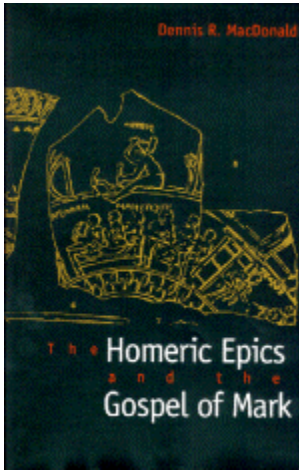


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MacDonald, Dennis R.

The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark

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As Odysseus encountered unexpected detours on his voyage, so too readers of this book will find an analysis of Mark that charts a fresh course. Dennis MacDonald's proposal, simply put, is that "Mark wrote a prose epic modeled largely after the *Odyssey* and the ending of the *Iliad*" (3). If correct, this would suggest the need for a significant paradigm shift in Markan studies. Scholarship has had, like the Cyclops, a somewhat singular vision, traditionally focusing on the Jewish religious and cultural milieu. Though its importance is not denied (e.g., 6, 189, 207 n. 27; regarding the LXX, see 16), it is argued that "the primary cultural context of the Gospel [of Mark is located] in Greek religious tradition, not in Judaism" (189). MacDonald's overall approach and methodology has been explicated elsewhere (cf. his *Christianizing Homer: "The Odyssey," Plato, and "The Acts of Andrew"* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]), but its application to Mark is new. In both Mark and the *Acts of Andrew*, it is observed that the authors essentially retold Greek tales (hypertexts; *Homeric Epics*, 2) in a Christian guise. These Christian versions of Greek stories are "transvaluative" in that they "articulate values different from those of [the] targeted hypotext[s]" (2). Such imitation (*mimesis* [Greek]; *imitatio* [Latin]) was not unusual in the ancient world (4-6), so MacDonald's proposal is a priori quite reasonable.

His thesis is unique, even bold: "during two millennia of interpretation, no one has suggested the parallels I am proposing between Mark and Homer" (170; cf. 7, 14, 44). But with novelty will come an inevitable line of questioning: If Mark's indebtedness to

Homer is as widespread as claimed, why has no one noticed it before now? This question is particularly pertinent, since it is argued that Mark actually expected readers to recognize the transvaluation of Homer (3, 189). MacDonald anticipated this concern, adding that even a sophisticated reader such as Luke is among those who seem to have missed the clues intended to point readers to the epics (6-7). Mark is partially responsible for this collective failure to recognize Homeric storylines because, while he was indebted to Homer, he was simultaneously disguising that dependence “by writing in prose, altering Homeric vocabulary, rearranging episodes, and borrowing as well from Jewish Scriptures.... Mark was no slave to his models” (6).

For the most part, the criteria used to evaluate the Homer-Mark parallels (see esp. 8-9 but frequently repeated, e.g., 42-43) are familiar, but MacDonald’s confidence in them is appropriately—even refreshingly—cautious, since “[c]riteria are tests, not laws” (8; cf. 173). He reminds readers that ancient intertextuality is complex and that measuring one author’s indebtedness to another is not easy. One particularly valuable criterion consistently employed is that of analogy, meaning that mimesis of particular stories is evident in the work of other writers as well. Commenting on similarities between the Gospel’s passion narrative and the *Iliad*, MacDonald shows how Virgil also imitated the epic: “Vergilian imitations [in the *Aeneid*] suggest that Mark’s imitations of the death of Hector was no freak. It contributed to a vital literary tradition of Homeric mimesis” (147; cf., e.g., 93, 152, 172-73).

Not only are readers reminded that the criteria used to discern literary indebtedness have their limitations, but MacDonald adds that *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* is not a synopsis placing passages with verbatim agreements in parallel columns. Rather, “for the most part the parallels pertain to motifs and plot elements” (9; on occasion, there are significant Greek parallels; see, e.g., 41). Here again one can anticipate objections from some readers who will find echoes of Homer to be too subtle to warrant any claim of dependence. However, the strength of the overall thesis lies in the sheer number of examples given. Repeatedly Markan narratives are shown to have undeniable similarities with Homeric tales, such as, to give but one significant example, the secrecy motif used by both writers (44). Even if specific details in the argument are questioned, the larger thesis put forward will not be so easily dismissed.