

My Turn A Critique of Critics of “Mimesis Criticism”

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For more than two decades I have been investigating the influence of classical Greek literature on early Christian texts and have published four books and nearly a dozen articles on the topic, especially on the influence of the Homeric epics on the New Testament writings ascribed to Mark and Luke.¹ I call this controversial methodology “mimesis criticism” to distinguish it from source, form, social-scientific, rhetorical, and literary criticisms. To this point I have not answered my critics directly, but two published reviews of [The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark](#) have picked a fight that I cannot avoid. One by Margaret M. Mitchell of the University of Chicago appeared in [The Journal of Religion](#); Karl Olav Sandnes of Norway published an article on my methodology in [The Journal of Biblical Literature](#).²

Simply stated, a mimesis critic assesses a text for literary influences that one might classify as imitations instead of citations, paraphrases, allusions, echoes, or redactions. In ancient narratives such imitations usually obtain to characterizations, motifs, and plot—seldom to wording. Many such imitations disguise their dependence on an “antetext” (a term I prefer to the more ambiguous word “intertext”) by creating a hybrid that borrows from several models, what one might call “mimetic eclecticism.” Sophisticated imitations, on the other hand, may advertise their dependence so that readers benefit from a comparison of the text to its model. Such a rivalry or emulation may “transvalue” its target by replacing the perspective of the model with another.

The most obvious similarities between the Gospel of Mark and Homer seem to pertain to characterizations. Like Odysseus, Jesus is a wise carpenter who suffers many

things and sails on the sea with associates who are foolish and even treacherous. Like Odysseus, Jesus comes to his “house,” the Jerusalem Temple, which has fallen into the hands of his rivals, the Jewish authorities, who, like Penelope’s suitors, devour widows’ houses. Blind Bartimaeus calls to mind the blind seer Tiresias; the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus for burial resembles Odysseus’s nurse Eurycleia (“Renowned-far-and-wide”), who recognized her lord’s identity when washing his feet. The youth who flees naked at Jesus’ arrest and reappears at his tomb is an ersatz-Elpenor, whose soul met Odysseus in the nether gloom. Mark’s so-called “Messianic Secret” derives from Odysseus’s disguise to keep the suitors in the dark concerning his identity. Jesus, too, seeks to silence those who witness his great deeds lest word get back to his foes.

The calming of the sea transforms the tale of Aeolus’s bag of winds; the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac borrows from the stories of Circe and Polyphemus; the beheading of John the Baptist resembles the murder of Agamemnon; the multiplication of loaves and fish for five thousand men and again for four thousand men and women reflects the twin feasts in Odyssey 3 and 4, the first of which feeds four thousand five hundred men at the edge of the sea. Jesus walks on water like Hermes and Athena. The Transfiguration of Jesus before Peter, James, and John is a transform of Odysseus’s transfiguration before his son, Telemachus. Odysseus’s picaresque entry into the city of the Phaeacians inspired Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The cleansing of the Temple imitates Odysseus’s slaying of the suitors, and the agony at Gethsemane echoes Odysseus’s agony during his last night with Circe before going off to Hades. As we shall see, Mark also borrowed extensively from the Iliad.

In a sequel to my book on Mark I published another that used the same methodology on the Acts of the Apostles.³ I compared the vision to Cornelius with the lying dream to Agamemnon in II. 2, Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders with Hector's farewell to Andromache in book 6, the casting of lots to replace Judas with the casting of lots for a soldier to face Hector in book 7, and Peter's escape from Agrippa's prison with Priam's escape from Achilles' bivouac in book 24.

These parallels may at first seem forced or arbitrary, but I use six criteria to test the relationship of any text to another. The first two pertain to the proposed model: (1) its accessibility to the author, and (2) analogous uses of the model by other authors. Mitchell and Sandnes both affirm the importance of the epics in ancient culture and make their own contributions to appreciating their influence on ancient Christian literature.⁴ Furthermore, neither objects to my claim that ancient imitations of the epics often transvalue Homer to endorse an alternative perspective. They do, however, object to finding such emulations in Mark for the following reasons.

Objection 1: Because the Homeric epics were foundational to ancient Greek culture, any similarities between Mark and Homer are more likely to reflect general cultural influence than literary mimesis.

Objection 2: I minimize the influence of Jewish Scriptures.⁵

Objection 3: The Homeric epics are inappropriate models for the Gospels.

Objection 4: The parallels between Mark and the epics are inconsistent.

Objection 5: My methodology is unfalsifiable. Several critics have argued that among my parallels I include inversions, strategic opposites, and have objected that if opposites function as parallels, my analysis is “incapable of invalidation.”⁶

Objection 6: I fail to state Mark’s goal in imitating Homer.

Objection 7: I make Mark and his intended readers too clever.

Objection 8: Mark’s alleged imitations of Homer do not conform to the conventions of ancient rhetoric.

Objection 9: No one seems to have recognized these imitations before. For example, Mitchell claims that “[W]e have no text that corroborates a Homeric reading of Mark.”⁷

To these serious methodological objections I would respond as follows.

Response to objection 1: Because the Homeric epics were foundational to ancient Greek culture, any similarities between Mark and Homer are more likely to reflect general cultural influence than literary mimesis. To some extent I would agree, but one must not exclude imitation *prima facie*. Certainly some similarities between Mark and Homer may be due to general cultural influence, but it also is true that many ancient authors consciously imitated the epics; after all, they learned to do so in school. Furthermore, ancient narrative is rife with examples of obvious and subtle imitations of the epics as texts.

The challenge, then, is to test if similarities between two works issue from cultural osmosis or rhetorical mimesis. The last four of my six criteria attempt to do this very thing: (3) density (the number or volume of parallels between the two texts), (4) order (recognizable affinities in the sequence of the parallels), (5) distinctive traits

(characteristics found in these two texts and not found widely elsewhere), and (6) interpretability (why the author imitated the target, which may include emulation or transvaluation). To my knowledge, no critic of my work has proposed alternative criteria for establishing literary connections. Although some parallels satisfy these criteria weakly, others do so magnificently and are sufficient to establish mimesis as a dominating strategy in Mark, not merely general cultural affinities.

Response to objection 2: I minimize the influence of Jewish Scriptures. To some extent this criticism is fair; except in cases where the influence of the Septuagint is unassailable, I tried to identify potential Marcan models in classical Greek literature instead of forcing biblical influence or yielding to that hermeneutical black hole called “oral tradition.” I am now writing a three-volume commentary on Mark and Luke-Acts that discusses all likely antetexts, including biblical ones. But even in my book on Mark, I by no means denied the influence of Jewish writings: Mitchell actually cites in a note the following statement from my conclusion: “The reading of Mark proposed here . . . locates the primary cultural context of the Gospel in Greek religious tradition, not in Judaism. This is not to deny Mark’s Jewish concerns or the influence of the Septuagint. Like many ancient narratives, the earliest gospel was eclectic in its dependence on literary models; Mark was an equal opportunity imitator.”⁸ Such mimetic eclecticism is well documented in classical antiquity. Mitchell herself argues that the author of Luke-Acts imitates both the Bible and Homer.⁹ The basic difference between my critics and me on this point pertains to their exclusive restriction of Mark’s antetexts to the Septuagint and my inclusion of the Homeric.

Response to objection 3: The Homeric epics are inappropriate models for the Gospels.

Mitchell claims that early Christians who did imitate Homer did not find a Gospel “a suitable subject for a Homeric-styled epic.”¹⁰ But she herself refers to Pseudo-Nonnus, who composed a Greek epic in dactylic hexameters on the Gospel of John. The Empress Eudocia wrote several Homero-centones, patchwork poems composed largely from Homeric lines, on Gospel themes, such as the Annunciation, Jesus’ birth, the visit of the Magi, the flight to and sojourn in Egypt, John the Baptist, Jesus’ baptism, the Temptation in the desert, the calling of the disciples, the wedding at Cana, the healing of the Centurion’s boy, the paralytic at Capernaum, the man born blind, the leper, Peter’s mother-in-law, the Gerasene demoniac, the lame man and the man with a withered hand, the deaf man, the Canaanite woman, the widow’s son at Nain, the Samaritan woman, the hemorrhaging woman, the foaming demoniac, the Transfiguration, the stilling of the sea, the feeding of the five thousand, the feeding of the four thousand, the walking on the water, Lazarus, the cleansing of the temple, the anointing at Bethany, Peter’s denial, the Crucifixion, the burial of Jesus, the visit to Hades, the Resurrection, the mission to Galilee, Doubting Thomas, and the Ascension.¹¹ According to Jerome, a Latin poet named Juvencus “presented the Gospels in heroic verses.”¹² At the beginning of the fifth century the poet Sedulius wrote his Carmen paschale in imitation of Vergil.¹³ The Gospels were indeed fair game for “a Homer-styled epic.” Indeed, as far as we now know, the Gospels were the mimetic target of choice for Christian Homeric imitators.

Mitchell also asks “why a Hellenistic (-Jewish?) author would link his hero Jesus with wily, ironic Odysseus, a figure of much-debated character flaws.”¹⁴ But she herself cites Basil of Caesarea’s use of Odysseus as a positive moral example for reading Homer.

She also compares the epithet polytropos, “man of many turns,” used of Odysseus in the first line of the Odyssey, with Paul’s claim to be all things to all people (1 Cor 9:22), and then cites Gregory of Nazianzus in support, who compared Paul with Proteus, a trickster god, an even less attractive ethical model.¹⁵ Sandnes cites a text of Clement of Alexandria who urges his readers to avoid Greek custom as Odysseus avoided the Sirens.¹⁶ One could add many more examples of Christians admiring Odysseus.¹⁷

Furthermore, Mark does not foist Odysseus’s moral flaws onto Jesus, who embodies Odysseus’s virtues—such as his cleverness and enormous capacity for suffering—and who transforms his vices. Instead of blinding a monster who lived in caves, Jesus exorcises him. Instead of hugging his mast during a storm, Jesus calms the sea.

Response to objection 4: The parallels between Mark and the epics are inconsistent.

Mitchell notes that in my view Mark’s Jesus plays several mimetic roles: sometimes he resembles Odysseus, other times Telemachus, Menelaus, or Hector.¹⁸ Such switching of roles characterizes much ancient literary imitation. For example, in the Aeneid Aeneas plays roles mimetic of Achilles, Hector, Odysseus, Jason, and other heroes. Vergil borrowed what he needed from each model to create his hero. By this standard Mitchell should also fault Mark’s inconsistent use of the Septuagint: Jesus variously emulates Jonah, Moses, and Elijah.

Sandnes notes an inconsistency in Mark’s putative use of the motif of the nostos, or the homecoming so important in the Odyssey. In my reading Jesus returns to his hometown, Nazareth, but also identifies the Jerusalem temple as his home, and finally predicts his return as the Son of Man to judge his servants to see if they have been

faithful.¹⁹ One could as easily argue that repeated use of a motif reinforces the author's investment in it.

Response to objection 5: My methodology is theoretically unfalsifiable. The claim that my thesis “is theoretically incapable of invalidation” because I use differences as parallels is nonsense. I never use transvaluations exclusively to link two texts, which must have a sufficient number of other parallels, perhaps in a recognizable sequence, and with sufficiently unusual traits to bind them together into a hermeneutically useful pairing. Each of my parallels thus is theoretically vulnerable to invalidation by failing these criteria. That said, I would insist that differences also can be so strategic in that they, like similarities, notify the reader of the presence of the antetext. The children's storybook Sleeping Ugly announces that it is a transform of the folktale Sleeping Beauty by means of a contrasting noun: “ugly” for “beauty”; but what most ties the two stories together is the common adjective “sleeping.” For mimetic transvaluation to work one needs both similarities and differences, and both can be evidence of a literary connection.

I will adduce but one illustration from my book on Mark. I use my criteria to argue for the following parallels between Homer's account of Aeolus's bag of winds and Jesus' stilling the storm.

Od. 10.1-69 (imit. [B])

- Odysseus's crew boarded and sat down.
- On a floating island Odysseus told stories to Aelous.
- After a month he took his leave, boarded, and sailed with twelve ships.
- Odysseus slept.
- The crew opened the sack of winds and created a storm: “[A]ll the winds [☉☼■♁○□✕] rushed out.”

Mark 4:1-2 and 35-41

- Jesus boarded and sat down to teach.
- On a floating boat Jesus told his stories to the crowds.
- When it was late, he took his leave, and sailed. “Other boats were with him.”
- Jesus slept.
- “A great gale of wind [☉☼■♁❖○□◆] came up.”

Response to objection 7: I make Mark and his intended readers too clever. Mitchell

writes:

Hovering over MacDonald's whole book is a competing portrait of the evangelist as a bookish, textually self-conscious crafter of "theological fiction," an author who delighted in constructing elaborate allegorical mappings on the epics, puckishly leaving clues and "flags" in his wake for the perspicacious readers he hoped to attract (p. 170). This intimacy of acquaintance with a Markan author (who appears strikingly akin to himself in method, acuity, and disposition) leads MacDonald to argue with confidence that his research has disclosed, at long last, the dormant and unfulfilled intention of the long-dead evangelist, for "I have come to conclude that Mark wanted his readers to detect his transvaluation of Homer" (p. 3).²¹

On this point I agree with her entirely. I suspect that if I erred in this regard, I underestimated Mark and his readers.

Response to objection 8: Mark's alleged imitations of Homer do not conform to the conventions of ancient rhetoric. The primary objection of Sandes has to do with what he takes to be Mark's failure to alert his reader that he was imitating the epics, his "hypotexts." He calls this my "Achilles' heel."²² To make his case he interprets discussions of rhetorical imitation in Quintilian, Pliny the Younger, and especially Seneca, according to whom students learned to disguise their dependence on their models by means of using multiple antetexts in the same composition, like a bee that takes pollen from several flowers, digests them, and produces textual honey that may or may not reveal the source of the literary pollen.²³ In such cases emulation would not be visible because the recognition of the literary model would be largely disguised.

On the other hand, Sandnes cites two examples of Homeric imitation where the emulation is transparent: Vergil's Aeneid and Lucian's Verae historiae (True Story); he argues that Mark's emulations are not analogous. Here is his summary of his argument.

This article questions some of his [MacDonald's] analogies [for imitation], and particularly his use of the rhetorical practice of emulation to bridge the gap between the alleged Homeric hypotexts [models] and Mark's Gospel. I have argued that the practice of imitation and emulation was either modest, in terms of improving or altering the language and style, but still consonant with the substance, or a rewriting and replacement of the model. The Aeneid [by Vergil] and the True Story [by Lucian] were outstanding examples of this. In both writings, however, emulation was broadcast in ways that alerted the reader. The authors moved between advertised intertextuality and subtle emulation. MacDonald isolates subtle emulation from its advertising context [which is to the Old Testament]. Subtle and concealed emulation without basis in a broadcast intertextuality cannot make up for slippery comparisons.²⁴

This characterization of emulation either as modest tinkering without emulation or drastic rewritings such as one finds in the Aeneid and the Verae historiae simply is wrong; in fact, it fails to include most ancient imitations. Stephen Hinds would call this limitation of mimesis "philological fundamentalism" and shows that allusions in classical literature run the gamut on a continuum from advertised emulation to nearly undetectable echoes.²⁵ He suggests that the reader of ancient literature avoid imposing "a rigidly polar choice . . . between the clearly defined allusion on the one hand, and the mere accidental

confluence on the other. The paradoxical goal, then, is a more exact account of the allusive inexactitude.”²⁶ Hind’s definition of allusion includes what I mean by imitation.

Sandnes imposes just such a “rigidly polar choice”: an imitator must be “consonant with the substance” of the model by improving diction or to shout out to the reader with unmistakable clues: “I am rewriting X!” If the author does not, the imitation is suspect and not hermeneutically significant. Thus Sandnes complains: “In Mark’s Gospel, no metatextual preparation for Homer’s poems, no Homeric names, no Homeric quotations are found. The crucial question is: Does it make sense to speak of subtle emulation when these characteristics of the genre are all absent?”²⁷ But classicists recognize—without the help of Homeric names or quotations—imitations of epic repeatedly in Herodotus, the tragedians, the Hellenistic romances, and even other works by Vergil and Lucian. What would Sandnes do with the Book of Tobit, the Hellenistic Jewish poets, and even the Jewish historian Josephus whose ostensible topics were Jewish yet who imitated Homer, sometimes quite clearly?²⁸

In fact, the kinds of Homeric imitations in the Aeneid and the Verae historiae are exceptional. Sandnes is correct: Mark’s similarities with epic are not like those in these works; instead, they are like the vast majority of Homeric imitations that are more “subtle” and whose identifications are tantalizingly “slippery.” Indeed, one might say that the very subtlety, even opacity, of these imitations enhances their charm by inviting the reader to pay attention to clever allusions or echoes.²⁹ ///see again Genette!///

But Sandnes registers an appropriate caveat: for a reader to recognize that a text emulates its model an author needs to advertise the relationship between the two, something Sandnes and Mitchell insist that Mark did not do. I would argue, however, that

Mark would have thought that he had. As a test case I will analyze similarities between the deaths and burials of Jesus and Hector. Clearly II. 22 and 24 were accessible to Mark (criterion 1), and many authors modeled the deaths of their heroes after that of Hector (criterion 2).³⁰ We shall see that the parallels between the heroic deaths in Mark and Homer are dense, sequential, and distinctive (criteria 3, 4, and 5). Mark's transvaluation of the epic consists in the outcomes of the stories: Hector's body stayed in his tomb; Jesus rose from his. According to Mitchell, however, these parallels are "rather tenuous" and hang by "a slim thread."³¹ Let's see.

Like Homer's Hector, Jesus dies alone because his allies had abandoned him. Athena disguised herself as Hector's brother, Deiphobos, but when the Trojan asked him for a spear, he was nowhere to be found. Hector then realized that his gods had abandoned him. Mark's Jesus interpreted darkness over the earth at noon as God's forsaking him, but onlookers at the cross took his cry of dereliction as a call for Elijah. The prophet was nowhere to be found. Hector's soul flew to Hades with a shout; Jesus uttered a loud cry and expired. The Trojans mourned Hector as though their city had been destroyed "from top to bottom." Jesus' death anticipated the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, whose veil was rent "from top to bottom." After Achilles slew Hector, he refused to return the body to Troy; after the crucifixion, Jesus' body was in the hands of his executioners. The primary transvaluation of the two stories pertains to what happened after both heroes were buried: Hector's body stayed in the tomb; Jesus rose from his.

Minor characters, too, have Homeric counterparts. As we have seen, Elijah never returned to assist Jesus; Deiphobos/Athena vanished. The centurion who executed Jesus resembles Achilles, who gloated that he had slain the mortal whom the Trojans prayed to

as to a god. I take the words of the centurion at the cross as a gloat: “Oh sure, this mortal was a son of a god!” In the epic, three women lead the lament for Hector as they watch from the walls of Troy the desecration of his corpse: his mother Hecuba, his wife Andromache, and his sister-in-law Helen. Mark says that three women watched Jesus die from afar, two of whom shared the name of Jesus’ mother; one of these Marys had two sons with names identical to those of Jesus’ brothers. I argued that Mary the mother of James and Joses was a substitute for Mary of Nazareth, and that Joseph of Arimathea (“excellent-discipleship”) was a substitute for Joseph of Nazareth, Jesus’ father. Both characters are equivalents to Hector’s parents, Hecuba and Priam, who dared to travel at night to beg Achilles for the body of his son.

The following list identifies the parallel characterizations between Mark 14-16 and the Iliad.

Il. 22, 24, and Od. 10, 11, 12

- Zeus and Apollo, who abandoned Hector
- Hector, the hero whose death anticipated the fall of Troy
- Deiphobos (Athena), the aide who vanished
- Achilles, who gloated after killing the mortal to whom the Trojans prayed as to a god
- Three women watched from the walls of Troy
 - Hecuba, Hector’s mother
 - Andromache, Hector’s wife
 - Helen, Hector’s sister-in-law
- Priam, who rescued and buried his son’s body
- Achilles, who granted the body

Mark 14-15

- God, who abandoned Jesus
- Jesus, the hero whose death anticipated the fall of Jerusalem
- Elijah, the aide who failed to appear
- The centurion, who gloated after killing Jesus, “Oh sure, this mortal was a son of a god!”
- Three women watched from afar
 - Mary, mother of James and Joses
 - Mary Magdalene
 - Salome
- Joseph of Arimathea, who rescued and buried Jesus’ body
- Pilate, who granted the body

These are not the only parallels that link Mark's Passion Narrative with Homer's Hector.

I can imagine Mark complaining to Mitchell and Sandnes, "What more do you want?"

These parallels are not hanging by a slim thread; they are bonded by mimetic Velcro."

Response to objection 9. No one seems to have recognized these imitations before. When

I wrote my book on Mark I would have agreed that Luke did not recognize Mark's imitations, even though I suspected that Luke imitated Homer independently in Acts. But one morning about three years ago I discovered that in his redaction of Mark's Passion Narrative, Luke, too, imitated II. 22, apparently inspired to do so because he observed that Mark had done so before him.

According to this book of the Iliad, Achilles sent the entire Trojan army scurrying into the city for safety, but Hector decided to fight, even though his parents Priam and Hecuba pled with him to come safely inside the gates. Hector's mother exposed her breasts to convince her son not to fight out of pity for his mother. This passage seems to be the inspiration for Luke's reference to the breasts of "the daughters of Jerusalem."

II. 22.25-89

- Hector is on his way to fight Achilles.
- Priam and other Trojans, including the women, saw Hector outside the gates; the old man "beat [⌘⊕⊖⊗⊘⊙⊚] his head with his hands . . . and cried out in anguish."
- "His mother, for her part, mourned and shed tears; unclasping the fold of her garment with one hand, she held out a breast [⊙⊚⊛⊜⊝] with the other. As she shed tears, she said, 'Hector, my child [⊕⊖⊗⊘⊙], have regard for these and take pity on me, if ever I gave

Luke 23:27-31

Jesus is on his way to the cross.

²⁷ "A large crowd of the people followed him, including women who were beating [⌘⊕⊖⊗⊘⊙⊚] themselves and wailing for him."

²⁸ "Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children [⊕⊖⊗⊘⊙]."

²⁹ For behold days are coming in which

you the breast [☉☽☿☼☽☼] that banishes worry. Remember these, dear child [♠♣♠&♠☼☼], and ward off the enemy from inside the wall; do not stand there as a champion against him.”

- Hos 10:8 (cit. [B]): “And they will say to the mountains, ‘Hide us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’”

- In his speech to Hector, Priam had predicted the fall of Troy and emphasized the plight of the women and children.

people will say: “Blessed are the sterile, and the wombs that never gave birth, and the breasts [☉☽☿☼☽☼] that never gave suck.””

³⁰ “Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Hide us!’”

³¹ “For if they do these things to wood that is green, what will happen to the dry?” Jesus here predicts the fall of Jerusalem and emphasizes the plight of the women and children.

Luke’s Jesus resembles Hector insofar as he, too, goes courageously to his fate, but he also contrasts with the Trojan. Hector refused to show compassion for Hecuba by going off to fight. Jesus, however, shows compassion by telling the women to weep for themselves and their children. The women and children of Troy would suffer because, with Hector dead, the destruction of the city was certain. The women and children of Jerusalem would suffer because by killing Jesus the Jewish authorities doomed their city to its fall to Rome. I consider it unlikely that Luke would have imitated this episode had he not seen that Mark already had imitated other aspects of Hector’s death.

I doubt that these parallels will satisfy the criticisms of Mitchell and Sandnes who surely would launch similar missles to those lobbed against my book on Mark. But my final example should satisfy even them. Last summer I ordered a reprint of a book published in 1898, whose title caught my attention: The Homeric Centones and the Acts of Pilate. J. Rendel Harris of Cambridge University noted Homeric echoes in both documents and proposed that they issued from a shared lost Gospel that told the story of the Jesus in Homeric style. Harris clearly was mistaken about this source and about much

• [II. 22.462-64, 466-67, 474-77, and 515:]

“When she got to the tower and the crowd of men, she stopped at the wall to look and saw him [Hector] being dragged around the city [tied behind Achilles’ chariot]. . . .

“So when she arrived at the congregating of the crowd, the Theotokos says to John, ‘Where is my son?’ John says, ‘Do you see that man wearing a crown of thorns whose hands are tied?’ When the Theotokos heard this and saw him,

Black night engulfed her eyes; she fell backwards and gasped out her spirit [ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς]

she fainted, fell backwards on the ground

ἔπεσε ἠὲ καὶ ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς

[ἔπεσε ἠὲ καὶ ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς]

ἔπεσε ἠὲ καὶ ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς. . . . ἔπεσε ἠὲ καὶ ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς, and lay there for some time.

Around her pressed her husband’s sisters and his brothers’ wives, who had held her up in their midst; she was stunned to the point of death.

The women who were following her stood around her weeping.

Then, when she revived, and her spirit returned [ἔσπευσε τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς] to her breast, she wailed deeply with the [ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς], and cried with a loud voice,

After a while she revived, rose up

Trojan women and said, ‘Hector, I am a wreck! . . .’ ‘My lord, my son, . . .’”

So she spoke, weeping, and the women [ἄνεμος ἔλαττο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς] added their groans.”

The content of Mary’s speech has even more in common with Hecuba’s speech in book 22: both mothers lament the deaths of their sons, disfigure themselves, and wish for their own deaths.

II. 22.405-7 and 430-35

Gos. Nic. (M) 10:2

His mother tore her hair, . . . and at the sight of her child, she uttered a loud cry. . . .

And Hecuba led the shrieking lament among the Trojan women. “O my child, I am so miserable!

After a while she revived, rose up, and cried with a loud voice, “My lord, my son,

Why should I now live suffering cruelly while you are dead? Night and day you were my boast,

where has sunk the beauty of your appearance? How can I remain here watching you suffering such things?”

a help to all the Trojan men and Trojan women in the city, who used to welcome you like a god.”

When she had said these things, she tore her face with her nails and beat her chest. . . .

“Kill me first, you law-violating Jews!”

When the soldiers crucify Jesus, the Theotokos again grieves; again her expression of despair is absent in recension A. She addresses her son and fears for her future: “My son, what will become of me without you? How will I live without you? What livelihood will I sustain?”³² Homer’s Hecuba cried, “O my child, I am so miserable! Why should I now live suffering cruelly while you are dead?”³³

Mary next addresses the cross, and recalls Hecuba’s address to Hector at the beginning of book 22 and the baring of her breasts. The redactor was aware of a physiological problem here: a virgin appeals to her lactating breasts.

II. 22.8-84

As she shed tears, she said,

“Hector my son

[◆♣❖■&□■ ♣ετ○□❖■],

[◆□≡■ ♣ετ○□≡■ ◆✕⊙□❖■]

have regard for these [breasts] and take pity on me, whom I nursed with these breasts

[○⊙•□□✕⊙✕—

if ever I gave you the breast [○⊙⊗□❖■] that banishes worry. Remember these, dear child.”

worry. Remember these, dear child.”

The lament for Jesus by Mary Magdalene similarly imitates the lament of Andromache for Hector.

The death of Jesus in both Greek recensions of the Gospel of Nicodemus renarrate the New Testament accounts, but they differ again in their versions of the rescue of Jesus’ body by Joseph of Arimathea. The following passage has no close equivalent in the New

Gos. Nic. (M) 10:4

And looking at the cross, she was saying,

“Bend down, O cross, so that I might take my son

[◆□≡■ ◆✕⊙□❖■ ○□◆] and kiss my son

[◆□≡■ ♣ετ○□≡■ ◆✕⊙□❖■]

whom I nursed with these breasts

[○⊙•□□✕⊙✕—

astonishingly since I had not known a husband!”

astonishingly since I had not known a husband!”

to read texts as archaeologists would read an excavation. Beneath the surface of the texts lie sources and oral traditions, and in some cases historical bedrock. The evangelists thus are not authors but editors who reassembled pre-existing Christian materials. Literary critics have ignored Homeric influence on the gospels in favor of Jewish scriptures or Greco-Roman literature more contemporary to Mark and Luke. Who would think to compare them with pagan poetry composed eight centuries earlier?

A Homeric-mimetic reading the Gospels is a seismic paradigm shift with enormous implications. As is the case with all paradigm shifts, one must expect resistance from those who have benefited from business as usual. I no longer expect scholars of my generation to accept my work with open arms; if acceptance occurs at all, it will come from future generations. That is why I am so delighted to be able to teach at an institution like the Claremont Graduate University and to direct the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, institutions of higher research dedicated to the training of just such scholars.

But I also teach at the Claremont School of Theology, and thus many of my students are studying for the Christian ministry. Although Mitchell and Sandnes do not challenge my work explicitly on theological grounds, the vast majority of my critics do, and I consider it my duty to address these concerns as well—if not for the academy, for my ministerial students. In the past scholars of the Gospels often used their craft to argue for their historical reliability or failing that at least to mine historical or traditional kernels to justify traditional Christian belief. My claim that Mark and Luke, if not also Matthew and John, composed historical fictions has called into question such endeavors, including, for example, the work of the infamous Jesus Seminar of which I have been a member. For

this group of interpreters the goal is not to justify traditional Christianity but to radically revise it by means of a more sophisticated and skeptical form of historiography.

I would insist that my exposing the Gospels as actively and creatively imitating and rivaling the literatures of their host cultures, both the Jewish Bible and the Greek enkyklion paideia, is a badly needed corrective to the absolute claims made by some believers on the one hand and rationalists on the other. At stake is not truth but meaning, not scientific results but values, not metaphysics but ethics, not history but aesthetics. In a world balkanized by religious conflict and impoverished by ignorant claims to revealed truth, it should come as good news that the Gospels are literary fictions created by first-century intellectuals who saw in Jesus a hero for their time, fictions according to which many thoughtful and ethical people for two thousand years have consciously chosen to inform their lives. Gospel truth lies not in history but in the ethical imagination that, like the evangelists themselves, constantly must reshape culture for evolving visions of the good.

¹ I have argued for the influence of classical Greek literature in the following publications: Christianizing Homer: "The Odyssey," Plato, and "The Acts of Andrew" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); "Luke's Eutychus and Homer's Elpenor: Acts 20:7-12 and Odyssey 10-12," JHC 1 (1994): 5-24; "The Soporific Angel in Acts 12:1-17 and Hermes' Visit to Priam in Iliad 24: Luke's Emulation of the Epic," Forum ns. 2.2 (1999): 179-87; "The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul," NTS 45 (1999): 88-107; The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); "The Ending of Luke and the Ending of the Odyssey," in For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism and Early Christianity, ed. Randal A. Argall et al. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 161-68; "Tobit and the Odyssey," in Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity, ed. Dennis R. MacDonald, SAC (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 11-40; "Renowned Far and Wide: The Women Who Anointed Odysseus and Jesus," in A Feminist Companion to Mark, ed. Amy-Jill Levine. 128-35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); "Homer," in Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia, 2 vols., ed. Leslie Houlden, 1.357-60 (Santa Barbara: ABC/CLIO, 2003); "The Spirit as a Dove and Homeric Bird Similes," in Early Christian Voices: In Texts, Traditions, and Symbols, FS François Bovon, ed. David H. Warren, et al., 333-39 (Boston: Brill, 2003); "Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian Elders and Hector's Farewell to Andromache: A Strategic Imitation of Homer's Iliad," in Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, 189-203; SBLSS 20 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); "Lydia and her Sisters as Lukan Fictions," in A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles, ed. Amy-Jill Levine.

105-10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004); and “The Breasts of Hecuba and those of the Daughters of Jerusalem: Luke’s Transvaluation of a famous Iliadic Scene,” in Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative, ed. Jo-Ann A. Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea, 239-54, SBLSS 32 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

² Mitchell, “Homer in the New Testament?” JR 83 (2003): 244-58; Sandnes, “Imitatio Homeri? An Appraisal of Dennis R. MacDonald’s ‘Mimesis Criticism,’” JBL 124 (2005): 715-32.

³ Imitate Homer?

⁴ According to Mitchell, if one were to find Homeric influence on the Gospels they would likely apply not at the level of plot, characterization, or literary genre but at the level of smaller, isolatable units. That is, she does not buy the comparative literary approach but favors traditional form-criticism informed by classical Greek poetry: Homer Lite.

⁵ According to Mitchell, I “repeatedly” try “to deny the obvious influence of the Septuagint on the final form and the earlier traditions of Mark” (255). Similarly, the last sentence in Sandnes’s article states that “[MacDonald] neglects the OT intertextuality that is broadcast in this literature” (732).

⁶ Mitchell accuses me of relying on “a ‘have your cake and eat it too’ methodology, since in his [MacDonald’s] argument ‘parallels’ between the two narratives support direct influence, but divergences do also, since they demonstrate that Mark was not just imitating, but emulating and transforming Homer. This means, in essence, that MacDonald’s thesis, once propounded, is theoretically incapable of invalidation” (252).

⁷ *Ibid.* She also claims that I do “not adequately account for the massive and complete interpretative failure by the history of exegesis and the use of the text, even in the face of the glaring contradiction that as “sophisticated” a Greek author as Luke did not recognize these patterns in his source, Mark. This damnable counterindication is rendered even more logically problematic by the fact that, according to MacDonald’s own argument, Luke is himself supposed to have followed the same procedure of Homeric recasting” (*ibid.*).

⁸ Homeric Epics, 189.

⁹ “Homer in the New Testament?” 257-58. I would note that her example from Acts, with which I largely concur, satisfies Sandnes’s rhetorical standards no better than mine.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹¹ See M. D. Usher, Homero-centones Eudociae (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998). It also is worth noting that the Greek poem Christus patiens imitated Euripides’ Bacchae to narrate the passion of Jesus.

¹² Chronicon ad ann. 329.

¹³ See especially Michael Roberts, Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity, ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 16 (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1985), 74-92.

¹⁴ “Homer in the New Testament?” 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 258-59.

¹⁶ “Imitatio Homeri?” 725, citing Protrep. 12.

¹⁷ See MacDonald, Christianizing Homer, 23-24.

¹⁸ She complains that “This disjointed quality of MacDonald’s allegorical typecasting through bricolage is particularly serious in regard to his inconsistency about whether Jesus is father or son (Odysseus or Telemachus), given that the father-son relationship is the linchpin of Mark’s gospel” (250).

¹⁹ “Imitatio Homeri?” 721-22.

²⁰ Homeric Epics, 190. Mitchell may not think that this is what Mark did, but she surely cannot say that the “book ends without engaging the central question of ancient . . . literary criticism: What, finally is the ♦&□□□❖✕ (goal) of this composite literary work for its intended historical audience if conceived as a transvaluation of Homeric epic?” (255).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 250-51.

²² “Imitatio Homeri?” 718.

²³ *Ibid.*, 727.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 732. Although Mitchell does not explicitly make this argument, she does so implicitly by arguing that all of the parallels that I allege between Mark and epic are more easily accounted for in some other way, often by reference to the Septuagint.

²⁵ Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17-51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

