

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

An Introduction and Commentary

Joel L. Watts

MIMETIC CRITICISM AND THE GOSPEL OF MARK

An Introduction and Commentary

Copyright 2013 Joel L. Watts. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Wipf & Stock

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

ISBN 13: 978-1-62032-289-5

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

To all of those who write the changes of the world

What is an epigram? A dwarfish whole, its body brevity, and wit its soul

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

CONTENTS

Foreword by Dr. Jim West ix

Acknowledgments xi

Abbreviations xii

1 Introduction 1

PART I FOUNDATION

2 Our Kopsis: Mimetic Criticism 9

PART II THE CONSTANT

3 His Kydoimos 47

4 His Pedagogue 83

PART III APPLICATION

5 Reading Mark Mimetically: Jesus against Vespasian 105

6 Reading Mark Mimetically: Jesus against Simon Bar Giora 153

7 Reading Mark Mimetically: A Lucan Reading 195

8 Reading Mark's Scholia 211

9 Conclusion 238

Bibliography 239

Author and Subject Index 251

FOREWORD

JOEL WATTS' BOOK WILL NOT 'fall on the playground of the theologians' like Karl Barth's 'Romans' did. It will not shake the theological or exegetical worlds to their foundations and it will not mark a turning-point in the way biblical scholars do their work.

And those are good things. Barth's 'Romans' was more Barth than Romans (as many early critics of the volume showed quite clearly). That is not the case here for Watts doesn't offer readers Watts or 'Wattsonianisms', he offers readers a sure, steady, stable, sensible, and useful methodology for doing Gospel criticism in particular and biblical exegesis in general.

The theological and exegetical worlds do not need to be shaken to their foundations: they need to be utterly and thoroughly demolished and rebuilt from the bottom up. The way scholars have engaged the biblical text for the past 200 or so years has gotten us virtually nowhere. Fad methodologies have come and gone and we still can't assert with any sense of assurance that 'this biblical passage means this' (indeed, many would suggest these days that texts don't mean anything, it is only what the reader thinks that matters). Nor can we confidently insist that this or that biblical author wanted to communicate this or that idea. A new approach is needed. We need not build on the shaky and uncertain foundation of historical criticism: we need a new paradigm. It may well be that in halting first steps Watts' effort might lead us to at least the proper path.

Yet being something of a realist I understand that most biblical scholars will continue to utilize tools developed many, many decades ago. And that is a shame. Medical specialists utilize new tools and so do other professionals. Biblical scholars alone seem fixated on making use of methods long since abandoned in other fields of research. Biblical scholars are, it seems, excessively conservative.

If we at least were to entertain the possibility that Watts is 'on to something' (and I am not yet fully convinced that he is) then we might

Foreword

finally break free from our shackles and discover new facets of biblical texts which we have not yet seen.

The book at hand is a starting point. A first step. It is not, and shouldn't be imagined to be the 'last word' or 'the definitive treatment'. But as a first step, it is in fact quite bold. As the first salvo in a demolition operation, it is worthy of consideration. Let the demolition commence.

Jim West
Petros Tennessee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A SPECIAL THANKS TO my wife who insisted that I write a book. She is Polla Argentaria. To my children—Abigael, Landon, Sophia—do your homework. I want to thank Dr. Robert M. Foster, a true teacher. His kind words and care in constructing my own proper boundaries are appreciated. To Dr. Adam Winn, I offer my sincerest thanks as one who first inaugurated my interest in the Gospel of Mark. I want to thank those who suffered with the earlier manuscripts, Dr. Mark Goodacre, Dr. Jim West, Kelly West Figueroa-Ray, Robert J. Wilson, Rodney Thomas, and Mike DeVries. And a special thanks to Ric Hardison. Throughout the book, I make odd references to teachers and their students, so I want to now thank mine. First, let me thank all the teachers whose names I have long since forgotten. Lessons more than scholastic taught by Deana Peake and Edgar Beauchamp from Central High School (Baton Rouge, La) and Dr. Samuel C. Hyde Jr. (Southeastern Louisiana University), are still with me throughout the many intervening years. To Dr. Vivian Johnson, a friend, mentor, and thesis advisor I owe a great deal of academic shaping. To the members of Christ Church United Methodist and to the Pathfinders class (Charleston, WV), I owe a debt of gratitude for allowing me a place to think—and for not burning me at the stake when I thought out loud. To J.K. Gayle who first helped me to see beyond myself in the text. To the readers of my blog, I offer my sincerest thanks for your support over the years. To a select view, your friendship has rescued me from a dark night of the soul. Finally, because all should find a way to live on,

The Gospel of Mark was the first draft of a doctoral candidate's dissertation. He submitted it to his advisor who suggested the need for more background information about Jesus' birth, maybe some more teaching material, and a stronger ending. The student rewrote his dissertation and submitted the Gospel of Matthew.

Acknowledgments

His advisor thought the revision was much stronger but felt that the teaching material should be better integrated into the narrative, thought a story about Jesus' youth might be helpful, and suggested that the genealogy could be expanded back to Adam, etc. The PhD candidate did another major revision and produced the Gospel of Luke.

Once again the advisor was critical and asked for major revisions. Frustrated, the student took drugs and wrote the Gospel of John.—Jordan R. Scharf (d. 1982 after a battle with leukemia)

This work uses the abbreviations as found in *The SBL Handbook of Style*

Introduction

. . . HOWEVER, this is the beginning of that conclusion.

SEVERAL RECENT WORKS HAVE attempted to introduce the rhetorical tool of mimesis to Gospel criticism. This volume depends heavily on these works, but when it comes to criticism centered on the practice of mimesis, scholars have barely scratched the surface. Therefore, I will attempt to begin the introduction afresh. In (re)introducing mimesis to Gospel Criticism we will establish a better understanding of what it means to use mimesis as an examining tool. Ancient grammars were based on imitation, the practice of imitating previous texts to shape the Greco-Roman student. This tool also helped select sources for the imitator. If we are to examine the Gospels in their time and place, then we will need to take a sincere look at the normative educational practices of the time. If we are to look for sources, then we need to know the natural and artificial sources supplied to them.

This book will show Mark appropriates not only written sources, but manipulates several external situations to answer a crisis through the rewriting of history. Do not mistake my words; I do not mean to imply Mark makes use of a proto-document. Q does not exist and neither does Mark need to go beyond the Septuagint for a structuring source; however, by using mimetic criticism, we will discover not only the well watering Mark's imagination, but something more daring. We can know Mark's authorial intent; no longer are we left with merely a historical sketch of Jesus or a scripted theological treatise, but a colossal literary work deserving more attention. The failure to realize Mark may not have intended to write a factual report—but instead capitalized upon the plethora of literary tools at his disposal to shape *history* by rebelling against social constructs forcing his community into crisis—limits

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

historical criticism.¹ What is Mark's purpose here? Does Mark want to re-craft a story as an unoriginal compiler—or is he up to something more? What if Mark is not relating a biography of Jesus? I suggest Mark writes to *effect* future history and to rescue the present from the past. Mark does not mythologize Jesus (the past) in his Gospel (future), but mythologizes the present in such a way as to bring an end to an ideological crisis. This book sets the stage for Mark to display his innovative originality in an epic Jewish-Roman tradition. It is, although purposely brief, only an introduction.

Philosophy

A sound methodology is important to any criticism. To that end, I want to establish the basic philosophy of the book, beginning with the greatest fear about the future of my criticism. The threat of “parallelomania” remains ever present in any commitment to uncover the mystery of ancient literary sources. The concept was coined by Dr. Samuel Sandmel during his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature. He writes, “The key word in my essay is extravagance. I am not denying literary parallels and literary influence exist as source and derivation. I am not seeking to discourage the study of these parallels, but, especially in the case of the Qumran documents, to encourage them. However, I am speaking words of caution about exaggerations about the parallels and about source and derivation. I shall not exhaust what might be said in all the areas which members of this Society might be interested in, but confine myself to the areas of rabbinic literature and the gospels, Philo and Paul, and the Dead Sea Scrolls and the NT.”² He encourages scholars to move past abstract thoughts and into the realm of likeliness. Sandmel still speaks to us today, warning the historical critic and theologian alike to walk carefully in dissecting the evolution of a literary work so as to not embarrass themselves and to cast doubt upon their work.

Often, scholars find it tempting to stretch out similar details best explained through normal conventions, such as language, forcing them together to create a false sense of parallelism, such as in the work of Kersey Graves, the infamous nineteenth century skeptic. In

1. *History* means to reflect “Mark’s story,” or Mark’s contextualizing of history.
2. Sandmel, *Parallelomania*, 1–13.

his estimation, the Evangelists simply repeat cultural myths following other pagan sources when creating their stories of Jesus. His work goes too far in assigning parallels without understanding contextualization and thus even modern mythicists, surprisingly, dismiss him.³

I too find it titillating to wonder as I wander across Mark's landscape what else I might illicitly pull from the Gospel. For example, in discussing Mark as a counter to Roman imperial ideology, the possibility is tempting to see the twelve apostles not as a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel, but as reference to the twelve Caesars of Rome.⁴ Perhaps we could do as many cultural critics do and suggest a speculative connection between Christianity and Roman cults or Greek mystery religions. Christianity becomes nothing more than a hodgepodge of pagan religions synthesized without any accounting for its independent origins in Early Judaism. This, like Graves, fails to consider the extremely important concept of intertextuality, contextualizing, and the social memory. To avoid the legitimizing of pseudo-scholarship like Graves and other mythicists this book will resist unclear connections. Only clear and purposeful connections are made.

Mimetic criticism does not subsist only of mimicking or mirroring; therefore, connections simply appearing to look alike are not identified through this form of examination. After all, contextualization prevails as a very human attribute still common today. For example, just pay attention to those who examine the daily news through the lens of the Book of Revelation. One is not the source of the other, only a poor view.

Before we continue, I want to focus on the use of Classical Studies in approaching the New Testament. If we are to treat the New Testament honestly, then we must not remove it from its historical Greco-Roman-Judean setting. The New Testament is a theological book used by Christians if taken as a whole, and before this, there was some

3. Several recent works have attempted to portray the search for the Historical Jesus as seriously flawed, not because of modern criteria, but because Jesus never existed. This goes from the more outlandish view that Jesus is a spiritual being only in heaven to the idea that one can use mathematical formulas to determine the probability of the existence of the Historical Jesus. See, Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes' Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus*; Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David*; Thompson and Verenna, *Is This Not the Carpenter? A forthcoming work by Maurice Casey aims to put nails in the coffin of mythicism. Entitled *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?*, it is scheduled for publication sometime in 2013.*

4. Suetonius's work provides for twelve Caesars from Julius to Domitian, fitting well a very late date for Mark's composition.

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

assembly required. It exists as a whole *because* of Christian theology. These parts were hardly *Christian* theology at the outset. The *Epistle to the Romans* existed first as an ideological letter to convince those in Rome who already believed in Jesus to adopt Paul's gospel and thus become his students. He would maintain he had the proper theology of Jesus, Israel, and Scripture against others who were preaching about Jesus. To get to the heart of Paul's letter, we must move past the patina of the Christian theology of Calvin and Luther and instead understand the author's rhetorical investment, not with Christianity, but with a mid-first century Roman persuasive style the author used to counter mid-first century Jewish sectarianism.⁵

The Gospels and Jesus need a likewise examination. Scholars must treat Jesus as a historical figure apart *from*—but sympathetic *to*—early Christian tradition. The Gospels are literary compositions similar to forms existing in late first century milieus of Roman and Judean schools of rhetoric and religion. Whereas studying Second Temple Judaism helps us to understand the nature of rewritten Scripture and the role Scripture played in the Jewish community, Classicism helps us position the audience in the Greco-Roman world. Thus, Classicism gives us a better edge in discovering how the audience in classical antiquity would hear, appreciate, respond to, or perhaps even laugh at the production of the Gospels. Scholars are not meant to judge the truthfulness of the text's proclamation, only to measure how the author aroused the passions of the audience in the text to disseminate the message.

This book expects to engage Classicists, New Testament scholars, and theologians alike. The philosophy remains unadulterated in this regard because the premise is modest. First, Mark writes among others of the Silver Age of Rome. Second, Mark's Gospel dates half a generation after Paul writings, and most likely, had Paul in view as he birthed his creation. Unlike Paul, Mark faced a severe crisis centered on the person of Jesus—a person somewhat interpreted through the Pauline (and Petrine, although we know little of the actual Petrine influence) community. Therefore, I will contend for a synthesis (Christianity) of Roman propaganda (thesis) and Jewish resistance (antithesis) in reading

5. Christian theology is meant to represent theology formed from the New Testament through Christian tradition. This involves such matters as the Trinity and Justification. New Testament theology is the theology in transition. It is moving from sectarianism Jewish theology to a theology of Scripture and events seen through the experience of Jesus.

Mark's Gospel. Real theology is built upon a proper understanding of the context and historical meaning of Scripture. What I hope to do with this book is to primarily help further the significance of mimetic criticism as a basis for reading the *Gospel of Mark* through Mark's context. It will also help to decipher the Historical Jesus in Mark's Gospel. What the theologians do with the results, if they decide to accept them at all, will be up to them.

One final word concerning the philosophy of this book. Christian Tradition has assigned the authorship of this Gospel to the canonical John Mark. This book is not about identifying the author of the work, something otherwise impossible, only the rhetorical strategies of the author.⁶ The author, for no other reason than Tradition, will simply be named Mark and thus the Gospel will retain this name. We need not judge Tradition as too ideological to serve a purpose, but must make use of it cautiously. No doubt, this author was a male, given the period, so inclusive language is not used unless otherwise allowed. Further, this book will not attempt to judge the author of the work for faults or failures of the work, neither any of the characters contained therein.

Overview

The book is divided into ten chapters. We will give hope to the wayward Gospel critic and (re)introduce mimetic criticism in chapter 3. We will begin by summarizing several recent critiques of the Gospel using imitation, as well as enunciate the limitations of these studies. We will then examine mimesis so that moving forward the reader will have a firm historical understanding of the role imitation has played in Plato, Aristotle, Virgil and others in literary and cultural phenomenon. Once established, we will explore the tools of mimesis such as intertextuality and allusion. Our hope is to cement the difference between borrowing preexisting patterns (intertextuality) and building a work mnemonically and metonymically out of these devices (mimetic), as well as establish that allusions are purposeful tools of the author. The purposed creation is important to mimetic criticism. This chapter concludes with a clear definition of mimetic criticism.

The third chapter explores various details about Mark, such as his social situation, the crucial impetus for his writing, and his sources

6. While the name of the author is never revealed in the text, the author does make an appearance.

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

(ante- and memetext). This brief chapter is not meant to argue exhaustively for the finer critical points of recent Markan scholarship, only to establish the proper boundaries. These chapters are important because the wrong time and place of composition will hinder proper mimetic criticism as it gives the critic a false starting point. If we assume the early forties as Mark's *terminus post quem* we are likely to see Mark as history, and while palatable to many, this removes the proper authorial intent of the work. If Mark is dated too late, say into the second century, then we miss the crucial impetus driving Mark to compose his *courante* and thus are left with a heavily mythologized and reasonably suspected work of nothing more than fiction. If we are able to better place the Gospel into a proper time and place of composition, we will find the mimetic elements of Mark's Gospel are pertinent to his situation and thus find a necessary and natural limitation to our wild and abundant imagination (or imaging-ation). Establishing Mark's proper boundaries also serves another purpose: it allows us to identify whom Mark is using as a stylistic model. Chapter 5 will seek to introduce a Roman poet as Mark's exemplar. Further, we will examine his innovation upon Virgil's mimetic use of Homer.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate the application of mimetic criticism to the Gospel of Mark. In chapters 5 and 6, this will take the form of a commentary, but only on those passages managing a manifestly mimetic meaning. The concern for parallelomania abides with us as an internal control keeping the reader from getting too far off course. The seventh chapter will read Mark through the eyes of his rhetorical master. The teacher should always be able to recognize something of himself in the work of his students, after all. These chapters will also draw together the controversies surrounding dates and sources, showing the applicability of mimetic criticism to solving several of these problems. Chapter 8 will prove the value and validity of mimetic criticism by Mark's first reader, Matthew, while tackling the issues of Q. In this chapter, we will show how mimetic criticism can help cast light not just on the sources of Matthew and Luke, but also on the Historical Jesus. And of course, the conclusion is chapter 10.

Key Terms

Before we go on to the next chapter, there are a few terms to discuss. Throughout the book, the word *source* is used. An original source is not always a written document, but the motivation of the author. When referring to an original written work we will use *antetext*. This source of the author's imitation provides the intertextual framework, acting as a structuring document, and possible allusions. Here, redaction criticism helps us to limit the *antetext* to a literary source but we need not waste too much time in searching for a line-by-line connection, only a broad correlation of structure. In mimetic criticism, we understand the *antetext* as a written text supporting the community through social constructs such as religious fidelity. However, we may find an author countering a non-textual source. If we identify an example of a non-textual antithesis we refer to this source as a *memetext*. The *memetext* comes from the crucial impetus, the social crisis answered in some way by the author's composition. In this, the source no longer exists just as a literary source, but is transformed into a *mimetic source*.⁷ *Hypotext* will refer to *antetext* (thesis) and *memetext* (antithesis) while *hypertext* will refer the finished product (the synthesis). I will explain this in chapter 3.

Mimesis, *mimicking*, and *imitation* usually refer to the same concept of the rhetorical practice of an author borrowing or otherwise using a source to create a new work. Do not confuse *mimesis* with the idea of *re-authoring*. Generally the translators of the Septuagint are referred to as *re-authors*. I will explore this more when we examine Isaiah 65 as a mimetic source. If a text in the LXX is different either in scope or intent from the Hebrew text, the translator is referred to as a re-author.⁸ The *Septuagint* (LXX) is the designation for the Greek Old Testament.

7. A modern example of the memetext is found in the debacle that is *Star Wars III: Return of the Sith*. George Lucas inserted various strong allusions to the then-current political situation in the United States wherein it was all but impossible not to see Emperor Palpatine as the symbol of George W. Bush. Lucas was not using written sources to mimic his crisis, but "real life" situations, something that both his and his American audience shared. Mark's memetext, then, needs not be a written source, but a social situation shared between him and his audience.

8. For example of recent work completed in the field of rewritten Scripture, which the Septuagint must be included with, see Zahn, *Rethinking rewritten scripture*; Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple times*; Lange, *From Qumran to Aleppo*; Koskeniemi and Lindqvist, *Rewritten Biblical Figures*.

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

Finally, there are the terms *mnemonic* and *metonymy*.⁹ Mnemonic devices help students memorize literary and oral works. In the New Testament, mnemonics and *merisms* are replete and often serve to mentally expand the details of the passage beyond what is read.¹⁰ For example, in the Passion narrative, Jesus quotes a small portion of Psalm 22, but it is more likely the author intends for the audience to recall the entire psalm. This overshadows the Passion narrative and is not to be missed. This includes the scourging, piercing of the hands and feet, and the soldiers gambling over garments as well as a hopeful rebirth of the speaker and the birth of a new generation. Metonymy, however, is a rhetorical device taking one object as a stand in for another. For instance, Caesar represents Rome. All of these concepts build upon historical criticism to decipher the author's use of layered forms in his rhetoric. By using these devices, the shortest Gospel becomes like a police-box. The outside appearance gives off an unassuming perceptible, but on the inside, where we expected a stuffed and cramped box we find only a never-ending space of who knows what.

I have not written this work to abolish historical criticism, but to fulfill it. Some of the conclusions are nothing new, but only serves to give rhyme to the reason of why Mark would make use of what we perceive as fictive sources. My iambic cadence, however, is new I will show Mark does not merely record history, but writes history as master poet, who, had the stars aligned differently, would find a place in our pantheon of literary heroes next to Homer, Virgil, and most of all, Lucan. I will now tell you why.

9. Jakobson holds that metonymy is intimately connected to realism, similar to romanticism and metaphor. He further suggests that while metaphor is ideal for poetry, metonymy offers a "line of least resistance" for prose. (Jakobson, *The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles*, 47.)

10. For merism, see Longman, "Merism," 464–6. For recent a recent study of merisms and their role in the New Testament, see Jackson, *New Creation in Paul's Letters*. Merisms are otherwise known as enthymemes; however, I want to reserve the sound of the word "meme" for memetext whenever possible.

Our Kopsis

Mimetic Criticism

Introduction

PREVIOUS METHODOLOGIES ARE NOT sufficient in offering a full examination the Gospels. They all lack something. Using rhetorical criticism as a way to seek out the ultimate message of the Gospels, I suggest form criticism is the primary vehicle allowing us to peer underneath the text to discover the origin of the word-images. This being said, my hesitation in aligning too closely with either of these, or the rhetorical form criticism of Berger, et. al, is the limitation of the historical trustworthiness of the text.¹ Rhetoric does not just concern itself with shaping existing forms to fit a message—something found in form criticism, but selects forms according to the message. We need to discover, especially for Mark, his imaging-nation. To do this, we need a new criticism.

The failures of historical criticism are augmented by narrative criticism, allowing the audience to sit front and center. Unfortunately the audience is usually constructed from within the text. If mimetic criticism can make use of narrative criticism, both will then use the historical-critical method as well as rhetorical criticism in examining episodes as parts of a whole as well as the reality figured by the composition. Then we can focus on the audience. Rhetoric is meant to shape a perception and to force a promulgation of something. Perhaps it is used for the ideal law (deliberative), a judicial decision (forensic), or even the memory of a person in such instances as a funeral oration (epideictic). Seeking the context of composition we will find their intended

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

promulgation is directly related to their crucial impetus. However, historical criticism is limited when we continue to suggest that historical continuity exists between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Gospels, namely, even if the text is a mythologized account, heavily edited through theological reflection, there is some kernel of historical reality. Narrative Criticism introduces us to the story as a whole, but we must not assume that the surface is the complete story.

Writing was not just a medium of communication, but a highly developed process for the ancient author. To find out what happened before the Evangelists wrote, we will need to understand certain tools, particularly *imitatio*, or ‘mimesis.’ This is the literary tool employed by Homer, Virgil, and others in the production of literary works, a tool that is experiencing something of a rebirth in scientific studies.¹ The use of mimesis as a literary tool in the reading of Mark is not new, although I argue this approach has not reached its full potential. My first step is to migrate Dennis MacDonald’s conception of “‘mimesis’ criticism” to mimetic criticism.² Thus, the needed (re)introduction. To secure this (re)introduction, we will need to examine mimetic theorists in the ancient world as well as modern literary theorists. We will shape this ongoing narrative and tie it to the emergence of mimetic criticism. Whereas literary theorists and others may doubt that one cannot fully know the authorial intent, we will envision the mimetic critic as one who establishes the intent, sources, and method of the author.

1. Plato roundly criticized Homer for being nothing more than an ignorant mirror, but in more recent times, Laura M. Slatkin has provided a serious study on the combination of creation and allusion in Homer’s *Iliad*. See Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*. Recently scientific research suggests that mimesis is an essential part of human physical and social evolution. The suggestion that mimesis is an essential part of human physical and social evolution, see Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* and Garrells, ed., *Mimesis and Science*.

2. I have purposely moved mimesis from the noun to the adjective because mimesis is a misunderstood process; the noun simply does not accurately reflect with the critic or the author’s continued work. Mimetic is what the author, and critic, does with mimesis. MacDonald’s ‘mimesis’ critic appears to look only for the use of a specific form of mimesis rather than the multiple types of mimesis and the overarching goal of the author.

Part I: Mimesis and Imitation Criticism in the Gospel of Mark

I am not the first to identify imitation or mimesis in Mark's Gospel, nor is Mark the first biblical sculptor to mold his story with mimesis. Imitation is a natural inclination in storytelling and is found in our canonical sources. For example, simply compare the story of Yael in Judges (4–5) with the deuterocanonical *Judith* or the countless times Deuteronomy suffered reexamination in the period of the Second Temple. Rewriting Scripture to fit the current need becomes almost expected. I would suggest that it is needed for a community who is trying to establish itself after continuity with a previous tradition is broken. The real explosion of Christianity into the Gentile world did not take full expression until after the destruction of the Jewish Temple. Once Jewish Christianity transitioned to Gentile Christianity, it reacted to and incorporated responses and traditions of Greco-Roman literature. While I disagree with Dennis MacDonald in no small way regarding his conclusions, his methodology of introducing ancient literary theory to Gospel Criticism is well worth any Gospel critic's examination. Thomas Brodie has provided help in narrowing down methodology and to offer some correction to previous conclusions. Adam Winn's continuing push into the undiscovered country has helped beyond words to clarify my own position. It is to these three giants that I shall now turn.

Dennis MacDonald and Mark's Homer-textual Problem

Dennis MacDonald's *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* has thus far played an allusive role in this present volume. While it is not my particular crucial impetus, it is nevertheless an intertext and my dialogue partner. After initially dismissing Homeric influence in the New Testament, MacDonald writes that he found "parallels between Jesus and Odysseus, then between Jesus's disciples and Odysseus's crew, then between the Jewish authorities and Penelope's suitors, and then

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

between entire episodes in the two works.”³ His basis of seeing Homer in Mark is his assumption of a theological crisis pitting the Hellenist against the Jews. To counter this, for MacDonald, Mark steals from Homer’s protagonist for Jesus’s biographical sketch. MacDonald goes on to suggest the victory of Jesus over death (and his foes) is analogous to the victory Odysseus achieves.⁴ It is rather too Hellenistic-centric to attribute every modeling of a hero after Homer’s poems. In reality, victory over defeat is a constant strain of the human creative voice, especially in times of desperation, persecution and apostasy. MacDonald, however, persists and calls Mark a hypertext. This is an accurate description, I concede, of Mark but the Gospel’s hypotext is not Homer. MacDonald’s issue at this point is one of self-fulfilling prophecy. He suggests his solution is the one needed to the then-present problem—that of identifying Mark’s original sources—of Mark’s Gospel, but he does so without asking the important questions—questions with answers leading him *away* from Homer as a hypotext, such as Why is Homer important to Mark? If Homer and his imitators write epics, why does Mark not? MacDonald merely concludes, “Mark wrote a prose epic modeled largely after the *Odyssey* and the ending of the *Iliad*.”⁵ He leaves no room for anything else, although we have plenty of evidence from the time period of authors who wrote easily enough without a direct Homeric influence. A further fallacy suggests Mark is writing to a community overcome with a theological crisis caused by Homeric ideologues. Not even Rome cared much for Homer.

Not long after measuring Homer’s influence on Mark by certain criteria, MacDonald endeavors to destroy his own thesis. MacDonald acknowledges the historical use of Homer by Greek and Roman poets, such as Virgil, Quintus Smyrnaeus, Nonnos of Panopolis, and even identifies two Jewish poets who composed their works in “dactylic hexameters.”⁶ Prose, for MacDonald, is also based on Homer, although,

3. MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 2. Mark is not MacDonald’s first foray into Homeric Christian authors. He begins his first work on Homer and the New Testament by drawing attention the mid-second century Acts of Andrew. No doubt, this later work could very well have epic undertones. Given that it was preserved by the Manichean community, these may have appealed to them; however, one must question what bearing this has on the Gospel of Mark.

4. Here, I would alert the reader to the above mentioned concern with parallelomania.

5. MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 3.

6. MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 4. It is not until the third century that we find

with no slight to Philodemus intended, the story does not have to come from Homer even if the style supposedly does. MacDonald moves into the Jewish realm, suggesting the author of *Tobit* (composed in Aramaic) and Josephus both imitated Homeric prose to tell their stories. When it comes to the Gospel, however, MacDonald removes breaks with traditional uses of Homer (see below) and suggests Mark's Jesus is in competition with Homer's *Odysseus*.

An author may choose a style based on a theological crisis. Virgil and other Homeric mimics adopted his style and his images because, in part, they challenged not the characters of the story (external crisis), but the ancient poet (internal crisis). However style is not always reminiscent of crisis. Grammar students selected their texts to imitate based on their teacher. Style, while a part of imitation, is an elementary tool used to develop a writing unique writing style. Mark was in crisis, no doubt, but MacDonald fails to establish how such a great theological crisis is in anyway connected to a Hellenistic poem with mythological heroes foreign to the Jews. If we refuse to continue to take into account the theories and psychology of narrative as well as how orality functioned in the ancient world, we will continue to rob the Gospel of any sort of cognitive basis. To suggest Homer as a hypotext, especially when no one knew Homer was in Mark's Gospel, is to do one of two things. First, it is to suggest that Mark was not a very good writer, in that his writing failed to produce mimicry and failed to notify his readers of his epic journey. Second, it is to suggest Homer was not as huge a theological crisis in early Christian as MacDonald would have us believe, caving in his theory. After all, if Homer plagued the Markan mind, then where is the calming of the seas?

One of the most difficult aspects to overcome in accepting MacDonald's work is his definition of mimesis. There were, according to MacDonald, "no limits obtained to what features of the hypotext an author might imitate: its genre, characterizations, type-scenes, poetic conventions, distinctive motifs."⁷ There is nothing wrong just yet, but MacDonald instead of relying on these words turns to Stephen Hinds who misread Richard Thomas in assigning to the idea of allusion nothing more than a mere psychological echo of the author's experiences. If this is the definition of allusion, we are all lost in interpreting even

Christians using Homer's stylistic innovations.

7. MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 5.

Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark

the most transparent of works. Because of this failure MacDonald's synthesis suffers fatally. MacDonald has latched on to Hinds's first work, without a due examination of Hinds's second work, following so closely Hinds's cordoning off territory he repeats the negative terminology and the erroneous literary theory of Hinds.⁸ Allusions are tropes, not mimesis. MacDonald contradicts himself when he allows for a host of mimetic possibilities but then insists only philological fundamentalists require them. While he attempts to dismiss charges of literary relativism, he is unable to escape. MacDonald, following Hinds, created for himself a theoretical problem because allusion is not what mimesis is, but rather, only a pointer to the author's use of intertextuality. This is why, when in reading MacDonald's work, we discover his use of a word here or there to create unnatural intertextual relationships, supporting the initial thesis. Even with my severe disagreement with MacDonald's liberality of allusion, his developed criteria are our muse. These criteria are "accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability."⁹

Accessibility is always the main literary criteria for imitation; one cannot imitate what one does not know. Here, MacDonald is correct, that if a Greek author could own any book, or have it accessible through a sponsor, Homer is the first choice. However, this is where the idea of cultural synthesis is pushed too far. The Jews, for the most part, were not known for their accommodation of foreign culture, with this anti-Gentile focus growing stronger the closer history comes to 70.¹⁰ Not only did the stories of the cultural-purists Maccabees exist, but also the community of Qumran existed outside of what they considered tainted Jewish culture, and of course, the most obvious fact that should prevent us from easily accepting Jewish accommodationism is the Jewish Revolt. Mark was not a Greek, nor a good Roman. If anything, he was a Roman-educated Jew, but more than likely an educated Jew living in a Roman world of epics and rhetoric. Further, Greek rhetoric and pedagogy was not as easily

8. See Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone*.

9. MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 8.

10. I do not mean to suggest that the Jews were exempt from cultural synthesis, only that a willing embrace did not happen. Subtle changes happened, but nothing on the scale of the Greco-Roman synthesis, a synthesis that allowed, and expected, the borrowing of Homer.

adopted into Roman life as MacDonald would have us believe.¹¹ So while Greek readers chose Homer, the cultural milieu around Mark did not allow for many readers of high Hellenistic literature.

Charles McNelis would caution anyone on too stringent of an idea that Homer was used by all. The influx of Egyptian educational practices into Rome after the battle of Actium, McNelis urges, should make use consider a “broad geographic and chronological range” in looking at the educational practices of Rome. He does this, noting the Latin grammarians who served as educators hailed from a variety of places, but rarely from Greece proper. Grammar, the use of words as power, was considered a rhetorical device.¹² Education was used to cement Rome’s power and to replicate the elite social structure, something very necessary in the so-called melting pot. While the Romans used the Hellenistic inheritances, they nevertheless Latinized it through acculturation. Bloomer adds to this fact that Homer was not as important as MacDonald would make him when he writes, “Ancient education is sometimes said to have focused on Homer or more generally on literary texts; yet whereas students learned to read and write from their Homer, the culmination of education was not the production of poetry but the performance of prose speeches.”¹³ Other authors outpaced Homer in educational use as a matter of reality, even if tradition and nostalgia held otherwise.¹⁴

11. Sarah Culpepper Stroup notes that as Greek professionalism met Roman amateurism, something new was created. There is also the fact that Stoicism played a large rule in late Republican/early Imperial Roman rhetoric. Greek rhetoric, with its ornamentation was despised. It was feminine and unlike the later Latinitas style of rhetoric, filled with euphemisms. This is supposedly Plato’s problem with mimesis, in that it was too feminine, too full of embellishments. The Stoics refused to solicit emotions from their audience. As a matter of fact, in 161 BCE, near the time of the Maccabean Revolt against their Greek overlords, Rome expelled Greek orators. In 92 BCE, Latin rhetoricians were censured by the Senate. Nearly 180 years later, the Emperor Vespasian would name Quintilian as the chief Roman Rhetorician, the first to hold the post.

12. Elementary students would learn through the progymnasmata how to take various genres and mold them into persuasive pieces (Witherington, *Art of Persuasion*, 12).

13. Bloomer, *Roman Rhetoric*, 300.

14. A quick summation of why we should exclude Homer as an antetext or memetext is needed. First, the borrowing of Homer is almost restricted not to archetypes, but to stylistic designs. We see repeated in the ancient grammar books when the student learns the use of poetry and prose to produce a new work. Second, Homeric poems were not Scripture, allowing that myth was oral and fluid over the breadth of the Roman Empire. Third, Homer was used in education of the elites. By the time of the high