1-11) but only in an appendix and then not with obvious and frequent parallels (pp. 194-97). Even so, MacDonald has allowed New Testament scholarship to take a giant leap forward.