

GOSPEL WRITERS AND CLASSICAL POETS

MACDONALD (D.R.) *Synopses of Epic, Tragedy, and the Gospels. Volume 1: Mimetic Synopsis of Four Synoptic Gospels (Q+, Mark, Matthew, and Luke). Imitations of Deuteronomy, Homer, and Athenian Tragedies. Volume 2: Mimetic Syncretism of the Acts of the Apostles. Imitations of Homer and Euripides and Rivalry with the Aeneid. Volume 3: Mimetic Synopsis of Three Gospels of John. Imitations of the Synoptics and Euripides' Bacchae.* Pp. viii + 564, colour ills. Claremont, CA: Mimesis Press, 2022. Paper, £36.51. ISBN: 979-8-9867801-1-5.
doi:10.1017/S0009840X23002081

Ordinarily, the term ‘synopsis’ refers to a brief condensed statement of a topic, a summary, a table or an outline indicating its divisions. In biblical studies a gospel synopsis typically lays out the text of individual gospels in side-by-side columns to facilitate analyses of their verbal and sequential similarities and differences. In addition, traditions of Jesus sayings that Matthew and Luke share and are not reflected in Mark (designated Q) are sometimes called a ‘gospel’ though the genre of work in question appears to be a compilation of Jesus sayings, not a narrative about his life and character. M.’s synopsis presents his own reconstruction of that Q-plus tradition, which he terms the ‘Lost Gospel’, to which he adds episodes not accepted by other scholars.

Classicists recognise that ‘mimesis’ was a common practice in the Second Sophistic. That imitation of such ‘classical’ models as those M. claims were fundamental to evangelists in composing their gospels may not be evident even from the charts of narrative or thematic parallels. Unlike the parallels between the various gospels or their adoption of phrases and episodes from the Greek version of the Old Testament, the suggested adaptations from these ‘classics’ leave no definitive linguistic tracks. M. bolsters this project with examples from later Christian authors who found the ‘greats’ to be the intertexts for imitation and contested comparison.

M. repeats a double-barrelled mantra in each section of this massive work: (a) gospel narratives seldom retain memories about actual events; (b) more often they are *mimesis* based on seminal texts. Of course, no Classicist expects to mine the great epics for ‘historical memories’, but that is the project of much of the New Testament scholarship that M. repeatedly complains about. Though M. often refers to Lucian’s parodies to demonstrate that a broader audience would recognise the literary references behind particular gospel episodes, even Luke’s more polished Greek is well below any Second Sophistic author – not to mention the Latin, which M. also presumes that Luke knew.

For those who teach secondary school or undergraduate courses in comparative literature, philosophy or religion in antiquity that require readings from Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides and Virgil as well as the New Testament, M. provides a treasure trove of suggestive possibilities. Rather than pursue the ‘messianic secret’ in Mark’s gospel as either Jesus’ own non-messianic agenda or the evangelist’s apologetic device, readers should consider Homer for both divine epiphanies lurking behind human figures and Odysseus’ secretive return to Ithaca; or, perhaps, the possibility that Luke’s episode of the hidden/risen Jesus engaging two despondent followers on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:11–32) reminds readers of Odysseus testing his aged father before the ‘big reveal’ and banquet (*Od.* 24.261–394). M.’s mimetic synopsis provides a literary clue to this uniquely Lucan episode for readers willing to entertain the basic premise that the

evangelists are not clumsy biographers, but rather skilled mythographers. As an illustration that even Mark's gospel, which provided a template for later efforts, engages mythologising, M. finds two antetexts in the section Mark 9:14–27, Jesus healing a convulsive demoniac: an episode from the lost Sayings gospel and the well-known figure of Hercules furens. As he does throughout his work, M. points to Euripides' tragedy as evidence for the literary hybrid (pp. 169–70).

The second volume treats selected episodes from Acts; so readers may need to consult the charts in the introduction (pp. 366–70) to find topics of interest. While other scholars who have turned to sea voyages in the *Odyssey*, *Aeneid* and other texts to elucidate peculiarities in Acts 26–8 suggest dependence on a Greek translation, M. continues reliance on the school classics by insisting that Luke knows the *Aeneid* in Latin and Virgil's mimesis of Homer (pp. 362–3; 401–9). The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* provide a variety of suggestive literary antecedents for Luke-Acts, such as the 'old Jew' Simeon's recognition of the messiah in baby Jesus (Lk 2:22–35) compared to Odysseus' 'old dog', Argos dying upon recognising his master (*Od.* 17.317–54). Luke's readers should know without being told that Simeon also died (p. 425).

M.'s introduction of Euripides' *Bacchae* as antetext for the catalogue of nations in Acts 2:9–11 and 'prison breaks' involving release from chains in Acts 12:6–11 and 16:25–34 (pp. 434–47) anticipates the controversial interpretation of Johannine gospel(s) in volume 3. He claims that having recognised Luke's imitation of Euripides, the first Johannine gospel was composed to depict Jesus as the new Dionysus. Just as volume 1 presented a reconstructed Sayings gospel as the base text on the left, the John volume prints a 'Dionysus gospel'. Its creator had already inherited substantial sections of the Homeric mimesis that M. proposed for Mark, Luke and Acts in the previous volumes. While passages such as the 'water to wine' at Cana (John 2:1–11) as the first of Jesus' 'signs' and his self-identification as the 'true vine' (John 15:1) were recognised as Dionysius comparisons by early Christian writers, they did not invoke Dionysus to overwrite the syncretism of Jesus as incarnate god with Moses and Abraham. Yet for M. the Johannine prologue (John 1:1–18) and its echo in 1 John 1:1–4 are imitations of the opening presentation of Dionysus in *Bacchae* (pp. 476–80).

Most of the Jewish antetexts for Jesus' controversies in the Gospel of John belong to the second gospel that turned this original Dionysus gospel into an anti-Jewish text. As the final version of John's gospel, M. points to the 'Beloved Disciple' figure in John 13–21 as an authentic witness to the community's traditions. However, familiarity with the depictions of Peter and other disciples in Acts prompted the role assigned to Peter as the shepherd successor in John 21. With only 'the Gospel of John' available to readers from the second century to the present, appreciating the literary shape or theological contours of the hypothetical 'Dionysus gospel' remains provisional, as M. acknowledges (p. 492). Yet it also challenges another view inherited from historical assumptions that earlier Jesus tradition audiences were Jewish. M. proposes that the Dionysus gospel has recrafted its synoptic gospel heritage to incorporate non-Jews in presenting Jesus as a new Dionysus along with a near erasure of the disciple group from the story (p. 493). The list in a conspectus that precedes the synopsis of these three John gospels will help readers picture the structure of that earliest version.

However, readers might not reach the engaging possibilities of this literary mimesis approach to the gospels. M. opens volume 3 with an elaborate construction of the relationships between the canonical Johannine corpus of gospel, epistles and Revelation, which he admits does not affect the mimetic synopsis (p. 488). Throughout the book M. indulges in long sections of score-settling rebuttals to other scholars for failure to accept his idiosyncratic and revisionist views into standard or emerging paradigms. That

post-retirement reflection on one's publications may interest New Testament professors, but detracts from the possibilities offered by this new mimetic synopsis.

Boston College

PHEME PERKINS
pHEME.perkins@bc.edu

GREEK AND ARMENIAN LITERATURE

MURADYAN (G.) *Ancient Greek Myths in Medieval Armenian Literature*. (Armenian Texts and Studies 5.) Pp. xiv + 441. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. Cased, €110. ISBN: 978-90-04-51979-4.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X23001634

From its origins at the start of the fifth century CE Armenian literature has always engaged with and responded to other literary traditions and cultures. The first translations from the books of the Old and New Testaments may have been made from Syriac, but it has been demonstrated that they were revised according to Greek exemplars. Other translations – of liturgical, homiletic, historical, philosophical and scientific compositions – were made directly from Greek and, as discussed further below, several of these are preserved only in Armenian. Within a generation of the invention of the Armenian script, Armenian scholars began to compose their own works, guided to a greater or lesser extent by the form and content of the translated material available. The corpora thereby created in Armenian will have overlapped with one another to a large extent, but they will almost certainly have contained unique elements as well; frustratingly it is not possible to establish the contents of any late antique or medieval Armenian library. In the highly fragmented political, social and cultural landscape of medieval Armenia, centres of knowledge transmission and intellectual production, both clerical and monastic, developed in different places at different times, each with its own particular selection of literary compositions, and these were cherished and preserved over the centuries.

This long prologue is intended to provide some context for readers familiar with ancient Greek mythology but unaware of their reflection in the Armenian literary tradition. On the one hand, Armenian tradition is late in time and predominantly Christian in terms of both authorship and preservation; on the other, it is both conservative and eclectic. Furthermore, it remains significantly understudied. There are major manuscript collections that have yet to be fully catalogued, and there is some way to go before we can be entirely confident as to what has, and has not, been preserved in the tradition. We can anticipate further discoveries.

M.'s volume occupies an analogous position to much of medieval Armenian literature, looking in several directions at the same time. At its heart, it is a compilation of extracts derived from Armenian texts, both translations of Greek works and original compositions in Armenian. Such a compendium might seem to reflect a traditional form of scholarship, but nothing like this presently exists. This is the first systematic survey of ancient Greek myth in medieval Armenian literature. M. has assembled a comprehensive dataset of references and organised these according to the sequence of myths preserved in the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus. Given the diverse nature of the extracts, and their differing degrees of relationship to known versions preserved in Greek, this organising principle is as good as any. In total, 154 sections or episodes are presented; of these 153 appear in the *Bibliotheca*, only one, concerning Narcissus, does not. Each entry