

BOOK REVIEW

Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Gospel ‘According to Homer and Virgil’: Cento and Canon* (NovTSup, 138; Leiden: Brill, 2011). v + 280 pp. Hbk. US\$146.00 (€103.00).

Karl Sandnes takes an in-depth look at a fourth- and fifth-century Christian practice that involved rewriting Gospel narratives in the tradition of the classical writers Virgil and Homer. Such a work is called a *cento* (pl. *centones*), and is defined by Sandnes as ‘a pastiche of lines or quotes from a classical text’ (p. 3). This discussion aims to answer the question of whether the first-century Gospels could have been written in a similar style. Similar proposals have recently been made by Claremont scholar Dennis R. MacDonald and Harvard’s Marianne Palmer-Bonz, who suggest that the Gospel of Mark, as well as Luke–Acts, were modeled after the epics of Virgil and Homer. These theories suggest a new type of literary criticism called *mimesis criticism*. MacDonald describes this methodology as an alternative to *form criticism*, and suggests that certain stories contained within the Gospels originated from the process of imitating the Homeric and Virgilian epics and not pre-Gospel traditions.

Chapter 1 introduces the idea of mimesis criticism and makes the case that the epic poets were widely available in the first century for Christians through written word, art and live performances. Chapter 2 discusses various popular pedagogical exercises in the classical world, which included *paraphrasis*, *mimesis*, *emulatio* and *synkrisis*. It is in the tradition of these exercises that the centones were written. Chapter 3 asks why classical texts may have been imitated at all, and discusses the effects of Emperor Julian’s decrees on the aforementioned teaching exercises. Chapter 4 describes the process of creating a cento and the various opinions of the Church Fathers on such a practice. Chapter 5 discusses a cento composed by Faltonia Betitia Proba that was fashioned after Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Chapter 6 contains a similar theme, discussing the composer Eudocia Athenais’s cento, but as it relates to

Homer's epic. Chapter 7 summarizes the previously made arguments, and seeks to answer why Christian centones were needed and whether they should be considered an analogy of how Gospel writers may have utilized the epics.

Is it possible that mimesis criticism offers a more compelling argument for the origins of the Gospels than source criticism does? It is without debate that Homer and Virgil were widely read and accepted at the time the New Testament literature was being developed, yet it is questionable whether Gospel writers utilized the epics in a mimetic fashion. Sandnes points out the danger that such a method can lead one to isolate certain sections of the Gospels, not sufficiently accounting for the narrative structures as a whole. Sandnes is also hesitant to agree with such a theory and says that, in terms of the Gospels, MacDonald and Bonz have neglected the motifs and themes found in the Old Testament. This position is also held by Alexander, who argues that the book of Acts is deeply rooted in the Greek Old Testament, but retells the story within a different cultural narrative world (p. 20). Could the centones provide sufficient evidence that could carry such a method?

Proba's cento is 694 lines in length, preceded by a fifteen-line dedication. It seems to be based mostly on Genesis and Matthew's Gospel, and Sandnes seems to think that it underwent thorough additions and revisions due to its patchwork nature. Sandnes includes an excellent summary of the sections of the cento and its contents, often corresponding to the work of Clarke and Hatch in their book *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross*. The centones always begin with a creation account equally proportionate to the stories of Jesus. As Jeffrey T. Schnapp points out, each of these two parts begins with an invocation and closes with a valediction. Between the two parts lies a crescendo marked with the words *maior opus moveo* ('a great work I move to'). This may show how Proba relied on traditional Christian theology regarding the relationship between the Old and New Testament sections of the canon. The cento closes with the instruction that it be read and taught to children for the purpose of keeping them in the faith. This particular cento was well circulated, a fact perhaps proven by Jerome's criticism. It also shows that this early Christian cento was a *paraphrasis* of Virgil and not of Homer.

Eudocia's cento, 'according to Homer', was composed some time after 421 CE. According to Whitby, after being married to Theodosius II, Eudocia fell out of favour with the court and moved to the Holy

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Land. Eudocia quotes Homer *verbatim*, with only ‘slight modifications as may be necessary to fit a new story’ (p. 182). Like Proba’s cento, this one begins with an allusion to the paradise and the fall and a plan of salvation for humanity. It then moves to the stories of Jesus and his ministry. Sandnes and Whitby both seem to agree that the purpose of Eudocia’s cento is based in the context of God’s purpose for salvation. For example, Homeric motifs of devouring serpents, fathers joining sons to conquer deceitfulness, and heroes returning home, are altered to fit the Gospel stories of Jesus. Sandnes does a good job in corresponding with all the aspects of the cento, but particularly with the work of MacDonald. MacDonald has suggested that various sections of Mark’s Gospel story are direct imitations of Homer’s epic. Here, Sandnes carefully points out that Eudocia does not interpret the Gospels in light of Homer at all in the same ways that MacDonald supposes. This brings MacDonald’s thesis into question, as interesting as it may be.

While it may be true that no external support exists for Virgil and Homer being the hypotexts for the Gospels, it may not be appropriate to reject mimesis criticism as a valid approach to examining the Gospels. It is necessary to discuss the nature of intertextuality, as Sandnes does, but does he take into account all of the elements needed for such a discussion? I find the definition of allusion to be lacking in Sandnes’s appraisal. He points out that allusion can be the conscious or accidental process of the author, but it may be difficult to define it as such without considering the reader’s cognitive process. I presume that what Sandnes means by ‘accidental’ allusion is when a reader recognizes the allusion regardless of authorial intention. Should we also extend this to conscious allusion, that is to say, should we also suggest that ‘conscious allusion’ should only be defined by the reader’s recognition of it? If the reader does not recognize the allusion, does it then cease to be an allusion? It is also unclear what Sandnes means by ‘cultural echoes’. More dialogue as well as interactions with various opinions are needed to further complete this discussion.

The same questions can be extended to the definition of mimesis. Sandnes rightly asks whether advertisement is required for mimesis. It seems, at least for the centones, that mimesis involves directly quoting certain hypotexts, mimicking their style as well. But does mimesis include the creation of texts as well? Sandnes attempts to answer this question by engaging with the ancient literary practice of *paraphrasis*. Within this discussion, he defines *res* (content) and *verba* (how the

content is arranged), both referring to the hypotext. It seems, at least according to Seneca the Elder and Quintilian, that retaining the content in order to make it recognizable lies at the heart of paraphrasis. But recognizable to whom? Sandnes also maintains that invention lies at the heart of paraphrasis, which he draws from Michael Roberts, and includes it as ‘literary paraphrasis’ contrary to its ‘grammatical’ counterpart. Sandnes leaves these terms rather unexplained, forcing his readers to consult Roberts’s volume. We are reminded that Virgil utilized Homer by way of ‘literary paraphrasis’ to make his point that obvious parallels can be drawn between the two texts. He also points out that Mark, in terms of this definition, could not have used Homer as a hypotext. This point is well taken, since the centones provide us with a stellar example of obvious and ‘conscious’ allusion, quite different from the Gospel genre. But again, one must ask whether ‘paraphrastic allusion’ should be defined by authorial intent or the reader’s recognition. Sandnes may well recognize the tension such a question poses, but does not engage it here.

Another question is whether paraphrasis is necessitated by new contexts. Sandnes points out that ‘trifling with classical texts and performing them in unexpected ways was a common way of competing in literature, and also of amusing guests at a dinner party’ (p. 34). This includes elements of invention as well as mimesis, but also a new context, otherwise invention becomes redundant. In this way, literature can constantly be altered and understood in various new ways. By this definition, the text is left ‘open’, and a text is constantly expanded on. This leads Sandnes to the discussion of *emulatio*, which can be defined as the practice of taking various elements from several texts and combining them to represent the ‘best’ versions. In a way, this is an attempt by the author to supersede the hypotexts and an attempt to conceal the original materials under the guise of an ‘improved’ piece of literature. Applied to Christian writers in the first century, their literature can be seen as being engaged in a type of *Kulturkampf*. Such an idea, as proposed by MacDonald, suggests that the Gospel writers concealed their hypotexts in such a way as to supersede their meanings with a new meaning—a Christian meaning. Sandnes has trouble subscribing to the idea that a message can be derived from a concealed parallel, but who is to say how a first-century audience, within which he suggests Hellenism was so completely engrained, would apprehend such ‘concealed parallels’? He quotes John Pucci, who suggests that an unrecognized

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allusion is no allusion at all. Sandnes’s point here is easily understood; the tension for such a point results from not having clearly defined ‘allusion’ in the first place. If allusion must be recognized by the reader, can Sandnes suggest that ‘concealed parallels’ do not count? I think this section could be further developed taking into account other aspects of allusion and including a more substantial definition.

Sandnes’s work on the centones provides very helpful and insightful comments for a topic that may elude many New Testament scholars. He represents and engages the secondary literature well—especially MacDonald’s work. This book is a helpful read for anyone wanting an introduction to mimesis criticism and to the Christian centones, but it does not engage certain aspects of intertextuality in much depth. Having said that, I believe *The Gospel ‘According to Homer and Virgil’* is an excellent resource in terms of Greco-Roman influence on Christian literature in both the first century and beyond.

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