

## Signaling Legion: Reading Mark's Gerasene Demoniac with Homer and Vergil

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This paper explores intertextuality in Mark 5, where encounter between Jesus and the Gerasene Demoniac ends with the madman saved from monstrous oppression. Specifically, the loanword λεγιών (Legion, from the Latin *legio*) signals an emulation of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 8, which relates the story of Hercules overcoming the monster Cacus to bring relief and rescue to the people. Hearing Hercules in Mark 5 confirms the trajectory of the gospel as it unfolds in Mark's telling of Jesus' story.

Keywords: Gospel of Mark, Gerasene demoniac, *Aeneid*, *Odyssey*, mimesis, Legion

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### Introduction

Professor McMillon concluded class that day with an insightful observation: *The odd "we passages" of Acts—where narrative perspective awkwardly shifts from third person to first person plural—those odd "we passages" seem to coincide with stories in and around the city of Troas. I'm not sure why, but it's interesting to note.* Yes, it was an interesting observation, similar to others I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Lynn McMillon share during the two semesters we co-taught Bible and Classical Literature for Honors students at Oklahoma Christian University. Indeed, his comment was the first time I had heard a connection made between the mysterious "we passages" and the ancient city of Troy, since Troas was proximate to old Troy and conveyed association between Aeneas of Troy and epic stories about the origins of Roman power.

Lynn's observation opened my eyes and ears to a possibility that the "we passages" of Acts might be understood *literarily* and not historically, that the shift in language proximate with stories in and around Troas—a shift in language most akin to Odysseus' narration of his own travels after the sack of Troy—might signal an intentional intertextuality and not simply indicate that Luke joined Paul's company at Troas, as has been widely assumed.<sup>1</sup> Lynn became for me unwitting muse; or, more likely, as masterful

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called "we passages" of Acts continue to be an "insoluble riddle," as is made evident by the historical survey of scholarly positions in William S. Campbell, *The "We Passages" in the Acts of the Apostles: The Narrator as Narrative Character* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). Campbell himself argues that the sudden switch to first person plural is a device by which the narrator replaces Barnabas as faithful companion and eyewitness to Paul's journeys; yet his arguments do not adequately explain the *abrupt* appearance (and disappearance) of first person plural perspective. Alternatively, if the author of Acts intended to signal that readers should anticipate echoes of Homer reverberating among the "we passages"—echoes that create meaning by imitation and inversion of familiar story—such signaling might help dissolve our insoluble riddle. The "we passages" are located in Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-21:18, 27:1-28:16; note that the final section does not take place in or around Troas but instead narrates a dangerous sea voyage for which first person plural seemed a preferred literary style (cf. *The Odyssey*). For an

teacher Lynn intentionally ignites imagination with questions so that students might make associations that yield new insights and bring to light possible but undiscovered meanings.

Lynn may have been an unwitting muse, but he has been *my* muse, nonetheless. The following is offered in honor of Distinguished Professor Lynn McMillon in hopes that attending to imitation and inversion of (un)familiar story might yield new insight and bring to light possible but undiscovered meaning out of Mark's telling of Jesus and the Gerasene Demoniac. We will explore the possibility that the odd Latin loanword λεγιών (Legion, from *legio*) signals intertextuality with Vergil's *Aeneid*; specifically, hearing Hercules rend open the cavern of Cacus—groans and cracks of rock roots snapping as a stony precipice is heaved into churning waters summoning unexpected daylight to transform the darkness of a deathly monster's lair—hearing Hercules in Mark 5 confirms the meaning and trajectory of the gospel as it unfolds in Mark's telling of the story of Jesus.

Gospel writers like Mark are clever, masterful storytellers, and story itself is a profound delivery device for truth. This essay offers opportunity to listen, see, discover, and learn from the imitation and inversion of (un)familiar story. Such was the aim of our classes together, helping students encounter biblical narratives alongside story from the ancient and Classical worlds; such is also the aim of this essay, dedicated to Dr. Lynn McMillon, because an epic *Festschrift* is also bearer of heroic *kleos*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Approach: Are we myth-taking story and history?**

This project playfully applies Dennis MacDonald's mimesis criticism—*playfully applies* because MacDonald also plays the muse, igniting minds and sparking debate about Homer's lurking presence in the gospels and Acts, and my hope here is to playfully imitate his approach.<sup>3</sup> My aim is not to show that Mark intended *Aeneid* 8 as hypotext or model for the episode of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac; rather, I want to ask what we might learn *if* we assume the name Legion signals Vergil's story of Hercules and the monster Cacus. Indeed, MacDonald himself asserts that, "The authors of the Gospels *did not* imitate Vergil's Latin epic, at least not as profoundly as Mark and Luke imitated

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interesting approach that hears Homer signaled, see Dennis R. MacDonald, "Luke's Eutychus and Homer's Elpenor: Acts 20:7-12 and Odyssey 10-12," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 1 (Fall 1994): 4-24. Some critique of MacDonald's approach—mimesis criticism—is offered below.

<sup>2</sup> While the meaning of *kleos* might be broadened, here I intend the description offered by Nagy: *kleos* refers to glory or fame, and especially glory conferred through song or poetry. See Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2020), 614.

<sup>3</sup> Among Dennis R. MacDonald's several monographs, for this essay I primarily attend to: *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); *Mythologizing Jesus: From Jewish Teacher to Epic Hero* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); *Two Shipwrecked Gospels: The Logoi of Jesus and Papias's Exposition of Logia about the Lord* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2012); *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003); and *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2000).

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, from the outset I am being playful (foolish?), willfully transgressing the bounds of the muse's approach; we plunge straight to the center, where smoke surges highest, to discern what might be discovered between the Gerasene tomb and Pallantian cavern.<sup>5</sup>

MacDonald argues that Gospel writers (especially Mark, Luke, and John) intentionally imitate Greek and Roman story to present Jesus as a superior rival to the gods and heroes of familiar story. *Mimesis* is imitation, and the imitation of earlier story is a hallmark of ancient literary practices.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, the New Testament can (and perhaps *should*) be read as not only continuous with the Hebrew Bible but also as ancient Mediterranean literature that mirrors (mimics) Greek and Roman story. As MacDonald describes:

Greek education largely involved imitation of the epics, what Greeks called *mímēsis*; Romans called it *imitatio*. Homeric influence thus appears in many genres of ancient composition: poetry, of course, but also histories, biographies, and novels. One must not confuse such imitations with plagiarism, willful misrepresentation, or pitiful gullibility. Rather, by evoking literary antecedents, authors sought to impress the reader with the superiority of the imitation in literary style, philosophical insights, or ethical values. Literary mimesis often promoted a sophisticated rivalry between the esteemed models and their innovating successors.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, this is the case between Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Homeric epics: The *Aeneid* “represents Virgil's resourceful adaptation and appropriation of Greece's epic tradition, newly transformed so as to celebrate Rome's divine election and elevate *Romanitas* (the Roman way) to ascendancy as the universal human ideal for a new millennium of Roman power.”<sup>8</sup> The story of Aeneas exists as both imitation and invention, continuous and discontinuous with familiar epic, and “through Virgil's ingenious literary invention, the *Aeneid* became the surprising fulfillment of its revered Greek predecessor at a time when the Homeric epics continued to enjoy the status of

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<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 1. Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Language here is appropriated from Sarah Ruden's artful translation of *Aeneid* 8.256-58. See Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2008). Debate reigns as to which spelling is most appropriate: Vergil or Virgil? This essay employs Vergil, but Virgil gets worked in as well wherever sources consulted demand the alternate spelling.

<sup>6</sup> Consider this comment from Chris Shea in her chapter from the SBL symposium series *Ancient Fiction*: “The ancients have in some way institutionalized imitation, that is, that their authors and artists are taught by imitation and rewarded for imitation in a significantly different way and to a significantly greater degree than in our own society. . . . Imitation is an indispensable component of their artistic aesthetic.” See Chris Shea, “Imitating Imitation: Vergil, Homer, and Acts 10:1-11:18,” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, ed. Jo-Ann A. Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea, Symposium 32 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 37. See also Ronald F. Hock, “Homer in Greco-Roman Education,” in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity*, ed. Dennis R. MacDonald, 56-77 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> MacDonald, *Mythologizing*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See discussion under “Historiography Versus ‘History-Telling’—The Great Epics of Antiquity” (a subsection of her first chapter) in Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 17; cf. the introduction in MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*.

sacred texts throughout the Hellenized world.”<sup>9</sup> Vergil’s imitation of Homer is evident and easily detectable; Markan mimesis is, to be sure, another story.

MacDonald admits, “Clearly the Gospel of Mark does not advertise its Homeric hypertextuality and transvaluation as transparently as the *Aeneid*”; nevertheless, Mark does incorporate “mimetic markers” that signal epic literature, aspects of Mark’s project to “embed traditions about Jesus within a narrative that would present him as superior to heroes of Greek mythology, just as he presented him as superior to Moses, Jonah, and Elijah,”<sup>10</sup> also through imitation of familiar (Jewish) story. As an example, he suggests that, “Modern readers have been blind to many of Mark’s most significant mimetic markers: significant personal and place names. In large part, this blindness is caused by modern translations that transliterate names without translating them.” MacDonald suggests that Mark “not only created significant names but also frequently uses them to evoke antecedents in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.”<sup>11</sup> Mark as inventor of names positions him squarely within the poetic, literary, and rhetorical conventions of the day.<sup>12</sup>

Here, we might compare approaches to the Gospel by evaluating the fruit of two sense-making strategies related to Mark as inventor of names. In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham acknowledges that names in the gospels are a

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<sup>9</sup> Bonz, 17.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 10, 17.

<sup>11</sup> See discussion in Dennis MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 10-13. MacDonald offers examples of Mark’s clever invention of geographical and personal names which, according to him, are unattested among Mark’s likely source material—the lost Gospel of sayings of Jesus, commonly referred to by scholars as Q. Among other examples, MacDonald cites *Boanerges* (3:17, translated within the Gospel as “Sons of Thunder,” which calls to mind Castor and Polydeuces, known as the Dioscuri, the sailor sons of Zeus, god of the thunderbolt); *Mary the Magdalene* (15:40, 47, “Mary of Towertown,” by which she who “looked on from a distance” and “saw where the body was laid” is associated with Andromache, who looks down from the towers of Troy to behold the body of slain Hector, cf. *Iliad* 22); and *Barabbas* (15:7, “son of [the] father,” a name given to the man the authorities preferred over Jesus, who then at his death is acknowledged as “surely [a] son of [a] god,” or arguably more likely, the “son of God,” 15:39). Significantly, this observation at Jesus’ death is made by a *centurion*, another Latin loanword that tethers the crucifixion to an earlier story where a Latin loanword coincides with declaration of Jesus’ identity as “son of the most high God”—Mark 5, Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac. See important observations about the social and literary contexts for making sense of the centurion’s proclamation in Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 764-771. Collins describes the scene culminating in 15:39 as “the climax of the Markan theme of Jesus as the Son of God” (764).

<sup>12</sup> While Homer is certainly an inventor of names, here I quote at length an article that explores onomastic play in the Gospel of Matthew: “Classicists have long recognized that ancient narratives sometimes deploy personal names in subtle and literarily sophisticated ways. A pun or series of puns on the name of a protagonist, for example, may alert the reader to major themes being developed in the narrative. Another name may recall an eponymous figure from literature or history, inviting a fruitful comparison of their respective stories or characteristic traits as the narrative progresses. In such cases, the overt pun or allusion is not an isolated datum to be interpreted and left behind. Rather, it invites the reader to attend to the narrative in a new way.” See his survey of secondary literature exploring etymology, allegory, and names in Greek and Roman literature in John Genter, “Significant Names in Two Greek Novels and Matthew’s Gospel,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 249.

phenomenon “that has never been satisfactorily explained”<sup>13</sup> and raises the question as to why Matthew and Luke omit certain names in their redaction of Mark, making a historical argument that by the time Matthew and Luke wrote certain figures had been forgotten or had become too obscure to include by name. For example, Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52, a blind man encountered and healed near Jericho) is not mentioned by name in Matthew and Luke. As explanation of the omission, Bauckham posits,

With . . . Bartimaeus we encounter the phenomenon of a character named by Mark, presumably because he was well known in the early Christian movement, but whose name was dropped by one or both of the later Synoptic Evangelists . . . presumably because [he was] not well known when or where the Evangelists wrote. . . . Mark could expect his readers to know of Bartimaeus as a kind of living miracle, who made Jesus’ act of healing still, so to speak, visible to all who encountered him as a well-known figure in the churches of Jerusalem and Judea. But after his death and after the fall of Jerusalem, which removed the Jewish Christians of Palestine, Bartimaeus was presumably no longer a figure of wide repute, and so Matthew and Luke omitted his name.<sup>14</sup>

This logic—that “the tendency of Matthew and Luke to omit some of the names we find in Mark would be explained if these people had become, by the time Matthew and Luke wrote, too obscure for them to wish to retain the names when they were engaged in abbreviating Mark’s narratives”<sup>15</sup>—seems stretched when, in the paragraph immediately following, Bauckham offers Cleopas as an example, since Cleopas is only named in Luke’s Gospel, not Mark’s. In Luke 24:18, Cleopas and a companion encounter Jesus—returned from the dead but divinely disguised so that they could not recognize him—and they show hospitality to the stranger. Bauckham acknowledges that “there seems no plausible reason for naming him [Cleopas] other than to indicate that he was the source of this tradition.”<sup>16</sup> MacDonald offers something different.

MacDonald posits that Mark’s Bartimaeus and Luke’s Cleopas are invented names, each signaling story from the *Odyssey*. Cleopas is a rare name, appearing only here in the New Testament; the name is derived from *kelos* and translates as “All-Fame” or “All-Renown.”<sup>17</sup> In Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus—whom many have long presumed dead—returns to his home but is divinely disguised as a beggar; he is shown hospitality especially by the beloved nurse Eurycleia, whose name translates as “Far-Flung-Fame” or “Far-and-Wide-Renown.” As the nurse bathes the beggar, her hand encounters a prominent scar, well known to her who had cared for and bathed Odysseus in the years before his departure to Troy. Consider her touching reaction as the woman suddenly recognizes her long-lost Lord:

The old slave woman,  
holding his leg and rubbing with flat palms,

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Bauckham, 53-54.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham, 46. The logic is stretched because if Cleopas is sufficiently known at the time of Luke’s writing, explanation is needed for why Mark omits the name of this eyewitness to the resurrection.

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, 47.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion in MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 320-26.

came to that place, and recognized the scar.  
 She let his leg fall down into the basin.  
 it clattered, tilted over, and the water  
 spilled out across the floor. Both joy and grief  
 took hold of her. Her eyes were filled with tears;  
 her voice was choked. She touched his beard and said,  
 “You are Odysseus! My darling child!  
 My master! I did not know it was you  
 until I touched you all around your leg.”<sup>18</sup>

Considering the salient theme of *recognition* as disguised lords presumed dead are revealed (alive, and confirmed by unmistakable scars<sup>19</sup>), Luke 24 and *Odyssey* 19 clearly resonate; the invented name Cleopas signals the *Odyssey* so that those who have ears to hear might listen for imitation and inversion of familiar story.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, MacDonald hears echoes of the blind prophet Tiresias in Mark 10:46-52, signaled by the name Bartimaeus. In *Odyssey* 11, Odysseus and his crew sail to the edge of Ocean, a land of perpetual darkness where the “shining Sun God never looks on them with his bright beams,” where “destructive night blankets the world”<sup>21</sup>—the land of the dead. Odysseus prepares to summon the seer as readers consider the horror of the scene:

I promised for Tiresias as well  
 a pure black sheep, the best in all my flock.  
 So with these vows, I called upon the dead.  
 I took the sheep and slit their throats above  
 the pit. Black blood flowed out. The spirits came  
 up out of Erebus and gathered round.  
 Teenagers, girls and boys, the old who suffered  
 for many years, and fresh young brides whom labor  
 destroyed in youth; and many men cut down  
 in battle by bronze spears, still dressed in armor  
 around the pit, with eerie cries. Pale fear  
 took hold of me. I roused my men and told them  
 to flay the sheep that I had killed, and burn them,  
 and pray to Hades and Persephone.  
 I drew my sword and sat on guard, preventing  
 the spirits of the dead from coming near  
 the blood, till I had met Tiresias.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> From the translation by Emily Wilson, whose recent work pays special attention to the feminine in Homer’s poetry. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018), 19:466-476.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, Luke does not recount the story of Thomas putting his hand in Jesus’ side wound (John 20:24-29), but in Luke 24:39 Jesus tells those gathered, “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.”

<sup>20</sup> After Odysseus is revealed, he enacts bloody vengeance; after Jesus is revealed, he announces forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed in his name to all nations (Luke 24:47).

<sup>21</sup> *Odyssey* 11:12-19.

<sup>22</sup> *Odyssey* 11:32-49.

Odysseus then encounters the ghost of a recently and tragically departed shipmate, Elpenor; he then sees the ghost of his own mother and pitifully weeps; finally, the spirit of the unseeing seer approaches, recognizes and calls to the hero by name: “Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices!”<sup>23</sup> After conversing and receiving from the prophet insight for his journey and foresight about his own death, Odysseus turns again to his mother, who speaks to her son “in tones of grief”:

Then in my heart I wanted to embrace  
the spirit of my mother. She was dead,  
and I did not know how. Three times I tried,  
longing to touch her. But three times her ghost  
flew from my arms, like shadows or like dreams.  
Sharp pain pierced deeper in me as I cried,  
No, Mother! Why do you not stay for me,  
and let me hold you, even here in Hades?<sup>24</sup>

Grief overwhelms the scene; Tiresias himself turns and departs again to the house of Hades. But outside Jericho, city of the moon, a blind man recognizes the one who approaches and cries out, “David’s son, Jesus, have mercy on me!”<sup>25</sup> Jesus opens the blind man’s eyes; he follows Jesus on the road, presumably a road that leads away from (or out of) Jericho, the city of the moon. If the name Bartimaeus signals *Odyssey* 11, those who anticipate imitation and inversion discern expectation for the afterlife overturned: “Whereas the soul of Tiresias returned to Hades, Bartimaeus left Jericho to travel with Jesus; herein lies the emulation. . . . Odysseus left Tiresias blind in the netherworld, Jesus cures Bartimaeus.”<sup>26</sup>

According to MacDonald, “The name Bartimaeus may be significant. This is the only name given to a recipient of a miracle in the Synoptic Gospels; both Matthew and Luke omit it in their accounts.”<sup>27</sup> Bauckham states that, “It is quite clear that the names of the beneficiaries do not belong to the genre of gospel miracle stories. So explanation of those names that do occur is certainly required.”<sup>28</sup> Bauckham does not seem to make room for the possibility that Mark and other Gospel writers invented names as a literary or rhetorical technique, a mimetic device for signaling some other story. His recovery of

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<sup>23</sup> See discussion in MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 232-34.

<sup>24</sup> *Odyssey* 11:204-211.

<sup>25</sup> Unless I missed the observation, MacDonald does not comment on the significance of the name Jericho, “city of the moon,” in mimetic relation to the sun-void darkness of *Odyssey* 11. But see MacDonald’s note that the phrasing of the blind seer’s recognition of Odysseus (“son of Laertes, Odysseus”) mirrors the unusual ordering of the blind man’s cry: “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!” (10:47). See MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 233-234. For more on Jericho, see Thomas B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2015), 227-228.

<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 233-234.

<sup>27</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 233.

<sup>28</sup> Bauckham, 53. He seems to include Jairus as another named “recipient” of a healing act, although it was Jairus’ daughter who was raised; and he notes that the three women named in Luke 8:2-3 (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna) are also named recipients of healing (“cured of evil spirits and infirmities”), but while the fact of the healing is reported, the *story* of the healing is not told.

the gospels as testimony presents “a reputable historiographic category for reading the Gospels as history, and also a theological model for understanding the Gospels as the entirely appropriate means of access to the historical reality of Jesus” and for realizing “the disclosure of God in the history of Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> His project is laudable, and the fruit of his efforts have benefitted the Academy and Church alike. But by our comparison of Bauckham and MacDonald—scholarly work flayed open, ink like black blood spilling—a gibbering question approaches, a shade summoned from beyond the pale, crying at top of voice: *Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, Ἰησοῦ υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου.*<sup>30</sup> A monstrous question.

### ***Mythos* and *ethos*: Are we myth-perceiving gospel?**

We moderns have come to associate truth with the facts of crystalized history; a story is true if it is historically reliable, if it “actually happened” as depicted by the facts of historical presentation. But might we not be better to consider a story true as it communicates truth? This question should not imply that the Bible is ahistorical; rather, the Bible as *story* more profoundly delivers truth than Bible-as-history. To read the Bible as primarily history—in the way we typically understand history as facts about what happened—to read the Bible primarily as history diminishes sacred Scripture, reduces it to something hard and unbending, facts to be learned, dogma and doctrine chiseled out from historical text. Reading the Bible as sacred story moves us differently, moves in and among us differently; dogma is crystal, story is water; *mythos* moves like water, shaping and reshaping the landscapes we inhabit. Myth is a formational power, story that communicates significant meaning and truth for a particular culture; myth shapes shared identity—or, we might say, *mythos* becomes *ethos* as the stories we tell translate to the values, ethics, and norms of community, shaping cultural identity.

*Mythos* shapes *ethos*; the stories we tell follow us out, become the realities we inhabit; and telling a good story is the first step in creating shared cultural identity. Shaping cultural identity through story is precisely what we discover by attending to mimesis, imitation (or emulation) of ancient story. Perhaps, ancient epic is a better delivery device for the gospel, because epic delivers the moral, the ethical, the political, the theological, and the universal—*mythos* that profoundly shapes *ethos*. History (as a telling of historical events) and historiography (history that attempts to convey the truth or meaning of historical events) and even biography (*bios*) are not sufficient to do what epic can do—as we discern in what the *Aeneid* is and what it became for Rome. As with *Aeneid*, it is not how imitated story is similar but where imitation diverges—where the stories become different, when imitation becomes inversion—that reveals the meaning of mimesis. Mimesis of Greek and Roman epic story becomes playful imitation profoundly communicative of a gospel that turns the world on end.

In our own contemporary storied worlds, it is typically villains who monolog; so we return to our exploration of the meaning of mimesis in Mark 5. Gospel writers like Mark conveyed truth that transcends historicity and lives as story; mimetic markers in Mark are less clear than in the *Aeneid*, for example; but it is also possible that what is sometimes heard as mimesis is an echo of words or images that live, move, and have their being as *poetic memory*, an idea that “language itself, and especially literary or poetic

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Mark 5:7: *What have I to do with you, Jesus, son of the most high God?*

language, already contains within it the memory of previous texts.”<sup>31</sup> The echoes we hear may be intended or unintended, and “we need to think of the relation between the gospels and Greek lore more as dynamic cultural interaction: the complex, random, conscious and unconscious events of learning that occur when people interact and engage in practices of socialization.”<sup>32</sup>

Mimesis is a means for creating shared cultural identity; but we modern readers are culturally cut off from the storied worlds of sacred story. As MacDonald observes,

Today we read these texts with a cultural competence radically different from those for whom they were written; ancient readers could detect allusions invisible to all but the best-trained classicists. Even though the detection of mimesis is difficult, it is one of the most valuable contributions a critic can make for understanding a text. To be sure, one may profitably read a mimetic text for its own sake, but awareness of its model or models allows one to interpret it more comprehensively, more dialogically.<sup>33</sup>

In *The New Moses*, Dale Allison comments, “Our historically conditioned deafness to oblique allusions in the Bible can sometimes lead us to doubt their very existence.”<sup>34</sup> Hearing mimesis is profoundly difficult, and endeavors are complicated by the possibility that we may be hearing what our itching ears *want* to hear. Potential pitfalls are legion. To be sure, MacDonald has his critics,<sup>35</sup> and mimesis criticism is not mainstream.<sup>36</sup> Yet

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<sup>31</sup> See discussion in Ellen Finkelpearl, “Pagan Traditions of Intertextuality in the Roman World,” in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity*, ed. Dennis R. MacDonald, 78–90 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and Mediterranean Myths* (New Haven: Yale University, 2019), 47. I highly recommend the helpful introductory chapter “Gospels, Mythography, Historiography.”

<sup>33</sup> See the introductory discussion in MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1993), 18. On this, I also recommend the brief article by Christopher A. Hall, “Classical Ear-Training,” *Christian History* 22, no. 4 (November 2003): 40–41.

<sup>35</sup> Certainly, MacDonald’s work has received scholarly critique: essentially, that MacDonald overstates the likelihood of mimetic parallels, reading intertextuality into biblical narratives so that Gospel writers, for example, no longer present historical accounts but rather are viewed as crafting fictions in competition with the epic stories of Homer, Vergil, and others. For the contours of debate and discussion specifically related to MacDonald’s work on Mark’s Gospel, see Margaret M. Mitchell, “Review of *Homer in the New Testament?*, by Dennis R. MacDonald,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 244–60; Karl Olav Sandnes, “*Imitatio Homeri?*: An Appraisal of Dennis R. MacDonald’s ‘Mimesis Criticism,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 715–32; and Kristian Larsson, “Intertextual Density, Quantifying Imitation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 309–31. See also MacDonald’s own response in defense of his approach in Dennis R. MacDonald, *My Turn: A Critique of Critics of “Mimesis Criticism,”* Occasional Papers of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity 53 (Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 2009); see also, for example, Christopher B. Zeichmann, “Ulyssean Qualities in *The Life of Josephus* and Luke-Acts: A Modest Defence of Homeric Mimesis,” *Neotestamentica* 53, no. 3 (September 2019): 491–515.

<sup>36</sup> In a section of his essay titled “Mimetic Shame and Honor in New Testament Scholarship,” Mark Bilby offers this salient insight: “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,

the prophetic challenge echoes: *Let the one who has ears to hear, listen*. The following attempt at discerning mimesis offers opportunity to listen, see, discover, and learn from the imitation and inversion of (un)familiar story.

### Markan storytelling: What are we myth-ing?

What follows is a less rigorous, more playful attempt to discern (and make sense of) possible mimesis in Mark. As described in the introduction, the loanword *λεγιών* (Legion, from the Latin *legio*) signals an emulation of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 8, which relates the story of Hercules overcoming the monster Cacus to bring relief and rescue to the people. Hearing Hercules in Mark 5 confirms the trajectory of the gospel as it unfolds in Mark's telling of Jesus' story. This play proceeds in three moves: first, MacDonald's seven criteria for "detecting dependence on an antecedent text" guides and grounds thinking about the possibility of imitation (and inversion); second, the narrative immediately preceding Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac—Jesus calming a storm—reveals the presence of mimesis in familiar story, the tale of Jonah; and third, we read between texts to discern what we might learn *if* we assume the name Legion signals Vergil's story of Hercules and the monster Cacus. Since boat imagery pervades all three stories (Mark 4-5, Jonah 1, and *Aeneid* 8), why not unfurl the metaphor? We begin by assembling ribs and keel.

#### Move 1: Discerning Mimesis

MacDonald proffers seven criteria for guiding mimesis criticism, by which texts are assessed for "evidence that they are direct, extensive, advertised, and hermeneutically freighted imitations of earlier writings."<sup>37</sup> The criteria are noted as follows, with some evidence offered to better justify imitation of *Aeneid* 8:

1. *Accessibility*—Was the source text likely available or known? Did the author likely have access to the model text?

Vergil's masterful yet unfinished epic, the *Aeneid*, was published after the poet's death in 19 B.C.E. Copies of the Latin text disseminated throughout the empire so that by the end of the first century C.E., the epic's pervasive popularity and influence was undeniable, inspiring artistic representation and widespread celebration of Rome's

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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" (7); see discussion in Mark G. Bilby, "Mainstreaming Mimesis Criticism," in *Classical Greek Models of the Gospels and Acts: Studies in Mimesis Criticism*, ed. Mark G. Bilby, Michael Kochenash, and Margaret Froelich, 3–16 (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Although MacDonald reviews these criteria in numerous works, see discussion in *The Gospel and Homer*, 5–19.

founding epic.<sup>38</sup> Concerning Hercules (Herakles), the hero-god was “the quintessential Greek hero. In antiquity he featured in more stories and was represented more frequently in art than [any] other hero or god”; he was worshiped by Greeks and Romans; and although the rise of Christianity ultimately meant the demise of his cult, “the hero himself continued to fascinate writers and artists, who . . . even proclaimed him as a prototype of Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Of importance for this project is the writing of Diodorus Siculus, and specifically Book IV of his *Bibliotheca Historica*, in which he recounts the Labors (or Trials) of Herakles; this work was likely published in the mid-first century B.C.E., not too distant in time from publication of the *Aeneid*.<sup>40</sup> Scholars are divided over the date of the composition of Mark, most arguing for a date between the late 60s and early 70s of the first century C.E.<sup>41</sup>

## 2. Analogy—Do others imitate the source text?

Consider first the works previously cited that discern Luke’s imitation of *Aeneid* (see note 37 above). Concerning Hercules, MacDonald offers these observations in his book *Christianizing Homer*:

The careers of Heracles and Christ display tantalizing parallels. Both heroes had divine fathers (Zeus/God) and mortal mothers (Alcmene/Mary), whose actual husbands (Amphitryon/Joseph) were from royal stock and accepted the boys as their own sons. Villains (Hera/Herod) tried to slay the babies in their cradles (by serpents/by swords), but both were spared (by precocious strength/by precautious flight). Early in life both youths traveled to a desolate place to be tempted with a choice between easy vice and arduous virtue; both chose virtue. The careers of both heroes consisted largely of extraordinary ordeals that they overcame through supernatural means. Having acceded to the wills of their divine fathers, both died violent deaths, the bodies of neither could be found, both became gods, both appeared to mortals after their deaths, and both ascended to heaven in

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, discussion in MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil*, 1-5 (especially his comments about a “Greek-speaking Jewish poet, the author of the eleventh Sibylline Oracle, probably from Egypt in the first half of the first century C.E.” (3-4) who “prophecies” about Vergil and the story of Aeneas; Shea, “Imitating,” 42-51; Bonz, *Past as Legacy*, especially the first chapter; and Michael Kochenash, “Reconsidering Luke-Acts and Virgil’s *Aeneid*: Negotiating Ethnic Legacies,” in *Christian Origins and the New Testament in the Greco-Roman Context: Essays in Honor of Dennis R. MacDonald*, ed. Michael Kochenash, Margaret Froelich, Thomas E. Phillips, and Ilseo Park, 7-38 (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Emma Stafford, *Herakles, Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxv. See also the detailed work by Abraham J. Malherbe, “Heracles,” in *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity*, ed. Carl R. Holladay, John T. Fitzgerald, Gregory E. Sterling, and James W. Thompson, 651-674 (Boston: Brill, 2014). See also discussion in Nagy, 31-39; and see Arlene L. Allan, Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, and Emma Stafford, *Herakles Inside and Outside the Church: From the First Apologists to the End of the Quattrocento*, Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, trans. C. H. Oldfather, Loeb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), Book IV; for background, see Charles E. Muntz, *Diodorus Siculus and the World of the Late Roman Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> See the interesting introduction to his commentary in R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth and Helwys (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2007). See also A. Y. Collins, *Mark*.

a cloud. Just as Heracles conquered wild beasts, including the hound Cerberus, whom he fetched from Hades, Jesus conquered demons and preached in hell. Greek philosophical schools transformed Heracles the giant brute into a paragon of virtue because he had endured his trials stoically. . . . So many additional details exist between the two heroes that one probably should relate both Heracles and Christ to a common “heroicology.”<sup>42</sup>

3. *Density—Are there sufficient parallels to demonstrate mimesis as likely?*

Certainly, clear parallels exist between Mark 4-5 and the *Odyssey*; while parallels between Mark 5 and *Aeneid* 8 exist, they are less dense than between Mark and Homer. These details will be more fully described below.

4. *Order—Is the sequencing of events similar enough to signify likely mimesis?*

As with Criterion 3, stronger parallels exist between Mark 4-5 and *Odyssey*.

5. *Distinctive traits—Do texts share anything distinctive?*

Yes, a *chain* presents a distinctive trait between Mark 5 and *Aeneid* 8.

6. *Interpretability—Why does this author imitate the source text (e.g., to rival it, etc.)?*

This is the strongest link: Mark signals the story of Hercules and Cacus to clarify the meaning and trajectory of the gospel, as described below.

7. *Recognition—Are there ancient or Byzantine recognitions of mimesis?*

According to Shea, one of “the most compelling reasons to explore the works of Vergil in conjunction with the works of early Christianity is because the early Christians “canonized” him, regarding him as one of the pagan “saints” or prophets whom Jesus rescues from Satan in the “Harrowing of Hell” tale common before the Reformation.”<sup>43</sup> Fascinatingly, in the *Via Latina* catacomb, Hercules is present as a figure in funerary depictions alongside Jesus and Lazarus.<sup>44</sup>

## Move 2: Listening for Fish Tales

Mark 4:35 to 5:20 offers story as deliverable to children as to wizened adults; the story captivates by its power and simplicity, by its provocative and familiar figures, and by the recognizable message it communicates: a god-man, asleep in a boat while all others fear for life, rouses to command wind and wave, *Be still!*—and calm is restored. Those traveling with the god-man wonder, *Who is this, that even wind and wave obey him?*

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<sup>42</sup> See discussion in Dennis R. MacDonald, *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and The Acts of Andrew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 148-149.

<sup>43</sup> See discussion in Shea, 47.

<sup>44</sup> See Beverly Berg, “Alcestis and Hercules in the Catacomb of Via Latina,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 48, no. 3 (September 1994): 219-34.

Arriving at a strange land, their wonderment is enlarged and answered by an unexpected character, a monster-man<sup>45</sup> tormented and inhabited by a legion of unclean spirits, who lives with the dead, who cannot be chained, who howls, who somehow knows the answer to the question, *Who is this?* With a shout, the monster-man names the stranger *Jesus, Son of the Most High God*; and he then names himself *Legion*, as he says, *for we are many*. The Son of the Most High God commands the legion of unclean spirits to leave the man to enter a herd of swine, pigs who rush down an embankment and plunge into the sea, all drowned. As for the monster-man, his humanity is restored, no longer a monster but a man, a witness to the Lord's mercy.

Such a story captivates wide-eyed youths but has also been equally and extensively contemplated by academically-minded adults, some of whom have determined that the section of Mark in which we discover these stories reflects mimesis, imitation that signals the epic story of Homer's *Odyssey*.<sup>46</sup> Here, I suggest that Vergil's *Aeneid* is also in view; after all, as MacDonald puts it, "Apparently, Mark wished to do for the early Church what Vergil did for the early Empire: to provide a compelling narrative about a founding hero. Like Vergil, Mark used the Homeric epics among his models (in addition to the Jewish Bible)."<sup>47</sup> I am suggesting that Mark 4:35 to 5:20 reverberate with echoes of *both* the *Odyssey* Books 9-10 and the *Aeneid* Book 8. Not only these, but Mark clearly imitates the story of Jonah, a fish tale more easily swallowed as example of mimesis. To demonstrate mimesis, we begin with a fish tale.

In Hades, when Odysseus encounters the specter of famed Achilles, he comments on how good the ghost must have it: worshiped as a god in life, still seemingly revered as one who lords over the dead in spectral power. Achilles will have none of it. He sharply responds: *No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus! By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man, some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive than rule down here over all the breathless dead*. The words and fate of Achilles leave little hope for good expectation in life after death.<sup>48</sup> Heroes, like Odysseus, invading Death's realm and returning with boon is a centerpiece of epic story and myth, as has been widely acknowledged and discussed. As an example, consider Joseph Campbell's capture of the story of Herakles and Hesione of Troy:

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<sup>45</sup> Here, it is crucial to note that I am not conflating monstrosity and madness or the monstrous and mental health; mental illness is often read into this text, and such readings can be helpful—but my attention is on the character, a monster-man transformed by the Son of the Most High God. Nevertheless, for an interesting read that centers mental illness in this story, see Christine J. Guth, "Legion No More: Confessions of a Gerasen (Mark 5:1-20)," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 11, no. 4 (February 2008): 71–78, in which Guth offers an imaginative, first-person narrative from the perspective of the healed man as a "deliberate effort to write from the social location of one who lives with mental illness" (78).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, MacDonald, *Mythologizing*, 33-35; *The Gospels and Homer*, 205-208.

<sup>47</sup> MacDonald, *Mythologizing*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> See conversation in Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 11:528-617. Achilles asked Odysseus how he, one of the living and matchlessly clever though he is, had contrived to enter the House of Death, "where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home." Interestingly, Odysseus's words with dead heroes culminates in meeting Herakles (Hercules), who relates how he had dragged the great beast Cerberus, hound who guards the dead, up from the underworld to earth and into the light of day.

The Greek hero Herakles, pausing at Troy on his way homeward with the belt of the Queen of the Amazons, found that the city was being harassed by a monster sent against it by the sea-god Poseidon. The beast would come ashore and devour people as they moved about on the plain. Beautiful Hesione, the daughter of the king, had just been bound by her father to the sea rocks as a propitiatory sacrifice, and the great visiting hero agreed to rescue her for a price. The monster, in due time, broke to the surface of the water and opened its enormous maw. Herakles took a dive into the throat, cut his way out through the belly, and left the monster dead.<sup>49</sup>

Campbell describes this descent into Death as entering the *belly of the whale*, from which the hero reemerges reborn, as it were. Herakles willingly enters Death's maw but then opens a womb out of which he is "born again," and others (like Hesione) share in the salvation or boon afforded by the hero's escape or rebirth out of Death. Likely, those familiar with biblical stories immediately associate *belly-of-the-whale* imagery with Jonah, reluctant prophet who spent three days ruminating in a fish-gut time out. The story of Jonah is *a Bible story*; indeed, in each of their Gospels, Matthew and Luke explicitly reference the prophet and seem to assume familiarity with the story among their readers. Mark's Gospel does not explicitly refer to Jonah; however, the story of Jonah functions intertextually by the "obvious allusion to the Jonah story in the story of Jesus stilling the storm in all three Synoptic Gospels," and specifically in Mark, who "implicitly makes reference to not only the story of Jonah, but also to Moses and Elijah, both of whom are alluded to in Jonah as well."<sup>50</sup> To be sure, the story of Jonah offers a compelling narrative and provocative themes that invert expectation (e.g., the prophet as reluctant; salvation not *from* but *by* a monster; salvation extended to unexpected others), a rich subtext from which meaning and insight percolate into Gospel stories as writers and readers make sense of Jesus.

Jonah is indeed a familiar story; readers familiar with the story are unlikely to be disturbed by discerning the prophet as intertextual figure in Mark's Gospel. Consider the clear allusions to Jonah presented by Mark 4:35-41, the stilling of the storm:<sup>51</sup>

**Table 1. Imitation of Jonah 1 in Mark 4:35-41**

<i>Jonah, ch. 1</i>	<i>Mark 4:35-41</i>
<i>Departure by boat:</i> Jonah boards a ship; YHWH hurls a "great wind" upon the sea	Jesus gets in a boat; a "great gale" arises
<i>Violent storm at sea:</i> a great storm threatens to break up the ship	Waves beat into the boat so that it becomes swamped

<sup>49</sup> See discussion in Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 75.

<sup>50</sup> See Joel Edmund Anderson, "Jonah in Mark and Matthew: Creation, Covenant, Christ, and the Kingdom of God," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42, no. 4 (November 2012): 177-178.

<sup>51</sup> The following chart is adapted from discussion in Anderson, 176ff; in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 336ff; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 258ff. According to Marcus, "These overlaps do not relate just to shared themes but also to common vocabulary" (337).

<i>Sleeping main character:</i> Jonah is asleep in the hold of the ship	Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat
<i>Frightened crew:</i> sailors are afraid and cry out to their gods; the Captain wakes Jonah	Disciples wake Jesus: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”
<i>Miraculous calm related to main character:</i> Jonah is thrown into the sea; the sea calms	Jesus rebukes wind and waves; the storm calms
<i>Marveling response from crew:</i> the sailors fear YHWH even more; they sacrifice and offer vows	Disciples are filled with awe and question, “Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?”

In Mark, the story of Jesus stilling the storm is saturated with allusion to Jonah; yet the prophet is not explicitly named or referenced, neither in 4:35-41 nor in the rest of the Gospel. Yet, Jonah as backdrop is further confirmed by the prophet’s appearance in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus refers to “the sign of Jonah” as the only sign offered to an “evil generation” who requests a sign.<sup>52</sup> Despite lack of explicit reference to the Jonah story in Mark, for those with ears to hear the intertextuality, allusion confirms that “someone greater than Jonah is here”—but this connection, this confirmation is made clear not only because of *imitation* (how Jonah’s story provides the setting and imagery for Jesus v. storm) but especially because of *inversion* (how the story of Jesus turns Jonah’s story on its head to create new meaning). Consider the following distinctions or inverted aspects between the Jonah and Jesus stories:

**Table 2: Inversions between Jonah and Jesus**

<i>Jonah</i>	<i>Mark 4:35-41</i>
Jonah tries to escape the presence of YHWH by fleeing on a boat	Jesus reveals or embodies the Divine presence by his command over the elements
Jonah boards the boat to avoid proclaiming a message to the non-Hebrew Ninevites	Jesus boards the boat to “cross to the other side,” the Gentile country of the Gerasenes
Jonah sleeps in the belly of the ship; there is concern that he should wake and do something	Jesus sleeps in the stern of the ship, on a cushion; there is concern that he should wake and do something
The sailors question Jonah: “Who are you? Where are you from? Who are your people?”	The disciples call Jesus <i>teacher</i> , but then question, “Who is this, that even wind and wave obey him?”
The sailors fear angering the god by killing an innocent man	The disciples fear that they themselves are perishing

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 12:39, 16:4; Luke 11:29-30.

Jonah is thrown overboard, and the raging storm subsides	Jesus himself commands the raging storm, “Peace, be still!” and the storm subsides
Jonah is swallowed (and saved) by a great fish and spends three days in the “belly of the whale”	Jesus is not swallowed by a great fish and does not spend time in the “belly of the whale”

To be sure, despite imitation, at the end of Mark 4 Jesus is not swallowed by a great fish and does not spend time in the “belly of the whale”; echoes of Jonah generate anticipation that a “belly of the whale” experience approaches: readers/hearers must look, listen, wait for it. In this case, the “belly of the whale”—a heroic confrontation with death—is made evident in Mark 5 through playful mimesis with *Aeneid* 8, where Hercules (not Jesus) dives headlong into the thick, smoky darkness of a fierce monster’s lair, a move that anticipates Jesus’ own descent into Hades, story of Christ’s underworld journey that came to be a central aspect of the early centuries of Christian faith.<sup>53</sup> If Mark—moving beyond the Hebrew scriptures we anticipate—signals story from Homer and Vergil, then mimesis helps Mark make sense of the meaning of the cross; and if, as Culpepper claims, “Close examination of the Gospel of Mark shows that the shadow of the cross falls across the entire Gospel so that every pericope points ahead to the cross and must be understood in its light,”<sup>54</sup> then mimesis offers a sense-making strategy for discerning what Mark means by *gospel* of Jesus Christ (τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ).

### Move 3: Signaling Legion

The concept of death and rebirth is prominent within the legend of Herakles, and it is closely connected to the concept of kleos. This is illustrated in two places that feature the story of Herakles. The first place, as narrated by Diodorus (*Bib. hist.* 4.26.1), depicts Herakles descending into Hades whereupon he captures and delivers Cerberus from the place of darkness (death) to the place of light (life). It is not uncommon within Greek tragedy—and other genres—for a character to enter into Hades only to return again later. Traversing from earth into Hades and back is meant to depict the process of death and resurrection, which was understood as the ultimate form of kleos. The story of Herakles’ resurrection ends with his being awakened in Olympus, where he is welcomed amongst the gods as one of their own. And so, the immortality that is often expressed in Greek

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<sup>53</sup> See discussion in Georgia Frank, “Christ’s Descent to the Underworld in Ancient Ritual and Legend,” in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly, 211-226 (Grand Rapids, MI: Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, 2009). Those unfamiliar with the Christus Victor story of atonement can certainly consult the classic work by Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1931); more recently, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011). Weaver describes the Christus Victor narrative as discerned in the writings of the Apostle Paul: “Paul’s hope has an apocalyptic specificity, namely, the resurrection of Christ, which is both victory over evil and death in the old order and also the beginning of the transformation of fallen creation in the new order. Jesus’ resurrection did not simply mark the end of history. It is rather that the end (or goal) of history, namely, the reign of God, is breaking into the present and beginning the process of transforming all of creation” (52).

<sup>54</sup> Culpepper, *Mark*, 555.

literature with regard to kleos is most explicitly illustrated in the life and death of Herakles.<sup>55</sup>

Story about the identity of Jesus is to be told and understood in light of his death and resurrection. I want to suggest that what Mark, Luke, and others are doing by putting stories about Jesus into conversation with stories from the Hebrew Bible and also with Greek and Roman *mythos*—what they are doing is profoundly rooted in a clear-eyed understanding of the meaning of the cross, the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. *It may be that it is difficult for us to recognize what they are doing, how and why they so playfully engage and imitate story, because we ourselves are missing a clear-eyed understanding of the meaning of the gospel.* MacDonald’s *Mythologizing Jesus* entertains a possibility that the Mark 5 story of Jesus exorcizing a demoniac possessed by a legion of unclean spirits exhibits intentional mimesis of *Odyssey* Books 9 and 10, where Odysseus overcomes first a monstrous cyclops, Polyphemus, and then a bewitching queen, Circe. MacDonald captures elements of mimesis in this chart, with a bit added for clarification:

**Table 3: Mimesis between Mark 5 and Odyssey 9 and 10<sup>56</sup>**

<i>Odyssey 9 and 10</i>	<i>Mark 5:1-20</i>
	{This narrative is immediately preceded by a story of Jesus asleep in a boat as winds howl and waves rage; Jesus wakes and calms the storm, provoking the response, “Who is this that even wind and waves obey him?”}
Odysseus and his crew sailed to the land of the Cyclopes [and of Circe]	Jesus and his disciples sailed to the region of the Gerasenes
On the mountain of the Cyclopes “countless goats” grazed [Circe turned Odysseus’ comrades into swine]	On the mountains a “large herd of swine” grazed, about 2,000
Odysseus and crew went ashore	Jesus and his disciples went ashore
They discovered a savage, lawless giant who lived in a cave	They discovered a lawless demon-possessed man who lived among the caves

<sup>55</sup> Adam Z. Wright, *Of Conflict and Concealment: The Gospel of Mark as Tragedy*, McMaster Biblical Studies 5 (Eugene, OR: McMaster Divinity College Press, 2020), 100.

<sup>56</sup> Adapted from MacDonald, *Mythologizing*, 37-44; see also *Gospels and Homer*, 213-221; and see especially *Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 63-76, where MacDonald describes striking parallels between Mark 5 and the episode at the house of Circe in *Odyssey* 10. Here, MacDonald suggests, “If Mark modeled his story after Homer’s Circe, it might account for several peculiarities,” including the demons’ “designation as Legion: Odysseus’s companions were soldiers” (66). It seems a stretch that this term should signal Greek soldiers; so this essay argues another explanation for the odd inclusion of the Latin loanword *legion*.

Polyphemus usually was depicted nude {The name Polyphemus means something like “many voices” or “much speaking”}	The man was nude
[Circe recognized Odysseus and asked him not to harm her] The giant asked if Odysseus had come to harm him	The man recognized Jesus and asked him not to harm him
The giant asked Odysseus his name	Jesus asked the man his name
Odysseus answered, “Nobody” {The cleverness here is in the word play: <i>ou tis</i> —nobody—is a play on <i>Odysseus</i> }	The man answered Legion {“Legion, for we are many”— <i>legion</i> is a Latin term, not a Greek term}
Odysseus subdued the giant with violence and trickery [Circe had turned Odysseus’ soldiers to swine] {Odysseus overcame Circe with a special gift from Hermes, a flower that made ineffectual her magic of transformation}	Jesus subdued the demons with a word and sent them into the swine and then into the lake
The shepherd {the Cyclops} called out to his neighbors	The swineherds reported to his neighbors
The Cyclopes came to the site asking about Polyphemus’ sheep and goats	The neighbors came to the site to find out about their swine
Odysseus and his crew boarded ship	Jesus and his disciples boarded ship
Odysseus told the giant to broadcast that he had blinded him	Jesus told the healed monster-man to broadcast what God had done for him
The giant asks Odysseus, now on the ship, to come back	The man asked Jesus, now on ship, if he could be with him
Odysseus refused the request	Jesus refused the request
Odysseus and his crew sailed away	Jesus and his disciples sailed away
Odysseus awoke during a storm in the episode immediately following Polyphemus {wind and wave against Odysseus}	

To be sure, some may feel that the presentation of information in MacDonald’s book can feel tedious—charts like this making comparisons between texts that can seem a bit stretched. While I myself find MacDonald’s work exciting, provocative, and insightful, his observations sometimes leave me with questions: *Why imitate this particular story at all? What’s the intention behind this example of mimesis?* MacDonald suggests that Mark intends readers to mark Jesus as superior to Homer’s hero, Odysseus. “Whereas Odysseus blinded a monster, Jesus made a monster sane. Similarly, Circe

turned soldiers into swine for eating, but Jesus cast the legion of demons into the swine to return the madman to sanity. Here again, Jesus is a hero of compassion.”<sup>57</sup>

So, in this explanation, we do get a sense of *inversion* as the energy—the intent—behind mimesis: tell a familiar story, but undo expectation through inversion, revealing the superior character and power of Jesus-as-hero. And mimesis is not allegory, as if the demon-possessed man is analogous to the Cyclops or Jesus is analogous to Odysseus, because in mimesis there’s too much blurring of the lines: for example, Odysseus and his men rush out of the cave on the bellies of beasts and race for the water to make their escape, but in Mark demons enter swine and rush headlong to the water and drown; or, Odysseus shares Circe’s bed after she makes an oath not to harm him, but in Mark request for a similar oath has a very different outcome, even though one of the characters is already naked. Yet the question persists: *Why mimesis with this particular story?*

It’s not a stretch to conclude that Jesus is more compassionate than Odysseus. Many are more compassionate than Odysseus (just read the *Odyssey* and see, Odysseus does not set a very high bar). To make sense of the mimesis, we might suggest that *xenia*—or, the broken hospitality central to the story between Odysseus and Polyphemus—is the point of Mark’s narrative: despite his clear power over demons, the people of the region want Jesus and his crew out of there immediately. Their lack of hospitable welcome is judged in light of the mimesis. Or, we might suggest that power over the monstrous is the point of mimesis: if Odysseus is able to best a monster and tame a sorceress through trickery and violence, how much superior to him is Jesus who commands a horde of demons with only a word? Now we may be getting closer to discerning intent behind mimesis. But surely mimesis is more than a device to convey superiority of compassion or power. *Why this mimesis of the monster’s cave?* I want to suggest a linguistic clue that may reveal that this isn’t the only monster’s cave Mark has in view.

The name *Legion* has long mystified scholars—*legio* is a Latin term describing a company within the Roman army comprising around 5,000 soldiers.<sup>58</sup> So, of course, many, many demons like soldiers acting in concert to colonize this man might well be considered a legion. While Luke’s telling of this same story includes the name Legion, Matthew completely drops this name from his version of the story, which is interesting since he deploys the term later in his Gospel to describe the *legion of angels* that might save Jesus if he chose to call for rescue.<sup>59</sup> The voices of scholars trying to make sense of Legion are many, and their variety of approaches begs the question: *Why the sudden odd insertion of this Roman military-imperial term into the story of Mark 5: 1-20?*

*Legion*, as noted, is a Latin term, a term with specific militaristic, imperialistic reference. Above, we attended to mimesis with the *Odyssey*; and while “My name is Legion, for *we are many*,” might point to Polyphemus, whose name means “many voices,” could it be that Mark’s Latinism here signals a different story, a Roman story, to which we ought attend? In his *Aeneid*, Vergil certainly imitated Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclopes. Caesar Augustus—the first Roman emperor—commissioned Vergil to compose the *Aeneid*, an epic poem in Latin that accounts the journey of heroic Aeneas, whose fated

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<sup>57</sup> MacDonald, *Mythologizing*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> See discussion in Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 268-70; here I also include an interesting take offered by Warren Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans and Mark’s Jesus: Legion Enters the Pigs (Mark 5:1-20),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 139–55.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Luke 8:30; Matthew 26:53.

flight from Troy ultimately initiates the founding of Rome. Much of the *Aeneid* is *vaticinium ex eventu*, storytelling that depicts known history as if prophesied about in the distant past. Twice in the epic a tongue of fire ignites above the heads of characters who anticipate the coming of a “kingdom,”<sup>60</sup> Roman rule as it is established throughout centuries and culminates in Augustus and the *pax Romana*, Roman peace throughout the world. The *Aeneid* was no mere story—much like the works of Homer, the *Aeneid* carried and conveyed Roman values; indeed, Augustus intended the epic as a means for return to traditional moral values, not least the piety and manliness they understood as necessary for properly ordering the world. And Vergil’s mimesis of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is rich and playful and creative—Aeneas is portrayed as hero far surpassing Odysseus in all ways: in cleverness, morality, virility, and devotion.

So in Book 3 of the *Aeneid*, readers are not surprised to discover Aeneas arriving upon the Cyclopes’ shore, just as Odysseus had done; yet here we encounter not a Polyphemus-like monster, but a man, a Greek, one of Odysseus’ sailors who had been left behind by his commander. The sailor begs kind Aeneas to take him on board and away from this cursed land, and though the Greeks had been Troy’s bane and brought death and destruction to Aeneas’ family, home, and people, Aeneas welcomes the sailor, demonstrating care of the stranger far superior to the hospitality displayed between Odysseus and Polyphemus. In the end, the monster does show up, and the Greek together with the Trojans make a harrowing escape.

But in the *Aeneid*, this is not the only instance of a mimesis of the Polyphemus story, and it is to this instance that I want to draw our attention. Indeed, I am suggesting that Mark’s unexpected deployment of the Latin term *legion* is itself intended to signal that we are to pay attention to *Aeneid*. Book 8 seems to me the heart of *Aeneid*—this is where Aeneas receives his armor from Venus, his mother, armor divinely engraved with the living history of Rome, all that is to come, flashing forth from the shield of Aeneas as vibrant *vaticinium ex eventu*. Armed, literally, with his destiny, Aeneas is equipped to battle legions. At the end of book 7, we see armies gathering for a battle that will decide the fate of future Rome. And both here and early in Book 9, the word *legio*, or legion, is used to describe the forces gathering for war. Early in Book 8, Aeneas is instructed by the river god to journey up the Tibur and beseech the help of a people there who will ally with them for battle. Aeneas makes the journey, and the people he encounters are sitting down to a great feast, a yearly rite of celebration and thanksgiving for a savior who rid their land of a terrible monster. As Aeneas sits down to feast and enjoy their hospitality, he is told the story of Hercules, worshipped as a god here, who defeated Cacus, a fierce monster who had been terrorizing the people and stealing their cattle.

The name Cacus is a play on the Greek word for *bad* or *evil*, and the story that ensues is clearly mimetic of the *Odyssey* in its description of the gore-filled cave where Cacus resides. To illustrate Vergil’s mimesis of *Odyssey*, first listen to this exchange between Odysseus and Polyphemus as he and his men reach their boat and attempt to make escape:

They swung aboard, they sat to the oars in rank;  
and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Aeneid*, 2:850ff, where young Iulus embodies a future hope as three generations flee the fires of Troy; and 7:79ff, where Lavinia ignites, a sign of fame and war to come.

But once offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,  
 I called back to the Cyclops, stinging taunts:  
 'So, Cyclops, no weak coward it was whose crew  
 you bent to devour there in your vaulted cave—  
 you with your brute force! Your filthy crimes  
 came down on your own head, you shameless cannibal,  
 daring to eat your guests in your own house—  
 so Zeus and the other gods have paid you back!  
 That made the rage of the monster boil over.  
 Ripping off the peak of a towering crag, he heaved it  
 so hard the boulder landed just in front of our dark prow  
 and a huge swell reared up as the rock went plunging under—  
 a tidal wave from the open sea. The sudden backwash  
 drove us landward again, forcing us close inshore  
 but grabbing a long pole, I thrust us off and away,  
 tossing my head for dear life, signaling crews  
 to put their backs in the oars, escape grim death.<sup>61</sup>

Now, back to the *Aeneid*, where the hero is told that Hercules finally discovered the cave of Cacus, but the monster had run inside and had broken the chain that suspended a great boulder above the cavern's entrance, a stone so massive that not even Hercules could push it away. Indeed, the god-man tried three times to move the stone but could not. But Hercules was undaunted, and we ought pay attention to what happens next, because I think this is what Mark wants us to hear as he imitates this story in the story of Jesus and Legion:

[Hercules] gnashed his teeth and peered all over  
 For a way in. . . .  
 A flint spire, with the rocks cut off on all sides,  
 rose from the cave's roof, dizzying to see:  
 a fitting place for ghastly birds to nest.  
 It slanted from the ridge above the river  
 on the left. By wrenching from the right he freed it,  
 and tore it from its roots and shoved it over.  
 The heights of heaven thundered with the impact.  
 The stream fled backward, terrified; the banks burst.  
 Now Cacus' cavernous palace was laid open,  
 its shadowy depths exposed—as if some power  
 should split the earth clear to the habitations  
 of Hades and uncover that pale kingdom  
 the gods hate. From above, the huge abyss  
 would show, and spirits tremble at the light.  
 The monster, then, caught in the sudden daylight  
 in the rocky hole, had never howled like this,  
 as Hercules harassed him from above  
 with everything at hand . . .  
 [Hercules] pinned and throttled [the monster] until  
 his eyes popped and his throat was dry and bloodless.

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<sup>61</sup> *Odyssey* 9:527-545. This translation is Fagles.

Now with the doors torn off, the black lair open,  
 the heavens saw looted cows he'd tried to hide.  
 The hideous corpse was pulled out by the feet.  
 Men could not satisfy their hearts with gazing [upon the defeated monster].<sup>62</sup>

Pause and consider what we just heard recounted. A god-man breaks open a cavernous hell to expose the monster and the gore-strewn cave to daylight. A comparison is made to what might happen if the same event were to expose Hades, so that blinking ghosts are left trembling in unanticipated light. This is precisely what becomes the story of *Christus Victor*, where the cross like a Trojan Horse becomes transport for the God of light, transport down into Death and Hades where iron doors are torn open and darkness is forever transformed so that Hades and Death no longer hold ultimate destiny for human souls. Darkness transformed by light, the monster exposed, uncovered, defeated. *Where, O Death, is thy victory, thy sting?*

Another element in Mark's story helps confirm the intentional mimesis here: the man possessed by Legion is said to have always broken his restraining chains; nowhere in the Polyphemus narrative are broken chains mentioned, but here in the Cacus story the monster breaks the chain suspending the great boulder. Those familiar with these stories hear how playful mimesis generates meaning upon meaning, deepens the implications of Jesus healing this demoniac—as if the story was ever intended to be heard as mere historical narrative. No, the story is a delivery device for the gospel itself, the good news of a god-man who saves not only some from the evil Cacus, but who saves all by triumphing over Death and Hades. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.”<sup>63</sup> Legion's question and request might well be our own; but we know the end of the story—a story with a good-news ending—and legions make escape from that foul cavern, squealing.

So here at the end I return to the problem with which we began: *It may be that it is difficult for us to recognize what Mark and others are doing by mimesis, how and why they so playfully engage and imitate story, because we ourselves don't really have a clear-eyed understanding of the meaning of the gospel.* But this re-read of Mark 5 encourages me; and when I meet my own twenty-first century Achilles, one who worries over death and in despair breathes the words, *By god, I'd rather slave on earth than rule downstairs over all the breathless dead*, then I can ask, *Hey, have you heard the one about Christus Victor? It's a hell of a story!*

### Conclusion: Myth-taken truth

Playful mimesis generates meaning upon meaning, deepens the implications of story as delivery device for truth. While our unfamiliarity with ancient and Classical story hinders recognition of mimesis, it may be that it is difficult for us to recognize what Gospel writers are doing by mimesis—how and why they so playfully engage and imitate story—because we ourselves don't really have a clear-eyed understanding of the meaning of the gospel. But story can be playful because Truth is not fully captured by words. In the beginning was the Word, God as one who lives behind and above and among and within

<sup>62</sup> Vergil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Sarah Ruden, 8:229-265.

<sup>63</sup> Mark 5:7, NRSV.

our words but never exclusively *as* our words. So, understanding my own “just so stories” as *myth* reminds me that they resonate with and point to and are sometimes incarnations of the Word, but they are not the Word, not exclusively Truth, because Truth is not fully capturable as words.

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