

The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark
Linking Odysseus to Mark, Jesus, and the Cosmos

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Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is known to be one of the first gospels written. It is believed that this gospel, in addition to the theoretical Q source, was then revised and adapted by the writers of Luke and Matthew to write their own story with their emphasis. While most Bible scholars see Mark as an independent work, Dennis MacDonald sees the Homeric Epics as a source of framework for Mark, with the author borrowing major themes and events from the story to retell the hero's journey.

MacDonald has developed a criteria to judge the similarities and differences between these two documents: accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability. How these criteria are met determines how strong or weak of a case he has for the link between these two stories. MacDonald notes that some stories in Mark have a stronger link to Homer than others, but it is the overall weight of similarities (and differences) that shows the link between Homer and Mark.

One of the most striking motifs that Mark seemingly borrowed from the Homeric Epics is the fact that Jesus' ministry was tied to the sea. "To be sure, our sources about Jesus entirely independent of Mark are few, but neither Paul, nor Q, nor independent traditions in the other gospels, canonical or otherwise, supply the slightest reason to think Jesus' feet ever left terra firma or that his disciples could have distinguished a mackerel from a bluegill."¹ If this is true, and the water connection is only a literary construction, why would Mark choose to do this? Is this narrative choice *only* to prove that Jesus is the superior model over Odysseus?

¹ MacDonald, Dennis. *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. Yale University Press, 2000. 55.

MacDonald makes several arguments for the connection to the sea as literary device to draw the reader to the Homeric epics, but I believe there may be other reasons. I think there is a strong Jewish connection to the ocean narrative in the Gospel of Mark, most importantly the waters as symbolic of chaos, and Jesus and his followers conquering this chaos to form a new earthly throne, in the same way as the creation narrative in Genesis.

Homer's Sea Faring Hero as Comparison

Before looking at the Jewish importance of the sea narrative, MacDonald uses the story of Jesus calming the seas to show the imitation of the Homeric epic. In a side-by-side reading, the stories are very similar. In both, the hero and his companions are at sea when they are met with a violent storm. However, the Gospel of Mark shows Jesus to be more than Odysseus. While Odysseus was helpless and blamed his crew, Jesus calmed the waters and, perhaps in a fatherly tone of voice, invites them to have faith.

In this example, MacDonald looks beyond Odysseus for the Greek model used for Jesus. As the disciples, dumbfounded over what they had just seen, ask who it is who can calm the seas and take power over the wind, MacDonald points to the god of the winds, Aeolus. "When the storm arose in the epic, Odysseus was helpless... Jesus, on the other hand, rebuked the winds and calmed the seas..."² MacDonald also finds justification in other details around the story of Jesus, including the protagonist waking

² MacDonald, 62.

mid-storm and the twelve ships of Odysseus with the “other boats that were with him” (Mark 4:36).

Jewish Roots of the Chaotic Sea

In this story in particular, the Sea of Galilee is the picture of chaos and danger. There is a real threat of death for Jesus and his disciples. If the disciples had an inclination to place themselves in the story of Odysseus at that moment, they may fear they were being punished like his crew. Or perhaps they saw themselves in the story of Jonah. Both cases, they may have seen their current situation as a sign from God that they were on the wrong path.

MacDonald’s view of the Gospel of Mark being a retelling of the Homeric epics may go a step further - it may include the positioning of Jesus as the One in the beginning that was over the ‘wine-red sea’ and the creative force behind the “divine wind”³. As MacDonald says, “Mark thus sets the stage for the first half of the Gospel, which, like the first half of the *Odyssey*, involves the sea, complete with winds, waves, and ships.”⁴

The first half of the creation story is God shifting wind and water to create the earth. The separation of light from darkness, the separation of waters above and below, and the separation of water and dry land fall within these first three creation days. Like Mark, and like Odysseus, these days of calming and conforming the troubled waters into safe and habitable areas are critical for what comes next in the story.

³ Genesis 1:2, New Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday, 1990.

⁴ MacDonald, 173.

Chaos to Order, Jesus to God

Genesis is the story of God creating the world, but more importantly God creating a throne room for Their kingdom. Old Testament scholar John Walton uses contemporary creation myths to show similarities between the Jewish story. His work in *The Lost World of Genesis One* can be seen to use similar techniques that MacDonald uses when comparing Homeric epics to the Gospel of Mark.

In his book, Walton summarizes his position, "... Genesis 1 may be designated the *cosmic temple inauguration* view... the cosmos is being given its functions as God's temple, where he has taken up his residence and from where he runs the cosmos. This world is his headquarters."⁵ The story of creation - the story of the waters and winds - have more to do with the function they operate in rather than their physical origin.

The God who is in charge of the waters and the winds is one that takes disorder and brings it to order. The story of Noah is another water and winds narrative that shows God using chaos and danger to bring about a reordering. Jonah sees the power of God and the role that waters and winds play in the restructuring nature that God has over these thematic elements - disorder is a raging sea and the process of setting things right is the calm.

In the grand story of Jesus, he is not only powerful over the waters and winds, he is the vehicle God uses to reorder Their creation. Mark uses the story of the raging Sea of Galilee to *both* alert his reader to the superiority over Odysseus *and* to foreshadow the restructuring of the temple of God on earth. Mark's Jesus is not only better than Odysseus, Mark's Jesus may be more messianic than previously thought. If MacDonald

⁵ Walton, John H.. *The Lost World of Genesis One : Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, InterVarsity Press, 2009. 141.

is correct that Jesus and his followers never left dry land, the prevalence in the nautical themes may also be a clue into the author's intent on painting Jesus as the Spirit of God over the waters in Genesis 1:2.

Conclusion

MacDonald has received a lot of pushback from critics that claim he is devaluing the Gospel of Mark. I disagree - I think MacDonald has only enriched Mark's story while doing so in a very authentic way. If Mark took the Homeric epics and reworked them to show Jesus as the superior to Odysseus, is that any different than what Jesus himself did? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the understood Jewish laws to differentiate himself based on the criteria his listeners would understand. When Paul was in Athens, he used the statue to the Unknown God to retell the story of Jesus' resurrection.

Churches continue to do this today. Deconstructing the story of Jesus and rebuilding the themes in a way we can understand 2,000 years removed is the hallmark of the Sunday service. Mark's Homeric adaptation proves that the Jesus in his story is far greater than the Greco-Roman heroes, he possesses the powers of their deities, and is in fact the God of the Jews.

References

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