

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**Tell No Man: The Messianic Secret in the Gospel According to St. Mark and its  
Relationship with the Odyssey**

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by

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## Introduction

“Peter answered [Jesus], ‘You are the Messiah.’ And [Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:30, NRSV). The messianic secret is a literary device which appears in the Gospels, generally following a similar pattern as Mark 8:27-30: someone recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and Jesus instructs them to keep his identity concealed.

Because scholarly consensus affirms Marcan priority, the idea that Mark is the earliest Gospel and a source for the other Synoptics, understanding this device must begin with an investigation of its occurrences in the Gospel of Mark. One likely explanation of the messianic secret stems from its literary dependence on Homer’s *Odyssey*. In order for this to be a feasible interpretation, it must be proven that Mark imitates the Homeric epic. Once a connection can be made, the impacts of the *Odyssey* on Mark’s messianic secret need to be analyzed.

## A Case for Mimesis

Literary mimesis is the relationship between two works where one intentionally draws from the other. The original work is referred to as the *hypotext* while the *hypertext* is the subordinate work. Some pieces of literature and art exhibit obvious mimetic relationships while others may not be as clear. A modern (and pertinent) example of mimesis is the Cohen Brothers’ movie *O Brother Where Art Thou* which is a clear retelling of *The Odyssey* in Depression era Mississippi. While a hypertext may be literarily dependent on the hypotext, they may not share the same values. Therefore, a strong emphasis should be placed on the hypertext’s intentional replacement of the values promulgated by the hypotext.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

When it comes to the mimetic relationship between *The Odyssey* and Mark's Gospel, it is very important not to ignore the theological substitutions made by Mark's text. If the deviation lacks intentionality, the textual relationship would not be a significant interpretive tool. However, substitution makes a bold declaration that the hypertext corresponds more closely to whatever reality the two works jointly address. This becomes an effective means of persuasively disseminating a particular worldview in the hypertext.

The issue of determining what criteria can be used to establish a mimetic relationship is significant. One may be able to point to the many *possible* connections between the potential hypotext and hypertext but that does not objectively settle the matter. For the connections to be effectual and original, a metric must be used to determine the validity of a mimetic hypothesis. First, it must be established that the Christian tradition engaged in the "Christianization" of pagan works (literary or otherwise). Second, Dennis MacDonald proposes six criteria for mimesis to determine the relationship. They include accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability.<sup>2</sup> Before *The Odyssey* can act as an interpretive aid to Mark, it is important to firmly establish the relationship between the two texts.

### Christians Engaging Culture

Prior to analyzing whether or not MacDonald's criteria for mimesis applies to the relationship between *The Odyssey* and the Gospel of Mark, one other area specific to the Church should be addressed. The existence of a pagan literary methodology certainly does not automatically mean early Christians would endorse or use it. However, there seems to be sufficient evidence to warrant an affirmation of the technique's validity within the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

community. Paul at Athens, early Christian art, and other possible mimetic activity in the Church support this assumption.

### **Paul at Athens**

When Paul travels to Athens in Acts 17:16-34, he addresses an audience of Greek philosophers. In this speech, he utilizes rhetorical patterns familiar to his audience. According to Darrell Bock, the account of the speech follows the Greco-Roman structure: *exordium* (vv. 22-23a), *propositio* (v. 23b), *probatio* (vv. 24-29), and *peroratio* (vv. 30-31).<sup>3</sup> In addition, Paul is clearly comfortable using pagan sources in his appeal to natural theology. When he proclaims, “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (17:28), he is re-appropriating Greek poetry. The first quotation likely originates with Epimenides of Crete (600 B.C.E) as this is affirmed by Clement of Alexandria. However, it may just be a generalized reference to pagan ideas which permeated the culture.<sup>4</sup> The second quotation borrows from the poet Aratus (ca. 315-240 B.C.E.) as “Paul is working with ideas in the Greek world that are familiar to the Athenians and only alludes to Scripture in his speech instead of quoting it directly.”<sup>5</sup> This clearly shows a biblical precedence for Christians to engage the surrounding culture in a way that re-appropriates works of a society, inserting Christian values into them.

### **Early Christian Art**

Early Christian art reflects a similar comfortableness with using pagan symbols to perpetuate their message. The phoenix is a mythological creature which regenerates from its own

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 558.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 568.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

ashes after it dies. The Roman emperor Hadrian (76 C.E.-138 C.E.) cast himself as a phoenix to symbolize his immortality and regeneration through his successors.<sup>6</sup> Despite its pagan connotations and role in imperial cultic worship, Christians used it to depict their own theological convictions about Christ's resurrection.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 features a catacomb painting with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace with Christ in the form of a phoenix.



Figure 1. *Three Hebrew Youths in the Fiery Furnace*. Artist unknown. C. 220 C.E. Catacomb of Prescilla, Rome, Italy.

Clement of Rome addresses this theme in 1 Clement 25, saying:

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<sup>6</sup> Penelope J.E. Davies, "The phoenix and the flames: death, rebirth and the imperial landscape of Rome," *Mortality* 5, No. 3 (November 2000): 253-54, accessed February 20, 2015, ProQuest.

<sup>7</sup> Vision, "The Phoenix and the Early Church," Fall 2011, accessed February 20, 2015, <http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/legend-of-the-phoenix-new-testament-church/50364.aspx>.

There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix...And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds a nest of frankincense, and myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers.

Clearly, this is another example of Christians synthesizing pagan imagery with their theology.

### **Other Possible Mimetic Activity in the Church**

The previous examples offer valuable insight by revealing the posture of Christians towards Greco-Roman culture. However, if it is shown that other Christian authors engaged in memetic activity, it bolsters the likelihood that Mark's Gospel follows in this literary tradition. MacDonald confirms other examples, the most prominent being the Acts of the Apostles.

Evidence that the Acts of the Apostles utilizes *imatatio* of Homeric texts is apparent. After detailing the ways Acts meets his pre-determined criteria for mimesis, MacDonald concludes, "If any author of the New Testament was capable of imitating Homeric epic it was the author of Luke-Acts."<sup>8</sup> He is not the only one who sees the connection here as Marianne Palmer Bonz argues that Luke's Gospel continues the Hebrew narrative of the Old Testament while drawing from the milieu of Greco-Roman society. Therefore, the author utilizes the *Iliad* and The *Odyssey* (and to a lesser extent, The *Aeneid*) as a way to bridge the gap between Jew and Gentile.<sup>9</sup>

MacDonald lays out four points of contact between the *Iliad* and Acts. First, he observes the similarities between the visions of Cornelius and Peter (Acts 10-11:18) and the second book of *Iliad* where Zeus sends Oneiros, the god of dreams, to King Agamemnon in his sleep. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 26.

imitation, Cornelius, a pietistic military leader, is shown to be morally superior to the prideful Agamemnon. The ethical superiority of the Christian God is also on display because He never engages in manipulative lying like Zeus does. Finally, the dream in the Lukan text promotes the inclusion of Gentiles alongside Jews in the New Covenant while the dream in the Homeric text exacerbates conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans leading to much bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

The second connection between Acts and the *Iliad* is Paul's farewell at Miletus (Acts 20:18-35) and Hector's tragic farewell to his wife, Andromache (Book 6). The tale of Hector in *The Iliad* is a telling analysis of the heroic ethic which dominated Greek culture. Peter Leithart describes their outlook by pointing out, "Though the hero knows that his life is short and death is the end, he wants to live forever. The only way to achieve 'eternal life' is to fill the brief days of life with deeds of such glory that people will remember and celebrate them in song and poetry after the hero is gone."<sup>11</sup> To the Greeks and Trojans, this occurred through acts of war. Hector's feeling that it is his fate to die in battle reflects this (*Iliad* 6.521-56). Paul presents a stark contrast to the violent, ego-centric heroic ethic by being willing to give up his life for the Gospel instead of focusing on self-glorification (Acts 20:20-24).<sup>12</sup>

The third parallel in this literary relationship is Matthias' selection as Judas' replacement (Acts 1:15-26) and the lots cast by the Greek armies to choose Hector's opponent in combat, which fell on Ajax (*Iliad* 7.197-219). In Acts, "the lottery does not select someone to kill but to serve others as a witness to life through Jesus' resurrection."<sup>13</sup> This also plays on differing

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<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles*, 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The Heroes of the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1999), 87.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

understandings of fate. Acts 1 shows the believers have full trust and faith in God's providence proven by the group's prayer (vv. 24-25). The polytheistic world of Homer could hardly understand this peace in a benevolent Providence. The constant power struggles in the pantheon of Greek gods left them with three theological options: gods equivalent to deified infants due to their constant fighting, a dictator god no better than a heavenly Führer, or the arbitrariness of an utterly deterministic force like Fate.<sup>14</sup> No matter which option is chosen, Luke clearly proves the superiority of the Christian worldview.

The final point of contact is Peter's escape from prison (Acts 12:6-19) which parallels the escape of Priam, king of Troy, from Achilles. After the god Hermes puts the guards to sleep (*Iliad* 24.795-812), Priam escapes Achilles' camp with his son Hector's slain body, enabling him to give his son a proper burial. The Acts narrative improves on this greatly because it does not end in a solemn funeral service. Rather, Peter and the other Christians rejoice because Peter's release is an answer to their prayers (Acts 12.12-17).<sup>15</sup>

These four examples make a persuasive case for a relationship between *The Iliad* and the Acts of the Apostles. Alongside this, Paul's use of pagan sources and early Christian symbolism involving the phoenix illustrate an important point. Early Christians were not content with carving out an isolated space for themselves in a pagan culture. They were not interested in mere coexistence with pagan sources. Leithart explains, "God, in short, calls [Christians] to war against the idols, but the Bible teaches a variety of strategies and tactics in war."<sup>16</sup> Taking pagan ideas, stories, and symbols and inserting Christian messages into them was one of the strategies

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<sup>14</sup> Leithart, 21.

<sup>15</sup> MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Leithart, 19.



used by the early generations of Christians who found themselves in a hostile cultural environment.

### Mark's Mimesis of the Odyssey

After determining that early Christians would have employed mimesis, it is important to look at MacDonald's criteria to determine whether Mark's Gospel is an imitation of Homer. Each criteria, accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, and interpretability need to be analyzed.

#### **Accessibility**

The criteria of accessibility seeks to understand whether the hypotext was available to author of the hypertext. In Greco-Roman education, students were first exposed to the works of Homer to solidify their basic understanding of the language, culture, and history.<sup>17</sup> As students progressed through their education, Homer took an increasingly centralized role, as they even learned catechisms based on the classics.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, this was a reflection of his importance in Greco-Roman society as a whole. In fact, the *Odyssey* was by far the most imitated book in ancient culture. It was commonly "supplemented, parodied, burlesqued, dramatized, prosified, and transformed to serve an array of un-Homeric values."<sup>19</sup>

Since the works of Homer were culturally pervasive at the time of Mark's composition, there is little doubt the author had access to them. Given the general consensus that the Gospel of

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald F. Hock, "Homer in Greco-Roman Education" in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* ed. Dennis R. MacDonald (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 59, 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 5.

Mark is geared towards reaching the Greco-Roman world, it would make sense that the author would use literary symbols and techniques familiar to the intended audience.<sup>20</sup>

Some critical scholars are quick to conclude that Mark's Gospel uses primitive Greek, exemplifying the author's poor skill and lack of learnedness. They conclude that he may not have had access to the Homeric texts or ability to perform mimesis successfully.<sup>21</sup> However, in light of the literary structure and devices throughout the Gospel, it is difficult to reach such a conclusion. Francis J. Moloney indicates that given its early composition, Mark is one of the first in its genre making it quite revolutionary, something difficult to understand given the historical distance of its modern readers.<sup>22</sup> There are many markers of literary design (some of which will be addressed later), beautiful transitions, themes, and motifs throughout the book.<sup>23</sup> It would be wrong to dismiss a theory involving mimesis on the grounds of Mark's primitive language.

### **Analogy**

Investigating analogy means searching for a tradition of hypertexts which imitate the hypotext.<sup>24</sup> This is not a difficult feat given the background information about accessibility. As mentioned, the Homeric epics were incredibly prevalent in Greco-Roman society and a flourishing tradition of mimesis developed around them. Pagan works based on Homer's tales are *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes, the *Aeneid* by Virgil, and the *Posthomerica* by

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<sup>20</sup> William Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), 132.

<sup>22</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 8.

Quintus Smyrnaeus.<sup>25</sup> There also seems to be a tradition of Jewish sources which followed similar literary conventions including *On the Jews* by Theodotus, *On Jerusalem* by Philo Epicus, the deuterocanonical book Tobit., and the previously mentioned connection between Acts and the Homeric epics.<sup>26</sup> It is certainly not controversial to claim there was a substantial tradition that mimicked Homer.

### **Density and Order**

Density, also known as points of contact, measures the parallels between the hypotext and hypertext. This criteria is established by the quality, not quantity, of connections. As few as three or four in depth similarities is preferable to many shallow ones.<sup>27</sup> There are many possible density markers between the *Odyssey* and Mark. For example, before reaching his home and reclaiming his throne, Jesus, a “man of constant sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3), has to endure much abuse and pain just like Odysseus (whose name means something along the lines of “The Son of Pain”) does. Odysseus has to outsmart Poseidon, god of the sea while Jesus displays dominion over the water twice by calming the storms and walking on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-56). Both Jesus and Odysseus find themselves opposed by groups of men trying to kill them. As a result, they each have to reveal themselves to their loyal follows in secret before conquering their enemies. The list could go on but with each similarity, the probability of the mimetic relationship increases. The criteria of order informs the understanding of density insofar as it helps the reader place the points of contact in a sequence and will be explained with the discussion on the messianic secret.

### **Distinctiveness**

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 8.

Distinctiveness looks at the aspects of the hypotext which are unique and analyzes how they correspond with the hypertext.<sup>28</sup> For example, if the hypertext follows the hypotext's literary pattern or makes use of a repeating theme or motif, then there is a much stronger case for the hypertext's dependence on the hypotext. When looking at this criteria, one has to make use of the points of contact between the texts which were discussed in the section on density and order.

One area of distinctiveness between these two texts are the roles and fates of their main protagonists. Odysseus, a noble hero, known for being charismatic and a wood worker, has to undergo extreme trials and tribulations before returning to his homeland to resume his roles as husband, father, and king. Jesus, a charismatic and unconventional rabbi who grew up as a carpenter, has to undergo persecution by the Jewish religious establishment and crucifixion before he can return to his heavenly home as a celebrated and glorified victor over sin and death. The distinct parallels between these two characters illustrates the way the Gospel of Mark plays off the distinct development of Odysseus' character.

### **Interpretability**

The criteria of interpretability asks whether or not the interpretation of the proposed hypertext can be improved in light of its dependency on the hypotext. As previously mentioned, literary mimicry does not automatically translate into value mimicry. *The Aeneid*, which draws heavily from Homeric sources, perpetuates a certain narrative about the founding of Rome. It recasts the Greek tales with Roman political values. Likewise, Christian writers attempted to do the same when it came to their mimicry of pagan literature and symbols. The remaining portion of this essay will delve into how the mimetic relationship between the Gospel of Mark and the *Odyssey* can aid modern readers in interpreting the messianic secret.

### **Interpreting the Messianic Secret**

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

The mimetic relationship between Mark and the *Odyssey* can help augment efforts to understand how the messianic secret is used as a literary device. First, a brief survey of the messianic secret in modern scholarship must be given. Then, the recognition scenes in the *Odyssey* will be examined to understand Homer's intentions by including them. This information can then create an enlightened interpretation of Mark's Gospel.

#### Its Origin and Possible Explanations in Modern Scholarship

Because some critical scholars believe the writing of Mark's Gospel is primitive, they claim the messianic secret could not have been created by the writer. Rather, it is assumed to have originated with the historical Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Some posit that Jesus' silencing of those who called him "The Son of God" is an argument *against* the high Christology proclaimed by the Church.

Reza Aslan suggests:

[Jesus as the messiah] may have been how the early church understood Jesus' identity. But it does not appear to be how Jesus himself understood it. After all, in the entire first gospel there exists not a single definitive messianic statement from Jesus himself...The same is true for the early *Q* source material, which also contains not a single messianic statement by Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was loath to take on the multiple expectations the Jews had of the messiah. Perhaps he rejected the designation outright. Either way, the fact remains that, especially in Mark, every time someone tries to ascribe the title of the messiah to him—whether a demon, or a supplicant, or one of the disciples, or even God himself—Jesus brushes it off or, at best, accepts it reluctantly and always with a caveat.<sup>30</sup>

Bart Ehrman suggests the purpose for Jesus' secrecy was to avoid confusion between the *type* of messiah the Jews expected and the type of messiah he claimed to be. They wanted a mighty warrior-king but this was obviously not Jesus' intentions.<sup>31</sup> If a mimetic framework is accepted, it creates a paradigmatic shift in the interpretation. Ehrman's explanation may have connections

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<sup>29</sup> Aslan, 133.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

<sup>31</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 75.

to the historical Jesus, making it valid but the mimetic relationship implies that the author of Mark intentionally re-appropriated the phenomenon to evoke connections with Odysseus.

### Revealing Scenes in the *Odyssey*

Revealing scenes are prominent in the *Odyssey*. The entire story anticipates Odysseus' eventual return home, his self-revelation to his family, and his vengeance on his wife's suitors. This is foreshadowed throughout the book. Many times, especially early on in the story, a god or goddess reveals themselves instead of Odysseus. In order to fully understand their function in the story, it is helpful to look at the prominent recognition scenes.

### **Foreshadows of Odysseus' Revealing Scenes**

Throughout the *Odyssey*, the prefiguration scenes involving deities make a theological statement. In Greco-Roman mythology, the gods would test people by appearing to them as mere mortals. This is the primary way Homer anticipates the ultimate revelation of Odysseus.

In an effort to inspire him to look for his father's return, Athena visits Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in the form of a man named Mentos (1.120-23). While she visits the royal hall in disguise, none of the suitors show hospitality. Only Telemachus offers courtesy to the stranger, meaning he passes a divine test of character.<sup>32</sup>

Athena also appears to Nausicaa, the Phaeacian princess, as one of her friends in a dream to convince her to go bathe in the river the next day (6.1-44). After arriving at the river, she meets the weary Odysseus and offers him a place of shelter. This is both a test of character and a manipulation (or intervention) into Odysseus' journey to provide him much needed passage.

Hermes, the Greek messenger god, appears to Odysseus to warn him of Circe's devious intentions and provide him with a drug that would prevent her magic from working (10.302-34). This also plays into the theme of hospitality as Circe is guilty of preying on Odysseus' men. This

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<sup>32</sup> MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, 45.

example functions as a means of restoring balance to the situation by providing Odysseus the means to escape her spells, marking another instance of divine intention.

The final prefiguration occurs when Athena appears as a young man to Odysseus after he finally reaches Ithaca (13.252-504). During their encounter, Odysseus lies about his identity, proving himself to be a charismatic deceiver. As a reward for his craftiness, she transforms him into a beggar to protect him from the murderous suitors.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, the gods, particularly Athena, foreshadow the climax of the story: the moment when Odysseus could reveal his true identity and take back his kingdom, family, and home. Homer's use of these signs is to perpetuate the Greek theological principle that "depicts the gods as guardians of the moral order, who, in disguise, visit mortals to test them by learning how they treat strangers. The gods bless those who honor strangers and punish those who do not."<sup>33</sup>

### **Odysseus' Revealing Scenes**

Shortly after Odysseus' return to his homeland, he begins secretly revealing his true identity to different characters. The culmination of the story occurs when Odysseus reveals himself to his enemies to get his revenge. There are numerous other recognition scenes involving Odysseus leading up to this moment but just the significant ones will be analyzed.<sup>34</sup> The three main scenes are his appearances to his son, Telemachus, his nurse, Eurycleia, and the suitors.

Telemachus first encounters his father shortly after Odysseus' landfall. He is visiting the house of a loyal swineherd named Eumaeus while still disguised as a beggar. When the father

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>34</sup> There are a total of 15 recognition scenes. The references for all of them are: (1) 13.187-96, 221-371, 253-86, (2) 14.1-173, (3) 14.185-408, (4) 14.453-533, (5) 15.301-39, (6) 16.1-250 (7) 19.44-251, (8) 19.252-316, (9) 19.317-507, (10) 20.185-239, (11) 21.188-229, (12) 23.1-38, (13) 23.39-84, (14) 23.85-116, 153-246, and (15) 24.205-360.

and son are left alone, Athena arrives, transforming Odysseus to look like he “must be some god” (16.203).<sup>35</sup> What follows is a joyous reunion filled with tears and kissing (16.243-250).

When the prince discovers the true identity of the beggar, he brings him to the palace and has the nurse, Eurycleia, bathe him. As she washes Odysseus in disguise, she recognizes the scar on his leg, which he received from a wild boar, causing her to realize his true identity (19.528-38). Despite her desire to announce his return, Odysseus commands her to keep it a secret out of fear for his life (19.545-54). Not only does she consent, she proves her loyalty by giving him the names of the women of the house who did not remain loyal to Odysseus in his absence.

The main recognition scene is occur when Odysseus casts off his beggar’s robes and reveals himself to his wife’s suitors who are consuming the food and wine of his house under the assumption that he is dead. After spending time among them in disguised as a beggar, Odysseus determines they are utterly unworthy of surviving in light of their grievous actions against him. He announces to the suitors (22.5-7), “Look—your crucial test is finished, now, at last...Apollo give me glory!” What ensues is a slaughter reminiscent of the graphic violence and brutality of the *Iliad*. Leithart remarks, “Odysseus, who has mastered the sea, masters the surging ocean of suitors.”<sup>36</sup> He kills them all, including the disloyal women of the house. The unique aspect of this scene is that in this case, Odysseus’ self-revelation is to unleash revenge and death on his foes.

### **The Significance of Odysseus’ Revealing Scenes**

After looking at some examples of recognition scenes in the *Odyssey*, how they function in the story can be understood. In the foreshadowing recognition scenes that involve gods or goddesses, the main purpose is to test human characters and intervene in their affairs to advance divine agendas. Similarly, Odysseus tests other characters while disguised, only intentionally

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<sup>35</sup> This is mirrored by Mark in the Transfiguration.

<sup>36</sup> Leithart, 206.



revealing himself after he is ensured of their loyalty to him. Another reason for his secrecy is the fear that the suitors would converge on him, killing him before he could implement a plan to overthrow them.

#### An Interpretation of the Messianic Secret in the Gospel of Mark in Light of Homer

Throughout Mark's Gospel, there are many times when Jesus' identity as the Son of God is recognized but he commands that this not be revealed. He does this to demons (1:25; 3:12), the leper (1:42-43), the family of the daughter he raises from the dead (5:43), the deaf man whose hearing he restores (7:36), and most surprisingly, his own disciples (4:11-12, 33-34; 8:30; 9:9-10). Jesus does not finally reveal his identity until his trial before the council of Jewish religious leaders (14:61-62).

As discussed earlier, one of the purposes of the messianic secret is for Jesus to avoid persecution at the hands of the authorities until the proper time. Only at the right moment could he publically proclaim his identity. This harkens back to Homer's tale about Odysseus: neither hero can say who they are for fear of death until the right moment.

Seemingly, there is a major contradiction between the two. Odysseus reveals himself in a moment of glory whereas Jesus' self-revelation leads to his death on the cross. So then, what is the statement the author of Mark is making by this contrast? The protagonist of his story dies but Odysseus lives on in Homer's epic. The answer to this conundrum is revealed in the resurrection. Through his resurrection, Jesus *does* live on as a victorious conqueror of evil. Gustaf Aulen remarks, "...Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God

reconciles the world to Himself.”<sup>37</sup> This is a lasting, eternal victory that far outshines the victory won by Odysseus’ desolation of the suitors.

The contrast is even starker when Odysseus’ ideals are juxtaposed against Jesus’ self-sacrificial ethic. As mentioned earlier, Greco-Roman ethics celebrated heroic feats in battle which became their means to eternal life. Leithart elaborates, “...a hero is not guilty when he hews down his enemies and devours them; that is just what heroes *do*.”<sup>38</sup> While he is celebrated for his resurrection, Jesus’ message is radically different: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35). Jesus refuses to avenge crucifixion through bloodlust. Rather, his death delegitimizes his cosmic enemies (Colossians 2:8-15). As one reads through Mark, Jesus’ self-revelation is expected in the same way as that of Odysseus. Yet Christ refuses to follow Odysseus’ logic of destruction and violence as a mean of achieving victory. Instead, he submits to death on a cross. However, that was the only way for him to achieve true victory. The paradox is one that counters Homer’s celebration of Odysseus’ revenge. Christ gives up his life, creating a Eucharistic ontology characterized by humility (Romans 12:1). This interpretation is ripened and deepened through the mimetic relationship between Mark and the *Iliad*, as the author of the Gospel of Mark re-appropriates pagan literature to perpetuate Christ’s message.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to prove two main things. The first point is that the Gospel of Mark intentionally draws from the *Odyssey* as a way to reach a Greco-Roman audience. The second point is that this relationship can shed light on the messianic secret. Given the propensity

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<sup>37</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Leithart, 119-20.

of the early Christians to engage in imitation, or re-appropriation, of pagan sources and the fact that Mark meets MacDonald's criteria to establish literary dependency between a hypertext and hypotext, a mimetic relationship seem highly probable. As a result, the *Odyssey* can contribute to efforts at interpreting Mark, especially in the area of the messianic secret. Certainly, Mark's author uses the *Odyssey* as his literary model for these scenes in his writing. However, the author was not conceding to a Greco-Roman worldview but rather substituting the values of early Christianity into the story which presents two advantages: first, it points out the bankruptcy of pagan ideas and secondly, it evokes a positive connection between Jesus and Odysseus in the eyes of a Greco-Roman reader. What then is the purpose of the messianic secret? For the historical Jesus it was most likely to avoid persecution at the hands of religious leaders and the Roman government before the time of his crucifixion. However, for the writer of Mark's Gospel, these scenes function on a literary level to anticipate the moment when Christ would reveal himself as the Son of God. When it happens at his trial in front of the religious leaders, the original readers would undoubtedly anticipate the unleashing of his wrath against those who would persecute him. However, the book subversively takes the violent, heroic ethic of the Greek heroes and unexpectedly substitutes them for the self-sacrificial ethic of Christianity.

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