Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism
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In the last three years (2015–2017), Dennis MacDonald has published three seminal books reflecting a lifetime of scholarship.[1] Each book of this trilogy makes a magisterial contribution to scholarship and exemplifies the value of mimesis criticism as a methodology for Biblical studies. MacDonald shows beyond any reasonable doubt that (1) Mark imitates Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; that (2) Luke expands Mark's Homeric parallels to include Euripides' *Bacchae,* Plato's *Republic, Apology,* and *Phaedo,* and Vergil's *Aeneid* as well; and that (3) John models Jesus after Dionysus and the Pentheus of the *Bacchae* of Euripides. If these seminal texts are taken seriously—as they must be—they will radically transform New Testament studies as a community, discipline, discourse, and body of literature.

This chapter and those that follow have taken these books seriously, and quickly at that. The original version of this chapter and the next two were presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Pacific Coast Region meeting at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, on March 9, 2015. These papers responded to review copies MacDonald graciously provided of his freshly published 2015 volumes entitled *The Gospel and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* and *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek*

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[1] Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (NTGL 1; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Dennis R. MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (NTGL 2; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); and Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

Literature. The next three papers were originally presented at the International Society of Biblical Literature meeting at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea, on July 4, 2016. For this session, MacDonald graciously provided pre-published versions of his forthcoming 2017 volume *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides*. Both panels carried a range of voices, yet all resounded in their appreciation of the heroic academic feat that MacDonald accomplished in this trilogy.

All six of these chapters look with critical appreciation on MacDonald's recent work, support mimesis criticism becoming a vital and standard methodology within New Testament studies, and sometimes propose new directions of mimetic inquiry. In his chapter, "Even Good Homer Nods," Michael Kochenash describes numerous strengths of mimesis as a methodology, contemplates a more agnostic accounting of sources for Jesus traditions than in MacDonald's mythopoesis, and outlines future directions for scholarship in terms of making LXX-epic pairings and addressing how classical emulations eludicate authorial motivations. In "Mark and Homer," Kay Higuera Smith challenges MacDonald's claim that Mark directly depended on Homer, something Smith sees as unlikely because of Mark's lack of a classical education, his marginal (subaltern) socioeconomic status, and his limited sociolinguistic competence. Smith ultimately acknowledges the tremendous value of mimesis criticism, but only in terms of indirect oral and cultural influence. In "Neos Dionysos in Textual and Cultural Mimesis," Richard C. Miller esteems MacDonald's recent contributions while lamenting the general ignorance of classical epic within Biblical scholarship and the tendency to dismiss major contributions by means of minor objections. Miller appreciates the way MacDonald has broadened mimesis from a methodology focused on texts to one illuminating standard cultural models, and he adeptly frames the Dionysian imitations with the first edition of the Gospel of John as "asceticized Bacchanalia." In "John's Politics

of Imitation," Chan Sok Park situates MacDonald's work on John and Euripides within two significant areas of Johannine scholarship: its indebtedness to Greek drama and its compositional history. He rhetorically presses on the issue of the "politics of imitation," wondering whether the Johannine community as well as the Luke-Acts community arose out of Dionysian cults or instead in competition with them. He also wonders what mimesis criticism would say about the absence of the Lord's Supper in John and what implicit and explicit claims about the Johannine community that MacDonald is making. In "The First Dionysian Gospel: Imitational and Redactional Layers in Luke and John," Mark G. Bilby describes how his doubts about mimesis were overcome by the numerous, dense parallels between Euripides' *Bacchae* and John. His primary objection is that MacDonald presumes the dependence of John (in three versions) on Luke-Acts (in a single version). Bilby instead provides an alternative, groundbreaking reconstruction of the Synoptic Problem. He shows that the rise of a Marcionite (or proto-Marcionite) exclusive Paulinism *and* Pliny the Younger's anti-Bacchanalian trials of Christians are historical, redactional-mimetic pivot points between the first and second editions of both John and Luke. Dionysian appropriations in the first editions of John and Luke are corrected and outdone by Socratic (counter-Dionysian) appropriations and the rehabilitation of Peter in the second editions of John and Luke.

The final three chapters focus on close mimetic analysis of specific passages in the Gospels and Acts, while also tracing out broader literary and theological implications for the New Testament, early Christianity, and the reception of epic literature in late antiquity. "Scriptural Revision in Mark's Gospel and Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius*," by Austin Busch, is a major contribution to the study of the Gospel of Mark. By means of a riveting, parallel tour of the reception of Homeric cyclops lore in these two texts, Busch recasts Mark's entire

narrative as a retelling of the anthropophagic redemption myths of Odysseus-Polyphemus and Zeus-Chronos, all the while reframing mimesis criticism within the broader framework of the reception of classical epic. Ilseo Park offers a glimpse of his doctoral dissertation under MacDonald in his "Acts 2 as an Intertextual Map: Moving from Dionysian to Platonic Identity," showing how the Pentecost narrative establishes the mimetic program for the entire narrative of Acts, evoking yet displacing Dionysian motifs with Socratic ones. Finally, in "The Scandal of Gentile Inclusion: Reading Acts 17 with Euripides' *Bacchae*." Michael Kochenash confirms MacDonald's claim of the clear imitation of Jason the Argonaut in Acts 17:5b-9, yet Kochenash goes further to explain how this imitation functions to provide reassurance that Paul was no political threat. He also finds an additional imitation not previously mentioned by MacDonald: that Acts 17:1-5a evokes the *Bacchae* in its description of a religious movement arriving across the Aegean, its remarkable success among prominent women, and the anxious response of those in authority. He finally describes the significance of this imitation as a recasting of Gentile inclusion in Jewish communities as on par with Dionysian sexual scandal and as an assurance that Christians will in Dionysian fashion overcome opposition from the Pentheus-like Jewish leaders. Building on MacDonald's work while expanding it, these three chapters will make their own impact on scholarship and transform the way that numerous passages in the Gospels and Acts are understood. We will not summarize the conclusion here, except to say that Dennis MacDonald, whose words have inspired this volume, is accorded the honor of having the last word.

Mimetic Shame and Honor in New Testament Scholarship

In keeping with antiquity's penchant for honor and shame, celebration and lament, let us pause to ponder how

strange this volume is within the broader context of New Testament scholarship. No tragic inventory is needed, for we all know that mimesis criticism as a methodology is almost entirely absent from popular introductions to the New Testament, as well as from primers and surveys of critical methodologies for the study of the New Testament. The same can be said for Biblical studies curricula, syllabi, reading lists, lectures, etc., whether at research universities or liberal arts colleges with religious affiliations. Throughout the educational enterprise, mimesis criticism is seldom mentioned, and when it is, it is too often stereotyped and dismissed out of hand. Academic societies such as SBL lack sufficient program units and sessions devoted to mimesis criticism, and mimesis criticism is not well-represented in sessions devoted to source, redaction, rhetorical, and literary criticism, where there should be natural affinities and collaborations. Most troubling of all is that graduate programs in New Testament studies so seldom require any kind of serious training in, or exposure to, the most commonly read, widely cited, and publicly performed narratives of that day. While ostensibly prioritizing Christianity's Jewish roots, New Testament studies so often privilege an anachronistically canonical Judaism that is ethnically monolithic, textually isolated, and linguistically ghettoized, instead of accounting for the diverse, cosmopolitan, and often quite Hellenized-Romanized kinds of Judaism practiced around and within the broader social and literary contexts of the New Testament.

This tragedy need not continue, and it must not. The publication of MacDonald's trilogy should settle the case once and for all that mimesis criticism is a serious, necessary, and valuable approach to the study of the New Testament. From here forward, any New Testament introduction or methodological primer that does not include and deploy mimesis criticism should be considered outdated and incomplete. From here forward, any curriculum or class

pertaining to the New Testament that does not address and teach mimesis criticism should be considered outdated and incomplete. From here forward, any SBL gathering that lacks numerous sessions and vigorous discussions about mimetic critical readings should be considered outdated and incomplete. From here forward, any graduate program in New Testament studies that lacks in-depth exploration of the Greek and Latin classics should be considered outdated and incomplete. From here forward, any treatment of the Jewish roots of Christianity that does not account for the influence of the Greek and Latin classics on the kinds of Judaism practiced around and within the New Testament should be considered outdated and incomplete.

From One Man to a Methodological Movement

While MacDonald's work is seminal, it cannot stand on its own. One person may pioneer a movement, but he cannot make it. As mimesis criticism becomes more mainstream and widespread, it must become more nuanced, more diverse, and yes, more contentious, too. MacDonald's pioneering effort to explore all the potential classical antetexts behind Mark, Luke-Acts, and John is invaluable. Yet, as primarily the work of one person rather than a community or school, it is inevitably going to be idiosyncratic at points. These idiosyncrasies can unjustly lead to the whole of the work falling victim to ignorant caricature. For example, naysayers may deride MacDonald as engaged in just another form of the kind of parallelomania that Samuel Sandmel eschewed or seek to invalidate the whole of the work by pointing out weaknesses in a few parts.[2]

Even MacDonald's most avid supporters take issue with some of his mimetic readings, which is only natural.

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[2] See Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81.1 (1962): 1–13.

Indeed, as the lead editor of this highly appreciative volume about MacDonald's works, I myself find some adduced parallels as not rising to the level of clear imitation/mimesis. Along with many readers of MacDonald's work, I find various New Testament texts and motifs to be better elucidated with reference to specific Jewish rather than Greco-Roman sources, that is, to the Septuagint more than Homer, Euripides, or Vergil.[3] That said, I must admit that literary allusions need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, hybridity is a hallmark of thoughtful literature.

Yet it is not merely specific parallels where I find myself doubting. Sometimes these doubts run along patterns of argumentation. Can I trust an adduced parallel if the titles given to the passages are paraphrases made by the person proposing the parallel? Do the translations overly privilege

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[3] With regard to *The Gospels and Homer*, for example, I have doubts about the strength of the parallel adduced regarding the glow emanating from Achilles in the *Iliad* and Stephen in Acts. See MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 77–79. A Jewish/Septuagintal antetext (Moses's glowing face in Exod 34:29–35) seems more likely than a Homeric one. By way of context, MacDonald's earliest publication on mimesis criticism (*Christianizing Homer: The* Odyssey, *Plato, and the* Acts of Andrew [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]) was preceded by Thomas L. Brodie's work exploring Luke's imitations of Septuagintal narratives. See especially Thomas L. Brodie, "The Accusing and Stoning of Naboth (1 Kgs 21:8–13) as One Component of the Stephen Text (Acts 6:9–14; 7:58a)," *CBQ* 45.3 (1983): 417–32; Thomas L. Brodie, "Luke-Acts as an Imitation and Emulation of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative," *New Views on Luke and Acts* (ed. Earl Richard; Wilmington: Glazier, 1983), 78–85; Thomas L. Brodie, "Greco-Roman Imitation of Texts as a Partial Guide to Luke's Use of Sources," *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar* (ed. Charles H. Talbert; New York: Crossroad, 1984), 17–46; Thomas L. Brodie, "Towards Unraveling Luke's Use of the Old Testament: Luke 7.11–17 as an *Imitatio* of 1 Kings 17.17–24," *NTS* 32.2 (1986): 247–67; and Thomas L. Brodie, "Not Q but Elijah: The Saving of the Centurion's Slave (Luke 7:1–10) as an Internalization of the Saving of the Widow and Her Child," *IBS* 14.2 (1992): 54–71.

the adduced parallels, and would other attempts at translation make certain parallels less plausible? Can the centuries-long gap between Homeric dialects and Koine Greek words be so easily surmounted? Are common narrative verbs (e.g., of seeing or saying) in parallel texts significant enough to note as evidence?

As a relatively new yet highly engaged reader of MacDonald's works, I certainly have my fair share of doubts. But I must also concede that I am not as capable of catching imitations as MacDonald is or others are. My doctoral studies did include extensive training in classical languages and literature. Yet I recognize that my cultural familiarity with Homer, Euripides, and Vergil pales in comparison to that of MacDonald and many classicists, and likely even pales in comparison to the rudimentary education and cultural experience shared among the authors and editors of the books that became the New Testament. Thus, my own sophomoric inability to detect literary clues and dramatic cues does not invalidate their existence. My doubts do not disprove. Rather, they invite me to immerse myself more deeply in the classics so that I might become capable of seeing the emulations and allusions that the New Testament authors/editors may well have seen and made.

All of this explains why mimesis criticism must move beyond one person and become a widely practiced methodology and discourse. Editorial committees and communities of scholars routinely collaborate to decide on matters of textual criticism and historical criticism. Why not for mimesis criticism also? It would be instructive to have groups or sessions, whether in-person or online, debate and even vote on whether a given mimetic parallel is reasonable or not. Perhaps they will together rank each as to whether it is (1) certain, (2) likely, (3) unlikely, or (4) impossible. Perhaps they will attempt to delineate modes of intertextuality, as to whether a given parallel may best be described as a quotation,

emulation, allusion, or otherwise a loose similarity, such as a general cultural phrase, *topos*, or custom. Such nuances and distinctions are present (mostly implicitly) across MacDonald's analysis and discussion. This is no criticism, for his goal was not to act in place of a community of discourse, but rather to launch a serious discursive endeavor and give it a large body of evidence to navigate and map more carefully. As MacDonald himself told me, he has attempted in these volumes to throw every possible parallel against the barn, and he looks forward to seeing what sticks to the scholarly community. Whatever the categories, the nuances, the groups, and the fora, what is most important is that there be a shared, substantive, and consequential discussion among scholars that takes seriously these classical parallels, as well as those discovered or proposed by others.

Mimesis and Early Christian History

For mimesis to get a fair hearing, we also must address faith-based approaches to the New Testament and how mimesis criticism relates to them. Many religiously minded scholars may find mimesis criticism unpalatable as just another example of the influence of secularism, neo-paganism, or even atheism. Even so, as with other methodologies in Biblical studies (e.g., source, form, and redaction criticism), mimesis criticism need not be construed as anti-Christian or anti-theological *per se*. It can easily be deployed in ways that comport with, rather than undermine, traditional theological and literary interpretations of the Gospels.

It is true that MacDonald's default historical explanation of literary parallels is *mythopoesis*, that is, fabrication of characters and stories to recall and rival classical models. But this default for MacDonald does not have to obtain for all mimesis critics. Indeed, some of the contributors to this book personally embrace an Evangelical and/or Orthodox Christian identity and confession. Their

participation itself is proof that, to his friends, students, and colleagues—whether in the church, the academy, or both—MacDonald has a well-earned reputation as someone who is hospitable to and inclusive of persons of Christian faith and someone whose methodology can be practiced by practicing Christians. For some of these contributors, like many of the scholars reading this book, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Judas Iscariot, Joseph of Arimathea, Stephen, and others should be considered historical persons, and their actions as described in the New Testament ought to be considered as having some basis in history. Yet these convictions regarding historicity are not mutually exclusive with the conclusion that their stories and perhaps even their names took on legendary overtones in their tellings and retellings. *Mythopoesis* need not merely fabricate out of whole cloth; it can also embroider upon an underlying tapestry.[4]

     I wonder if MacDonald himself would agree with this.[5] For example, would he grant that Paul was a historical figure, even as the historical Paul undergoes legendary transformations between his authentic and inauthentic letters, and between his authentic letters and Acts? If so, why should Paul be considered historical but not many of the players in the Gospels? Is it because he wrote? To turn a phrase, is it the case for MacDonald's mythopoetic Cartesianism that *scribo ergo sum*? If authorship is not the defining criterion of historical existence, then, for scholars more generally, Paul could very well be considered a paradigm for mimesis-critical readings of major players in the Gospels and Acts, rather than an exception to them.

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[4] See also Michael Kochenash, "Even Good Homer Nods," *infra* and Richard C. Miller, "Neos Dionysos in Textual and Cultural Mimesis," *infra*.

[5] See Dennis R. MacDonald, "Conclusion: Objections, Reflections, and Anticipations," *infra*.

Additionally, scholars may find in the Gospels historical characters who took on dramatic roles in actual life and not merely in later literature. Joseph of Arimathea, for example, need not be a complete fabrication for him to play the part of noble Priam begging the body of his son, or the part of righteous Tobit burying the bodies of the dead. To paraphrase Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (II.vii), life itself is a drama, and we humans play our parts. Art imitates art, true, yet art imitates life, and life art.

Mimesis and Early Christian Theology

Besides historicity, theology also factors into the capacity of mimesis criticism to gain broader traction among faith-conscious scholars. Time and again, what struck me in MacDonald's works were the ways in which mimesis-critical readings underscored a *high* Christology. The Jesuses of Mark, Luke, and John not only surpassingly emulate the roles and feats of epic heroes, but also those of epic deities. One might see in many mimesis critical readings so many opportunities for theologians and preachers to proclaim a Christ that does not merely recall but completely surpasses all other models and objects of devotion. Church historians and historical theologians might likewise be invited to explore just how pivotal these *surpassing imitations* were to the ascendancy of a high Christology in early Christianity. Yes, pre-Hellenistic Jewish texts and traditions played their roles, as did Jewish- and early Christian-Platonic ones. But the high Christology of the Gospels may owe as much if not more to the Greco-Roman mimesis practiced by Mark, Luke, and John than to Jewish monotheistic, messianic, wisdom, and word traditions, which were themselves profoundly transformed and shaped by Jewish appropriations of Hellenistic philosophy. Early Christology took flight not only on the wings of Hellenistic philosophy but also those of Greek epic.

Let us specifically address scholars who have dismissed MacDonald's work from the vantage of the study of the church fathers (patristics) or early Christianity more broadly conceived. One of MacDonald's criteria to demonstrate intertextuality—"ancient and Byzantine recognitions"—is not only valuable here, but also indicative of a massive area for future research, writing, discussion, and debate.[6] For the sake of greater terminological precision and academic breadth (to include receptions in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, etc.), I would term this criterion "overlapping afterlives" or "overlapping reception histories."

MacDonald does an admirable job of showing how the classics and the Gospels are clearly intertwined in the Acts of Andrew and the Homeric Centos.[7] But there are many rich studies yet to be done on the overlapping reception histories to be found among Christian apologists (especially Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, and even Augustine), Christian historians (especially Lactantius and Eusebius), early Christian epic poets (especially Juvencus and Prudentius), and the early critics of Christianity (especially Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian). Christian art is yet another broad avenue of inquiry in this regard. What may look like syncretism in the anachronistic eyes of an uninformed or religiously zealous post-classicism may actually be a kind of cultural and religious hybridity of the very sort mimesis criticism takes as commonplace.

While explicit, textual evidence of overlapping reception histories should be front and center, we should also keep in mind how the Gospel emulations of classical texts were so obvious as to be assumed. Where some scholars see minimal explicit awareness among early Christians of these overlaps, with just a slight shift of perspective one can see

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[6] See, e.g., MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 6–7.
[7] See MacDonald, *Gospels and Homer*, 327–86.

them implicitly present everywhere precisely because they were taken for granted as part of the Hellenistic air that everyone in Roman antiquity breathed. As mentioned, the Gospel emulations of Homer, Euripides, and Vergil played a major role in the ascendancy of a high Christology. But these emulations also continued underwriting high Christologies for centuries thereafter in their ongoing performances. Indeed, the Christological controversies of ancient Christianity can easily be read as the profoundly difficult effort to come to terms with the implications of the appropriation of classical models in the Gospels. How to reconcile Jewish monotheism with the epic depictions of Jesus—this lies at the heart of early Christian theological debates and liturgies. These debates also repeatedly evince a lively tension between competing appropriations of Greek epic and Greek philosophy. As readers will see later, this tension stood at the core of the emergence of proto-Orthodox/Catholic Christianity and was already very much in evidence in Acts and the later redactional layers of the Gospel of John and Gospel of Luke.[8] Even outside of Christian circles, we find that the primary objections lodged by rabbinic Judaism and Islam against Jesus's deification and Trinitarian theology demonstrate an incisive awareness of the patently obvious connections between classical stories and early Christian claims, and an informed objection to Christian theology being a legitimate appropriation of Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophy.

For those who are not blinded by prejudicial *a priori* assumptions of Christian uniqueness, early Christian

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[8] Regarding the programmatic and repeated epic (Dionysian) and philosophical (Socratic) tensions in Acts, see Ilseo Park, "Acts 2 as an Intertextual Map: Moving from Dionysian to Platonic Identity," *infra*. Regarding those same tensions evidenced in the compositional-redactional histories of John and Luke, see Mark G. Bilby, "The First Dionysian Gospel: Imitational and Redactional Layers in Luke and John," *infra*.

historical theology is clearly both an expansion of and defense against its own *surpassing imitations* of Greek epic and Greek philosophy. Thus mimesis is no mere appendage to Christianity and its related academic disciplines. Because classical imitation is at the heart of the New Testament, it is also at the heart of patristics, historical theology, church history, art history, and even interreligious studies.