# Mimesis Criticism of the Gospels
# An Introduction and Defense

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I am humbly grateful to Maciej Owczarzak for his invitation to provide this justification of my comparison of the canonical Gospels with classical Greek poetry, most notably Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Bacchae*. A list of my most relevant publications appears in the attending bibliography, "MacDonald's Publications on Mimesis." A significantly expanded version of this essay soon will appear in a major reference work, *Two Mimetic Synopses: Solving the Synoptic and Johannine Problems and Tracking Gospel Imitations of Classical Greek Poetry*.

What is Mimesis Criticism, Especially when Applied to the Gospels?

The answer to this question is quite straightforward and consists of four postulates.

**1. Mimesis, the imitation and emulation of successful models or antetexts, dominated Greek and Latin literary education.** According to Jacques Bompaire, "from his entry into the house of the school master, the good student of antiquity was taken into a mechanism that would surely make of him an author trained in the rules of Mimesis."[1] Tim Whitmarsh: "The dominant notion in the literary aesthetic was *mimēsis*. . . . *Mimēsis* marks not only the traditional temper of Roman Greek culture, but also its modernity: an 'imitation' of a literary forebear is not simply a xerographic reproduction but also . . . a transformation."[2] Such mimetic transformations allowed authors to establish cultural identities by adopting, adapting, and often rivaling venerated texts. According to Whitmarsh, mimesis often permitted "constructing one's own self-representation through and against the canonical past. . . . The literature of Roman Greece . . . engages dynamically with inherited images, tropes, and identities, actively constructing a new way of looking at the world. . . . It was through writing literature . . . that Greek cultural identity was most richly and intensively explored."[3] The imitations of the Septuagint/Old Greek (LXX/OG) in the Synoptics similarly are mimetic in that their authors sought "to establish cultural identities by adopting, adapting, and often rivaling venerated texts," to construct "self-representation through and against the canonical past."

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[1] *Lucian écrivain: Imitation et création* (BEFAR; Paris: Boccard, 1958, 43). The scholarship on rhetorical mimesis is enormous and fascinating. Particularly useful are Richard McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," in *Critics and* Criticism (ed. Ronald Salmon Crane; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 147-75; Donald A. Russell, "De Imitatione," in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature* (ed. David West and Tony Woodman; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-16; and Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Ancient Literary Genres: A Mirage?" in *Classical Studies* (ed. Andrew Laird; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 421-39.

[2] *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire: The Politics of Imitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26.

[3] *Greek Literature*, 27, 32, and 38.

**2. No literature in antiquity was more accessible and imitated than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.** More than six hundred Greek fragments prior to 200 C.E. witness to them; a paltry five to the Jewish Bible in Greek, the Septuagint. According to the first-century Stoic Heraclitus,

> One might almost say that his poems are our baby clothes, and we nourish our minds by draughts of his milk. He stands at our side as we each grow up and shares our youth as we gradually come to manhood; when we are mature, his presence within us is at its prime, and even in old age, we never weary of him. When we stop, we thirst to begin him again. In a word, the only end of Homer for human beings is the end of life.[4]

Furthermore, no texts in antiquity were more widely used in teaching literacy than the Homeric epics—a constant annoyance to students—and none was more widely imitated. A famous Roman teacher of rhetoric, Quintilian, advised his students to begin their reading with Homer, even if they never intend to write poetry themselves. “The proper place for us to begin is with Homer. Like his own Ocean, which he says is the source of <every> river and spring, Homer provides the model and the origin of every department of eloquence.”[5] For example, “History [as a literary genre] is very close to the poets. In a sense it is a prose poem” (*Inst.* 10.1.31). According to one scholar on Homeric influence in the Roman Empire, “The *Odyssey* is universally acknowledged as the ultimate model for the typical novelistic plot” in Greek and Latin novellas.[6] According to Dio Chrysostom, another of Mark’s contemporaries, Ὅμηρος δὲ καὶ πρῶτος καὶ μέσος καὶ ὕστατος (“Homer . . . is first, middle, and last”) of Greek culture.[7]

**3. The Synoptic Gospels are heavily populated by analogs to Homeric characters and episodes that demand an explanation.** This essay will focus on Mark, but the imitations are even more extensive in Luke-Acts. In previous publications I have proposed the following similarities.

| ***Iliad*** | **Location** | **Mark** | **Location** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hector refuses mixed wine | 6.258-265 | Jesus refuses mixed wine | 15:22-24 |
| Glaucus’s incurable wound | 16.454-531 | Woman’s incurable hemorrhage | 5:24-34 |
| Hector recognizes that Apollo abandoned him | 22.296-303 | Jesus recognizes that God had abandoned him | 15:33-34 |
| Hector dies with a shout | 22.361-363 | Jesus dies with a shout | 15:37 |
| Achilles gloats over his kill | 22.371-394 | Centurion gloats over his kill | 15:39 |
| Women watch Hector die from afar | 22.405-467 | Women watch Jesus die from afar | 15:40-41 ) |

[4] Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* 1.5-7 (translation from Donald A. Russel and David Konstan, eds., *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems* [WGRW 14; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005], 3).

[5] *Inst*. 10.1.46-47. “Whether their [first-century Roman] master taught both languages or only Greek, the poet whom boys began to study first and foremost was Homer. . . . Petronius, Quintilian, and Pliny are all unequivocal about Homer’s priority” (Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977], 212-13). Ronald F. Hock provides a detailed treatment of the topic in “Homer in Greco-Roman Education,” in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (ed. Dennis R. MacDonald; SAC; Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 56-77. He concludes by saying: “Homer’s role in education was varied, continuous, and profound. . . . Indeed, for the rest of their lives, those who had been educated, πεπαιδευμένοι, were expected to have Homer on their lips . . . , even when half asleep” (77).

[6] Joseph Farrell, “Roman Homer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (ed. Robert Fowler; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 271.

[7] *Or*. 18:8.

| Hermes speeds over the sea | 24.331-697 | Jesus walks on Sea of Galilee | 6:45-56 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Priam rescues and buries Hector | 24.518-798 | Joseph rescues and buries Jesus | 15:43-47 |

| ***Odyssey*** | **Location** | **Mark** | **Location** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Athena descends like a bird | 1.319-324 | Spirit descends like a dove | 2:1-2 |
| Sailors volunteer to follow Athena | 2.383-413 | Fishermen volunteer to follow Jesus | 1:16-20 |
| Nestor's feast for 4500 men | 3.1-68 | Jesus's feast for 5000 men | 6:30-44 |
| Menelaus's wedding feast | 4.1-67 | Jesus's feast for 4000 | 8:1-9 |
| Odysseus enters city behind mules | 6.252-261 | Jesus enters city on an ass | 11:1-11 |
| Alcinous's prolific figs trees | 7.112-121 | Jesus curses unprolific fig tree | 11:12-14 |
| Blind Demodocus among sailors | 8.471-473 | Blind man at "House-of-fisherman" | 8:22-26 |
| Lotus-eating, forgetful comrades | 9.62-107 | Forgetful disciples at sea | 8:19-21 |
| Polyphemus the cave-dweller | 9.105-525 | Dangerous demoniac from caves | 5:1-20 |
| Aeolus's bag of winds and gale | 10.1-55 | Jesus calms winds and sea | 4:35-41 |
| Cannibals at the harbor | 10.76-136 | Hostile Pharisees at the harbor | 8:10-13 |
| Following a water carrier to dinner | 10.100-116 | Following a water carrier to dinner | 14:12-16 |
| Circe turns soldiers into swine | 10.135-465 | Jesus sends demons into swine | 5:1-20 |
| Odysseus's last supper before Hades | 10.546-561 | Jesus's last super and Gethsemane | 14:32-42 |
| Death of young Elpenor | 10.546-560 | Flight of naked young man | 14:43-52 |
| Blind seer Tiresias | 11.90-94 | Blind seer Bartimaeus | 10:46-52 |
| Death of Agamemnon at a feast | 11.409-430 | Death of the Baptist at a feast | 6:14-29 |
| Burial of Elpenor at dawn | 12.1-5 | Young man at tomb at dawn | 16:1-4 |
| Eurylochus's vow | 12.298-305 | Peter's vow | 14:26-31 |
| Eurylochus's broken vow | 12.367-396 | Peter's broken vow | 14:66-72 |
| Eumaeus's Phoenician nurse | 15.417-491 | Syrophoenician woman | 7:24-30 |
| Odysseus's transfiguration | 16.172-301 | Jesus's transfiguration | 9:2-13 |
| Suitors plot to kill Telemachus | 16.383-385 | Vinedressers kill the beloved son | 12:1-12 |
| Conspiracy to kill Telemachus | 17.182-213 | Conspiracy to kill Jesus | 14:10-11 |
| Penelope's hospitality | 17.534-547 | Generous widow at temple | 12:41-42 |
| Irus the beggar | 18.1-94 | Barabbas the brigand | 15:6-15 |
| Telemachus's amazement at house | 19.35-43 | Disciples' amazement at temple | 13:1-2 |
| Penelope's request for a sign | 19.102-271 | Disciples' request for a sign | 13:3-8 |
| Prophetic oak at Dodona | 19.296-307 | Prophetic fig tree | 13:28-31 |
| Eurycleia washes her master | 19.370-575 | Woman anoints Jesus | 14:3-9 |
| Eurycleia's recognition of Odysseus | 19.474-486 | Peter's recognition of the Messiah | 8:27-30 |
| Odysseus slays suitors in his house | 22.17-86 | Jesus expels merchants from temple | 11:15-19 |
| Contested authority over the house | 22.221-233 | Contested authority over the temple | 11:27-33 |
| Odysseus hacks to death evil slave | 22.474-477 | Bystander slices off a slave's ear | 14:43-52 |

**4. If one grants these similarities, one must determine on the basis of rigorous criteria whether they issue from the influence of Homeric mythology on ancient Greek culture generally or from literary mimesis.** Theoretically, both a contextually generic and a mimetically genetic explanation are legitimate. This is where mimesis criticism becomes invaluable insofar as it promotes seven such criteria. The first two pertain to putative models or antetexts.

> Criterion 1. The criterion of *accessibility* assesses the likelihood that the author of the later text had access to the proposed model.
>
> Criterion 2. *Analogy* determines if other authors imitated the same mimetic model.

Undeniably, no books in antiquity were more accessible and imitated than the Homeric epics.

Criterion 3. *Density*: the more parallels one can posit between two texts, the stronger the case that they issue from a literary connection. These similarities often consist of shared wording, but they also may include similar characterizations and motifs.

Criterion 4. The criterion of *order* examines the relative sequencing of similarities in two works. If parallels appear in the same order, the case strengthens for a genetic connection.

Criterion 5. A *distinctive trait* is anything unusual in the targeted model or antetext and the proposed borrower that links the two into a special relationship.

Criterion 6. *Interpretability* asks what might be gained by viewing one text as a debtor to another. Why might an author have imitated the proposed model?

Criterion 7. Parallels satisfy the criterion of *ancient recognition* when one can show that readers within the culture from which the text was written were aware of such connections.

*The Gospels and Homer* and other publications apply these criteria to the parallels already cited and to dozens more, especially in Acts, but here I want to focus on a Markan imitation not of Homer but of Euripides' *Hercules furens*, where a direct and strategic literary connection is highly likely.[8]

Test Case: Mark 9:14-29 and Euripides' *Madness of Heracles*

According to this famous play, Heracles, a son of Zeus, had left Thebes to return Cerberus to Hades, and during his absence the tyrant Lycus plotted to kill his sons to ensure his rule. No Theban could protect them. When Heracles finally returned, his boys ran to embrace him, and his father Amphitryon told him of the threat against their lives. Heracles killed Lycus, but his family soon endured an even graver fate, ironically at the hero's own hands. Hera sent Lyssa, a goddess of madness, to afflict him. According to a slave who witnessed the event,

> "Alcmene's son
> stood there in silence, and while their father delayed,
> the children stared: he no longer was as he had been.
> He was contorted by the rolling of his eyes
> and developed bloodshot eyes;
> froth dribbled down his handsome beard." (*Madness of Heracles* 929-934)

In a rage, the demented hero killed his sons and Megara his wife. Athena then "threw a stone at Heracles' chest, / which stopped his crazed labor and put him to sleep; / he fell to the ground" (1004-1006). Amphitryon, fearing that Athena's blow had killed his son, shoved aside the chorus saying, "Quiet. Let me detect his breath. Come, let me put my ear to him" (1060). Heracles then woke, confused why his family lay dead. When his father told him that he himself had killed them, he recognized the wrath of Hera: "While I was still sucking milk in my swaddling clothes, / the wife of Zeus sent fierce-eyed serpents / so that I might be destroyed" (1266-1268), because her husband had sired him from Alcmene. Compare the following:

| ***Madness of Heracles*** | **Mark 9:14-19** |
|---|---|
| Heracles, the son of Zeus, had just returned from the realm of Hades. | Jesus, the Son of God, had just spoken with two dead men on a mountain during his transfiguration. |

[8] See *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (NTGL 1; Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, 269-75.

| | |
|---|---|
| During his absence, his family faced a crisis: no one was able to protect them from the tyrant Lycus (60-87). | During his absence, the disciples faced a crisis: a demon assaulted a young man whom they were unable to exorcise. |
| The problem never would have arisen had Heracles himself been there (95-106). | The problem never would have arisen had Jesus himself been there. |
| When Heracles entered Thebes, his father and wife were amazed when they saw that he had returned from Hades. Megara told her boys to run to their father, their savior (513-522 and 531-532). | "As soon as the crowd saw him, they were astonished, ran to him, and welcomed him. |
| Heracles then asked them what was happening (525-530). | [16] And he asked them, 'Why are you disputing with them?' |
| His father said that he and Heracles' wife and sons were about to be slain (533-561). | [17] Someone from the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought my son to you— he has a spirit that renders him mute. [18] Whenever it seizes him, it throws him down; he froths, grinds his teeth, and collapses. |
| Heracles' friends had been unable to help his family (56; cf. 84-85). | I asked your disciples to expel it, but they could not do so.' |
| The inability of Thebans to oust Lycus was a collective shortcoming (270-274). | [19] He responded by saying, 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me.'" (15-19) |

From this point on, Jesus no longer resembles Heracles; instead, that role falls to the deaf demoniac. Mark's Jesus exorcises the young man whose symptoms are those of Euripides' Heracles.

| ***Madness of Heracles*** | **Mark 9:20-24** |
|---|---|
| | "So the man brought him to Jesus, and when the spirit saw him, |
| "He stood there in silence. . . . He no longer was as he had been; / he was contorted by the rolling of his eyes / and developed bloodshot eyes; / froth [ἀφρόν] dribbled down his handsome beard" (928-929 and 931-934). | it immediately convulsed him. He fell to the earth and rolled around,<br><br>frothing [ἀφρίζων] at the mouth. |
| [Heracles:] "While I was still sucking milk in my swaddling clothes, / the wife of Zeus sent fierce-eyed serpents / so that I might be destroyed" (1266-1268). | [21] Jesus asked his father, 'How long has he been like this?' He said, 'From his youth; [22] often it throws him into the fire or the water to destroy him. |
| Amphitryon asked Heracles to help them. He did so by slaying Lycus, but then, crazed by Lyssa, slew his family. | Have pity on us and help us, if you can.'" |
| Ultimately, Athena "threw a stone at Heracles' chest, / which stopped his crazed labor and put him to sleep, / and he fell to the ground" (1004-1006).<br><br>His father Amphitryon feared that he had died (1060). | Jesus "scolded the unclean spirit, saying to him, 'Mute and deaf spirit, I order you: Come out of him, and never enter him again!' [26] The demon cried out, threw him into a violent fit, and came out. The boy was like a corpse, prompting many to say that he had died. |
| When Heracles finally came to his senses, he marveled: "I am alive!" (1089). | [27] But Jesus took the lad's hand, pulled him up, and he arose." (25-27) The disciples marveled. |

Whereas the demon in Euripides struck Heracles with frothing madness, Jesus in Mark casts a demon from a frothing madman. The evangelist surely expected his readers to appreciate Jesus's compassion when compared to Hera's cruelty, an ethical emulation or transvaluation, which reveals that he would have concurred with Euripides' hero, who complained, "To such a god / who would ever pray?" (1307).

The most distinctive parallels pointing to Mark's mimetic rivalry with the Athenian tragedian are absent in the Matthean and Lukan redactions.

| ***Madness of Heracles*** | **Mark 9** | **Matt 17** | **Luke 9** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Heracles visits Hades. | Jesus speaks with the dead. | 1-13 | 28-36 |
| A crisis arises in his absence. | A crisis arises in his absence. | 14-15 | 37-39 |

| His sons run to meet him. | The crowd runs to meet him. | ----- | ----- |
|---|---|---|---|
| Heracles asks about the problem. | Jesus asks about the problem. | ----- | ----- |
| Thebans were helpless. | Disciples were helpless. | 16-17 | 40-41 |
| Heracles "stood there in silence." | The afflicted boy was mute. | ----- | ----- |
| The demon makes Heracles froth at the mouth. | The demon makes the boy froth at the mouth. | ----- | 39 |
| Hera had afflicted him from his birth. | It had afflicted him from youth. | ----- | ----- |
| Athena stops him with a stone. | Jesus exorcizes the demon. | 18a | 42a |
| Heracles falls "to the ground" asleep. | The boy falls and is like a corpse. | ----- | ----- |
| His father thinks he had died. | Many say "that he had died." | ----- | ------ |
| Heracles awakes grateful to be alive but is horrified at what he had done. | Jesus lifts him up from the ground and the disciples marvel. | 18b-19 | 42b-43 |

If the story survived today only in Matthew and Luke, the imitations of Euripides' tragedy would be invisible.

The parallels proposed here magnificently satisfy the seven criteria of mimesis criticism. "[T]he content of the Euripidean *Heracles* was very well known; indeed, it could by no means have been lost" (criterion 1, accessibility).[9] The Christian apologist Aristides ridiculed pagans for claiming that "Heracles got drunk, went mad, and slit the throats of his children. . . . How is it that he who was drunk and a slayer of children should be a god?" (*Apol*. 10).[10] Several ancient authors also imitated the play, including Seneca the Younger, who wrote his own *Hercules furens* (criterion 2, analogy).

Surely the parallels presented earlier are sufficiently dense and sequential (criteria 3 and 4) to suggest direct imitation, but even more striking are the unusual motifs that appear in both: crises arise during the heroes' adventures with the dead; Hera and the demon inflict frothing madness on men they had tormented from their youth; when divine figures intervene, both men fall to the ground and are thought dead. None of these motifs appears in any other New Testament miracle story; they are distinctive (criterion 5). A reader aware of Mark's imitation will contrast Jesus's compassion for the man's demon-possessed son with Hera's petulant infliction of madness and Heracles' murder of his family (criterion 6, interpretability).

Two passages in the *Acts of Andrew* suggest that its author may have recognized Mark's mimesis and even enhanced it (criterion 7, recognition).[11] For example, early in Andrew's Passion one reads, "One of the boys under the supervision of Aristocles ["Excellence-famed"]—one whom Stratocles ["Battle-famed"] loved dearly—was stricken by a demon and lay in feces out of his mind" (Pass. 2). The apostle "burst inside, to the place where Stratocles' slave was foaming [ἤφριζεν] at the mouth, entirely contorted," and lying on the ground. The lad's name was Alcman (᾽Αλκμάνης; "Violent-madness"); the name of Heracles' mother was Alcmene. Alcman is an ersatz Heracles [Hera-famed]. Andrew scoffed at magicians "who were unable to do anything" and prayed, "Grant my request quickly with respect to Stratocles' servant by banishing the demon whom those who are its kindred could not banish" (Pass. 4-5).

> When the demon had left, Alcman got up from the ground; Andrew extended his hand to him, and the lad walked with him, self-composed, steady on his feet,

[9] Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides Herakles* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959), 2.161.
[10] See also Clement of Alexandria *Protr.* 7.76.5, Athenagoras *Leg*. 29.1, and Lactantius *Inst.* 1.9.
[11] The other is ch. 29 of the epitome of the *Acts* by Gregory of Tours. The *Acts of Andrew* imitates Greek poetry and philosophy throughout. See my treatment in *Christianizing Homer: The* Odyssey, *Plato, and the* Acts of Andrew (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

> conducting coherent conversation, affectionately looking at Andrew and his master, and inquiring about the cause for the crowd inside. Andrew told him, "There is no need for you to learn about anything alien to you. It is enough for us to see in you what we have seen." (Pass. 5)

According to Euripides, Athena stunned Heracles with a boulder. When the hero finally came to, he asked what had happened, but the others were reluctant to give him the bad news. Amphitryon: "Know only this much of your misfortunes, but let the rest be" (1125). Whereas Hera had sent madness to Heracles, Andrew's God made Stratocles' slave sane.

The mimetic strategy of the *Acts of Andrew* here resembles Mark's and becomes more obvious by the use of significant names. Unfortunately, one cannot be certain that the author of the *Acts* recognized Mark's mimesis, which would satisfy criterion 7, but it certainly qualifies as an analogous imitation of Euripides (criterion 2).

The learned author of the late second-century *Acts of Andrew* ended his work with an invitation to his readers to detect a deeper stratum of meaning beneath his construal of the ministry and martyrdom of the apostle, namely, his presentation of Andrew as a new Odysseus, Dionysus, Heracles, and Socrates.

> Here, then, I must make an end of the blessed narratives, acts, and mysteries difficulty—or should I say, impossible—to express. Let this stroke of the pen end it. I will pray first for myself, that I heard what was actually said, both the obvious and also the obscure, comprehensible only to the intellect. I will pray next for all who are convinced by what was said, that they may have fellowship with each other, as God opens the ears of the listeners, to make comprehensible all his gifts in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom, together with the Father, be glory, honor, and power with the all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, how and always, forever and ever, Amen. (*Acts Andr*. Pass. 65).

The author thus alerts his readers that his narratives contain both "the obvious and also the obscure [τῶν ἀφανῶν] and comprehensible only to the intellect [διανοίᾳ δὲ ληπτῶν]," but he prays "for all" believers in hopes that God will open their ears "to make comprehensible [ληπτά] all his gifts." No doubt he assumed that not all of his readers would have been πεπαιδευμένοι but that all could benefit from "the obvious [τὸ συμφανές]." As the history of reception and scholarship of the *Acts of Andrew* makes clear, the author's prayer was not answered; virtually no one was able to recognize the more profound gifts of his mimetic project.[12] The same may be said of the reception of the Gospel of Mark, even today.

But in the Roman Empire the cultural canyon between the educated elites and the throngs (οἱ πεπαιδευμένοι and οἱ πολλοί) was not as grand as one might think. "Easy familiarity with Homer was the mark of an expensive education, and those who had had one like to sneer at frauds. But some knowledge of Homer appears to have circulated throughout Roman culture in quite casual forms. Even the illiterate might converse in quasi-Homeric expressions that had become proverbial."[13] The epics were cultural inevitabilities. As Hegel put it, "Homer is that element in which the Greek world lived, like a human in air." Greek-speaking Christians in the early Empire may have been allergic to mythological poetry, but they were not immune to it, and one way of inoculating themselves was to replace Homeric stories with imitations of them, what one might call transvaluative mimesis.

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[12] See MacDonald, "Is There a Privileged Reader? A Case from the Apocryphal Acts," in *Textual Determinacy. Part Two* (*Semeia* 71; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 29-43.

[13] Farrell, "Roman Homer," 267.

## Resistance to Mimesis Criticism

Unfortunately, my proposals for literary imitation of Greek poetry have met with stiff and sometimes vitriolic opposition that I first chalked up to modern ignorance about Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy or to Christian piety. Soon, however, I discovered that the severest criticisms came from culturally liberal and professionally trained colleagues. Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (4th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) helped me understand why.

### Imitations of Greek Poetry Threaten the Disciplinary Matrix

According to Kuhn, scientific advances often are glacial, gradually building upon previous discoveries, what he calls "normal science" driven by "problem-solving." Members of these guilds advance science by replicating effective experiments of the past. Kuhn suggest that major advances, on the other hand, are not evolutionary but revolutionary, like those associated with Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Lavoisier, Darwin, and Einstein. Such revolutions share a common "structure" characterized by "normal" scientists who take for granted the adequacy of an effective "paradigm", which Kuhn later clarified as a "disciplinary matrix," a set of methodologies "deployed without question or dissent by group members" (182), "shared commitments" and beliefs (183), "shared values and behaviors" (185), and what he called "exemplars" or "the concrete problem-solutions that students encounter from the start of their scientific education" in their textbooks and standard reference works (186).

A scientific revolution, however, "commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science."[14]

> The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather, it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications.[15]

Kuhn, a philosopher of science, expressed reservations about the application of his structure to revolutions in the arts, but humanists soon recognized its relevance to their disciplines, which are similarly characterized by shared and often unchallenged methodologies and values. It certainly applies to scholarship on the Gospels.

Students trained to become New Testament scholars begin with textbooks that seldom, if ever, note the influence of classical Greek poetry, let alone mimesis criticism as a legitimate methodology. They concentrate rather on textual and historical criticism, form, source, and redaction criticism, and in many cases also literary criticism. Handbooks on exegesis seldom include "exemplars" of Gospel intertextuality apart from uses of the Septuagint or other Gospels. For most students of the New Testament, Greek poetry is invisible.

The same neglect appears in standard reference works. The most widely used critical text of the Greek New Testament, Nestle$^{28}$, indexes thousands of citations and allusions *ex vetere testamento* but a measly four *e scriptoribus graecis*: one each from Aratus, Euripides, Heraclitus, and Menander; none from Homer. The prestigious *Anchor Bible Dictionary* could not find space in its six volumes for entries

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[14] *Structure*, 53.

[15] *Structure*, 85.

on Homer, Euripides, or even Greek poetry generally. More scandalous is its utter silence about the most formative book that shaped Roman politics in the early empire: Vergil's *Aeneid*.

Even New Testament Greek lexica are culpable. The Greek of Homer and Euripides was difficult to understand even in their own day and was largely unintelligible except to the educated elite in the Roman Empire. A first-century (C.E.) grammarian known to us as Apollonius Sophista produced a lexicon with Homeric words listed alphabetically followed by their Koine counterparts, without which the text would be incomprehensible to most readers. But modern Greek lexica identify archaic equivalents to Koine only when they are etymologically similar, leaving their archaic equivalents unacknowledged. As a result, when a researcher searches for parallels to a Greek word in the New Testament, the only equivalents visible will be strictly morphological. The critical tools of New Testament humanistic scholarship thus inadvertently conspire to relegate Homer and Athenian tragedians to *damnatio memoriae*, or worse, *lapsus ad oblivium.*

Gospel synopses are no exception. *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum (*edited by Kurt Aland) lists three indexes list over 800 references to *Vetus Testamentum*, Apocrypha, and *Patres*. The two indexes in *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels* (edited by Albert Huck and Heinrich Greeven) list over 500 to the Septuagint and early Christian texts. Neither lists a single non-Jewish or non-Christian work, to say nothing of Greek epic or tragedy.

Any successful excavation for parallels between the Gospels and Greek poetry thus unearths, to use Kuhn's terms, anomalies that threaten the stability of the disciplinary matrix of New Testament research; they create a crisis that requires a shift to a new paradigm and alternative criteria, such as the seven of mimesis criticism. Kuhn: "When paradigms change, there are usually significant shifts in the criteria determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions. . . . [T]he choice between competing paradigms regularly raises questions that cannot be resolved by the criteria of normal science."[16]

## The Matrix Fights Back

Much of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* describes how adherents to matrices of "normal science" variously resist new theories and their critical criteria. "The source of resistance is the assurance that the older paradigm will ultimately solve all its problems, that nature can be shoved into the box the paradigm provides."[17] Again: "Though they [researchers] may begin to lose faith and then to consider alternatives, they do not renounce the paradigm that has led them into crisis. They do not, that is, treat anomalies as counterinstances. . . . They will devise numerous articulations and *ad hoc* modifications of their theory in order to eliminate any apparent conflict."[18] Such resistance characterizes the reception of mimesis criticism and includes four overlapping strategies: denial, accommodation, methodological assaults, and marginalization.

### *Denial*

According to Kuhn, practitioners of scientific paradigms may simply ignore inconvenient anomalies by dismissing them *ad fontes*. No serious scholar denies the significance of the Homeric epics for ancient literature, but defenders of the matrix insist that such influence either could not have been

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[16] *Structure*, 109.

[17] *Structure*, 151.

[18] *Structure*, 77-78.

textually mediated or cannot be proven to have been so. Karl Olav Sandnes, for example, insists that the evangelists and their readers were insufficiently literate for strategic and hermeneutically freighted imitation to be meaningful.[19] This reasoning is circular insofar as one best determines the sophistication of authors and readers by assessing a text itself, not by importing assumptions about them. If one accepts Sandnes's dictum, it matters not how many parallels one draws between classical Greek poetry and the Gospels, how sequential they are, or how distinctive; mimesis becomes moot and its practitioners mute.

M. David Litwa goes further than Sandnes in an unequivocal denunciation of mimesis in any form. I find this passage both preposterous and personally offensive: "MacDonald boasts that he discovers dense parallels in texts that correspond in order and sequence. Yet no amount of similarity between texts can prove a genetic connection."[20] I doubt that many classicists—or New Testament scholars investigating Gospel intertextuality with Jewish Scriptures—could agree with this sweeping statement. Often it is precisely the "amount of similarity between texts" that "can prove a genetic connection" with a high degree of plausibility, as was the case with the parallels between the *Madness of Heracles* and Mark 9 or *Acts of Andrew*, Pass. 2-5.

*Accommodation*

According to Kuhn, scientists may concede the occasional anomaly, but instead of abandoning the regnant paradigm, they tweak it to absorb the unwelcome "counterinstance." "They will devise numerous articulations and *ad hoc* modifications of their theory in order to eliminate any apparent conflict."[21] Litwa, for example, rejects genetic connections generated by mimesis criticism and modifies his comparative methodology in favor of a generic connections that result instead from "dynamic cultural interaction":

> Naturally, the evangelists knew Homeric mythology and so could have been influenced by it in various ways. Indeed, virtually everyone in antiquity knew Homer, from the great orators to the washerwoman who cleaned the sheets. They heard Homer performed, saw Homeric scenes in paintings, and witnessed Homeric plots in plays. The thesis that the evangelists sat down to adapt precise written passages of Homer like elite poets is, however, unlikely. If imitation occurred, it did not occur in this bookish fashion. There were many more common ways for people in antiquity to absorb and adapt cultural lore. . . . If scholars want to posit historical interaction between stories, they should think less about genetic relations between texts and more about shared cultural conceptions communicated through a broad array of cultural media.[22]

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[19] "*Imitatio Homeri*? An Appraisal of Dennis R. MacDonald's 'Mimesis Criticism,'" *JBL* 124 (2005): 715-32. Similar arguments appear in his *Challenge of Homer: School, Pagan Poets, and Early Christianity* (LNTS 400; London: T&T Clark, 2009).

[20] *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and the Mediterranean Myths* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2019), 49.

[21] *Structure*, 78.

[22] *Gospels Became History*, 49-50. This also is the view of Stefan Krauter, who argues that the impressive parallels between Luke-Acts and the *Aeneid* are not directly mimetic but indirect thanks to the ubiquity of the Latin epic in the early Empire ("Vergils Evangelium und das lukanische Epos? Überlegungen zu Gattung und Theologie des lukanischen Doppelwerkes," in *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* [ed. Jörg Frey, Clare K. Rothschild, and Jens Schröter; BZNW 162; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009], 214-43).

One thus need not appeal to mimesis criticism; historical criticism, modestly tweaked, will suffice.

There is much in this paragraph with which I agree. The evangelists surely did not expect their readers to have known about characters and episodes in the epics exclusively from texts. I disagree, however, that texts should be disqualified as one of the "cultural media" when it comes to Gospel authorship. Widespread direct and strategic imitations of the epics in the Greco-Roman world surely require that the Homeric texts themselves be considered, at least theoretically, when assessing the creation of Gospel narratives.

*Methodological Assaults*

Much of Kuhn's treatment concerns disputes among scientists about the adequacy of the tools and procedures that reportedly discovered the threatening anomalies. With respect to the Gospels, scholars may admit the theoretical plausibility of poetic imitations but attack methodologies designed to detect them. In addition to Litwa's insistence that "no amount of similarity between texts can prove a genetic connection," he polemicizes against four applications of my criteria, citing previous objections from Sandnes and Margaret M. Mitchell.[23]

Here is the first: "MacDonald's method makes his thesis about mimesis largely unfalsifiable. A broad range of imagined similarities can be construed as imitation, and an equally broad range of differences can be construed as emulation. So MacDonald can posit similarities when he wants and explain away difference by the notion of emulation. Margaret Mitchell calls this the 'have your cake and eat it too' methodology."[24] This criticism is transparently unfair. Mimesis criticism is more about hermeneutical conversation between texts than about mere textual mimicry. So the observation that some resemblances mimic or competitively emulate a proposed model actually assists in establishing a literary connection. The best examples of ancient mimesis are not plagiaristic but polemical, and to establish the tension between model and imitation one needs, to quote Litwa, "differences" that "can be construed as emulation." For example, similarities between the *Madness of Heracles* and Mark's frothing demoniac encourage readers to compare them, while the differences encourage them to contrast Hera's violence with Jesus's compassion. I prefer to view mimesis criticism as the "have your cake and" enjoy the transformed icing methodology.

According to Litwa, "sometimes the parallels that MacDonald points out are trite. The fact that Odysseus was on a floating island and Jesus on a floating boat for example is not very significant. What else would a seaworthy boat do? . . . The question is, which similarities are significant?" I agree with two aspects of this objection: yes, some parallels are less compelling and others, even "trite"; and yes, one always should ask, "Which similarities are significant?" If Litwa is correct that "no amount of similarity between texts can prove a genetic connection" (49), then one could never consider even significant similarities to qualify as mimesis. One need not prove mimesis to make it the best explanation of literary parallels.

What is more troubling about this criticism here is his patronizing jab, "What else would a seaworthy boat do?" other than float. But the similarity of "Odysseus . . . on a floating island and Jesus

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[23] Mitchell's arguments appear in "Homer in the New Testament?" 244-58. I answered these objections a decade ago in *My Turn: A Critique of Critics of "Mimesis Criticism"* (IACOP 53; Claremont: The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 2009), about which Litwa says only "In my judgment, MacDonald's response does not adequately address the concerns raised by Sandnes and Mitchell" (235, n. 4). He articulates no arguments to defend his dismissal.

[24] *Gospels Become History*, 48, citing Mitchell, "Homer in the New Testament?" 252.

on a floating boat" pertains to his preaching from the boat to the crowds on land, somewhat like Odysseus regaling the family of Aeolus with Trojan tales. Even if one grants to Litwa that these parallels are "trite," they appear in a larger context of parallels which he intentionally ignores. He must have seen the following parallels in *The Gospels and Homer*:

| ***Od*. 10.28-29, 31-32, 47-52, 55** | **Mark 4:35-41** |
|---|---|
| [Odysseus told Alcinous, on a floating island, tales of the Trojan War.] | [Jesus taught the crowds while floating on a boat.] |
| "For nine days, night and day alike, we on the tenth our homeland appeared. /. . . [Odysseus had twelve ships] | On that day, when it was late, he says to them, "Let's pass over to the other side." **36** They left the crowd and took him—he already was in the boat. Other boats were with him. |
| Sweet sleep came over me, for I was weary / from continually adjusting the sheet of the ship. / . . . | |
| [Odysseus's crew] untied the bag, and all the winds [ἄνεμοι] rushed out. / The gale immediately snatched them and drove them out to sea / weeping, away from their homeland." | **37** And a great gale of wind [ἀνέμου] came up, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it already was filling. |
| | **38** He himself was in the stern asleep on a pillow. They woke [ἐγείρουσιν] him |
| [10.27: "By our own folly we were perishing (ἀπωλόμεθα)."] | and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing [ἀπολλύμεθα]?" |
| "But I / rose up [ἐγρόμενος] and pondered in my blameless heart / whether to jump from the ship and perish in the sea / or calmly to endure and remain still among the living. . . . / | **39** He rose up [διεγερθείς], rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Silence! Be still!" The wind died down, and there was a great calm. |
| And my comrades groaned." [The ship then ran aground at the island of Aeolus, the god of winds and gales.] | **40** And he said to them, "Why were you such cowards? Do you still have no faith?" **41** They were greatly afraid, and were saying to each other, "What kind of person is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" |

These parallels provide an excellent example of "have your cake and" enjoy the transformed icing. The similarities between the two accounts link them into a hermeneutically promising dance, but the differences establish Mark's rivalry. Jesus is not helpless, like Odysseus, but lord of "the wind and the sea" like the god Aeolus!

Litwa calls another of his criticisms "the fudge factor. MacDonald creatively rearranges and tweaks most of his parallels in order to fit the structure of his . . . lists and charts. One example is Jesus walking on water (Mark 6:48). MacDonald compares this passage with Homer's *Iliad* 24.340-46 and *Odyssey* 5.43-55. But in these Homeric passages, Hermes and Athena never actually walk on water; they fly over it."[25] Technically he is right, Hermes does not walk on the water but skims over it, even though in ancient art, his sprinting sandals nearly touch the water (I'm repentant here, I guess). But methodologically Litwa not only is wrong, he dissimulates. The parallels between the two accounts extend far beyond the motif of feet skimming over the sea to include occasional lexical affinities. *The Gospels and Homer* presents the parallels like this:

| ***Il*. 24** | **Mark 6:45–52** |
|---|---|
| Zeus, on Mount Ida, saw (ἰδών) Priam traveling toward Achilles and pitied him. | Jesus, on a mountain, saw (ἰδών) his disciples traveling on the sea, making no headway. |
| Priam and Idaeus drove the chariot and wagon through the darkness. | The disciples rowed in their boat all night. |
| Hermes' magical sandals "carried him over the waters" to Priam. | Jesus walked on the water to the disciples. |

[25] *Gospels Became History*, 48.

| | |
|---|---|
| When the herald saw Hermes (τὸν δ᾽ . . . ἰδών), he mistook him for an enemy and shouted. | When the disciples saw Jesus (οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτόν), they mistook him for a phantom and shouted. |
| Priam was terrified, expecting the worst. | The disciples were terrified, expecting the worst. |
| Iris earlier had reassured Priam by identifying herself: "take heart [θάρσει], . . . and do not be afraid [μηδέ τι τάρβει]. . . . / I am [εἰμι] a messenger from Zeus." | Jesus reassured the disciples by identifying himself: "Take heart [θαρσεῖτε], it is I [ἐγώ εἰμι]; do not be afraid [μὴ φοβεῖσθε]." |
| Hermes reassured Priam by identifying himself: "I am [ἐγώ] Achilles' aide. . . . I am [εἰμι] one of the Myrmidons." [Cf. 24.460: "I am [ἐγώ] a god."] | |
| Hermes leaped (ἀναΐξας) into the chariot and traveled with Priam and the herald, and quickly brought them to the Achaean camp. | Jesus went up (ἀνέβη) into the boat with the disciples, and the wind ceased. Soon they arrived at Gennesaret. |
| Hermes put the soldiers to sleep, allowing Priam to enter the camp safely. | Jesus calmed the sea, allowing the disciples to reach shore safely. |

Obviously the parallels between these two tales involve more than how the protagonist transports himself over the waves!

Litwa has a final grievance: "MacDonald does not consistently apply all his criteria. Sometimes only density and sequence are applied. . . . If only select criteria are applied, however, there is too much left to subjective judgments. To be sure, creativity and imagination are good qualities in a scholar. Yet if the imagination is not disciplined and controlled by stricter guidelines, it veers into a kind of solipsistic dogmatism." Litwa does not indicate what such "guidelines" might be, but I suspect they might be three words with nearly identical spelling and morphology, what one expert in Latin *imitatio* has called "philological fundamentalism," an approach so strict that it disallows most ancient literary imitations. Would even these "similarities" suffice to "prove a genetic connection"?

Furthermore, he clearly is wrong in alleging that "sometimes only density and sequence are applied." Insofar as all the examples I cite in *The Gospels and Homer* come from the most accessible and influential books of Greek antiquity during the early Roman Empire, the first two criteria (accessibility and analogy) are always assumed.

> Children learned large parts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by heart as part of their primary education. All Greek literature and art, and just about all Greek philosophy, resonate against the background of Homer. Throughout classical antiquity and well into the Roman Empire, Homer held a position in Mediterranean culture that can only be compared with the position the Bible would later occupy. . . . Like the Bible for the Jews, Homer offered the Greeks the foundation of their cultural identity.[26]

In many instances, I also make the case for criterion 6, Interpretability. Litwa is right that not every proposed set of parallels contains clearly distinctive traits (criterion 5) or was recognized by ancient readers (criterion 7), but as was the case with Jesus's calming the storm and walking on water, the density of lexical and thematic similarities and their nearly identical sequences suffice to suggest mimesis.

One additional comment here: I am simultaneously honored and frustrated that detractors like Litwa associate mimesis criticism exclusively with me, as though I were Don Quixote de La Claremont, a knight-errant tilting at windmills with an occasional and blundering Sancho Panza. I am by no means the only interpreter committed to this task.

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[26] A. A. Long, "Stoic Readings of Homer," in *Oxford Readings in Ancient Literary Criticism* (ORCS; ed. Andrew Laird; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 214.

*Marginalization*

Kuhn notes that when anomalies to scientific matrices accumulate and thus cannot be dismissed as isolated mutations, their defenders trivialize their significance. With respect to research on the Gospels, scholars may grant direct literary mimesis in a limited number of cases, but revert to methodologies more acceptable to the guild thus leaving it undisturbed. The matrix of Gospel scholarship, by marginalizing mimesis, has failed fully to appreciate the significance of this ubiquitous ancient literary practice for interpreting these texts. As Quintilian put it, "There can be no doubt that in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation, since, although invention came first and is all-important, it is expedient to imitate whatever has been invented with success," above all poets like Homer and Vergil (*Inst*. 10:1). Or Philodemus: "Who would claim that the writing of prose is not reliant on the Homeric poems?"[27] The answer he expected was "No one." Today one might answer, "Most New Testament scholars."

Kuhn's observations about how disciplinary matrices in the sciences avert the threats of inconvenient natural anomalies thus apply as well to the scholarly reception of parallels between the Gospels and classical Greek poetry. As we have seen, some interpreters reject such parallels from the outset (denial); others acknowledge them but view them merely as culturally generic and not textually genetic (accommodation); others concede that direct literary imitations are theoretically possible but argue against criteria for detecting them (methodological assaults); and others may grant occasional imitations but see them as outliers (marginalization). Stated otherwise:

- Literary parallels between Greek poetry and the Gospels do not exist.
- Even if they do exist, they are not mimetically intertextual but dynamically intercultural.
- Even if they might be mimetic, proposed criteria cannot prove it.
- Even if one were to prove that some are mimetic, they are mere mutations.
- Whew! The matrix survives largely unscathed.

## The Future of Mimesis Criticism: Turning a Crisis into a Revolution

In 2004, after reading several unkind reviews of *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (2000), I had a dream in which I was a child in an urban playground waiting impatiently in a long line for an empty swing, then for a slide. Bored, I wandered alone down city streets and came upon an enormous amusement park with rollercoasters, Ferris wheels, and carousels—all unoccupied and neglected. I hustled back to my friends and told them what I had found, but they thought I was crazy. "If there were such an amusement park, someone surely would have discovered it long ago." "What makes you think you are so clever to have found it when no one else had?" "What's wrong with our playground, anyhow?" I trudged back to the amusement park and, alone and lonely, boarded a rollercoaster. When I woke from my dream, I knew exactly what my subconscious had processed: although Greek epics and tragedies offer trilling rides, few scholars were interested. Unfortunately, that remains the case.

Kuhn notes that not all crises in the sciences produce revolutions, but when they do, the agents of change often are younger scholars whose personal investments in the prevailing paradigm are modest.

> Almost always the men [sic] who achieve these fundamental inventions of a new paradigm have been either very young or very new to the field whose paradigm they change. And perhaps that point need not have been made explicit, for obviously these are the men [sic] who, being little

[27] *On Poetry* 5.30.36-31.2.

> committed by prior practice to the traditional rules of normal science, are particularly likely to see that those rules no longer define a playable game and to conceive another set that can replace them.[28]

Later Kuhn adds:

> Darwin, in a particularly perceptive passage at the end of his *Origin of Species*, wrote: "Although I am fully convinced of the truth of the views given in his volume . . . , I by no means expect to convince experienced naturalists whose minds are stocked with a multitude of facts all viewed, during a long course of years, from a point of view directly opposite to mine. . . . [B]ut I look with confidence to the future,—to young and rising naturalists, who will be able to view both sides of the question with impartiality." And Max Planck surveying his own career in his *Scientific Autobiography* sadly remarked that "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but, rather because its opponents eventually die."[29]

I now am 74 years old and for the past several years I have worked on a reference work designed to promote mimesis criticism on the Gospels in English for the next generation of scholars: *Two Mimetic Synopses: Solving the Synoptic and Johannine Problems and Tracking Gospel Imitations of Classical Greek Poetry*. Part 1, "A Mimetic Synopsis of Four Synoptic Gospels," organizes in parallel columns my reconstruction of the lost Gospel, which I prefer to call the *Logoi of Jesus* or Q+, as reconstructed in *Two Shipwrecked Gospels* (2012) followed by Mark, Matthew, and Luke (in chronological and not canonical order). When appropriate, I introduce pericopae with promising parallels in classical Greek poetry with my translations of the relevant texts and a brief discussion of similarities.

Part 2, "A Mimetic Synopsis of Three Johannine Gospels," stratifies the composition of the Gospel of John: what I call the Dionysian Gospel, the Anti-Jewish Gospel, and the Beloved Disciple Gospel. The translations of these texts again appear in parallel columns. The earliest stratum, the Dionysian Gospel throughout imitates Euripides' *Bacchae*; thus, the introductions of many pericopae include my translations of this famous Athenian tragedy. Both synopses are comprehensive of every verse standard Greek editions of the Gospels. Greek versions of the parallel in both parts will be available online.

In other words, both synopsis provide a map into the vast landscape of classical Greek poetry for students of the Gospels. To quote Kuhn one last time, the future of mimesis criticism is in the hands of the next generation of scholars, "who, being little committed by prior practice to the traditional rules of normal science, are particularly likely to see that those rules no longer define a playable game and to conceive another set that can replace them." This essay and especially my *Two Mimetic Synopses* are written to promote just such a scientific revolution in Gospel scholarship.

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