

# Marcin Kowalski

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Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Gospel 'According to Homer and Virgil': Cento and Canon* (Novum Testamentum Supplements 138; Leiden: Brill, 2011). Pp. xii + 280. € 106. ISBN 978-90-041-871-84

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*The Gospel 'According to Homer and Virgil': Cento and Canon* by Karl Olav Sandnes (KOS) is the fruit of the author's interest in the early Christian's relationship to the literary culture surrounding it. Karl Olav Sandnes is Professor of New Testament at the Free Faculty in Oslo. His interest in the influence of Homer upon the early Christian writers arose, as we come to know from the Preface, from the critical encounter with the ideas and publications by Dennis R. MacDonald. It resulted first in the article "Imitatio Homeri? An Appraisal of Dennis R. MacDonald's 'Mimesis Criticism'", *JBL* 124 (2005) 715-732, and subsequently in the book *The Challenge of Homer: School, Pagan Poets, and Early Christianity* (LNTS 400; London: T&T Clark, 2009).

The purpose of the present book first of all lies in getting the readers familiar with the ancient centos. Secondly, the author tries to assess to what extent the Greek centos of Homer and the Latin centos of Virgil can help us in understanding the process of the composition of the Gospels. *The Gospel 'According to Homer and Virgil'* consists of the preface and seven chapters, the last of which offers a concise summary of the main points stated by KOS in the present publication. The summary is followed by the valuable bibliography on the subject and by the indexes of biblical references, early Christian and classical writings, by the subject index and index of modern authors.

In the Chapter 1 ("Introduction: The Context of the Present Study") KOS presents the phenomenon of the centos in the context of the contemporary biblical studies. The author is especially interested in the Mimesis Criticism which claims that the attempts of the Christian centonists from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century have their precedents in the New Testament, primarily in the Gospels and in The Book of Acts, which originated from the process of imitating Homer. To assess this claim, KOS gives a brief sketch of the

ancient culture permeated by the ubiquitous presence of Homer and Virgil. Consequently, the author turns to MacDonald's interpretation of the Gospel of Mark as a transvaluation of Homeric stories and to Bonz's reading of the Book of Acts. In the case studies of Mark 15:39 and Acts 11–12 KOS shows advantages and flows of the Mimesis Criticism which, on the one hand, sets the biblical texts in their ancient cultural context, but, on the other hand, it reads the texts as isolated units, neglecting their plot and narrative structures. The introductory chapter finishes with the overview of authors and works showing a renewed interest in centos from the part of the biblical scholars.

In the Chapter 2 ("The Rhetorical Context of the Biblical Epics") KOS situates the phenomenon of centos in the realm of ancient rhetoric. The question moving the author's thought in this chapter is whether intertextuality can and should be proved by some philological criteria. To answer it, KOS introduces the reader in the rhetorical exercise of *paraphrasis*, and in the closely related strategies of *mimesis* and *emulatio*. First, it shows that *paraphrasis* does not include creating texts *ex nihilo*, without any pre-existing source. Secondly, on the level of transvaluating emulation, that is, the one that carries out a polemic with other texts, the intertextual links cannot be subtle and hardly noticeable. The hermeneutical *emaulatio* and comparative *synkrisis*, which the Mimesis Criticism practically refers to as "Kulturkampf" between the Christian and pagan world, functions only when it is recognized. The conclusion is that the thesis on the dependence of the Gospels on Homer or Virgil should be approached with great caution, since it does not fit the ancient literary-rhetorical practices. To demonstrate the ancient use of *emulatio*, the author concludes the Chapter 2 with the presentation of Juvencus, the Latin pioneer in *paraphrasis* of the Gospels from Constantine's times.

In the Chapter 3 ("Why Imitate Classical Texts") KOS analyzes the literary reasons and historical circumstances responsible for the development of the biblical narratives "in the venerable hexameter style". From the overview of the early Christian writers (Origen, Lactantius, Augustine) generally results that cultivated persons found the Gospels crude, written in a common and simple style of speech. Therefore, many well educated Christians "had no reason to pride in their own literature" (p. 65). Consequently, if the paraphrases of the Gospels were an attempt at improving upon their reputation, it is hard to understand how the Gospels themselves could be a challenge to the classical literature. As a result, the centos does not seem to be a model suitable for explaining the origins of the New Testament narratives.

Next, the historical circumstances standing behind the development of the centos, according to the author, can be narrowed down to the decree of Julian, the Apostate (361-363). In his attempt to restore the older order of

society, the emperor restricted access to the classical literature and banned the Christian teachers from exercising their functions. According to KOS, it disproves the thesis by MacDonald claiming that Julian shut the Christian access to Homer's texts forcing them to turn to their own "Homeric" texts, that is, the Gospels. The author logically concludes that the force of the emperor's legislation was rather to cut the Christians off from the use of the pagan legacy in general. Additionally, if the Gospel of Mark were so soaked in Homer, why Julian did not keep the Christians away from it? The chapter finishes with the mention of the Greek pioneers of the Gospel paraphrases, Apollinarius, father and son, of Laodicea (4<sup>th</sup> century). Their opus, referred to by the ancient historians, further explicates the historical circumstances in which the first centos came into being.

In the Chapter 4 ("What is a Cento") the reader finally receives the long awaited answer to the question what the cento really is. The author defines it as "a poem or a poetic sequence made up of *recognizable* lines from one or more existing poems, usually highly valued literature" (p. 107). The definition is then expanded by reference to the ancient authors which show that in the centos one can often find continuity with regard to *verba*, and discontinuity with regard to *sensus* or *res*. The centos were created to provoke laughter and functioned as upper-class amusement. The source texts (hypotexts) used by the centonists were regarded "open" to yielding new texts, but the recognition of the hypotext from the part of readers was essential.

Chapter 4 brings also more information on the use and critical appraisal of the centos among Christians. The quotations from the various ancient authors show that the centonists were also criticized for altering the Scriptures and forcing them to their own will. Concluding, the author warns against a simplified view of the centos in which the Homeric texts are subordinated to the Bible. "The centos confirm both texts as somehow canonical. One with regard to *verba* and style, the other with regard to structure, plot, and *res* or *sensus*" (p. 138). It calls for refining our attitude both to the cultural and to the Christian ancient canon.

The purpose of the next Chapters 5 and 6 is to present the readers with the two examples of the ancient centos. Chapter 5 ("Falconia Betitia Proba: The Gospel 'According to Virgil'") analyzes the poem by the roman aristocratic woman from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Her work, based mostly on the books of Genesis and Matthew's Gospel, starts with the story of creation and finishes with Christ's ascension, all written in the style of Virgil. Proba corrects Virgil and extracts from him a deeper Christian sense. The author shows the patchwork nature of Proba's work and her expertise both in the Bible and Virgil, to conclude that she does not impose a Christian meaning on

Virgil. Proba discovers what is hidden in the ancient poet and what can be understood only from the Christian perspective.

In the Chapter 6 (“Eudocia Athenais: The Gospel ‘According to Homer’”) a similar analyzes is applied to Empress Eudocia Athenais’s opus coming from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Her cento borrows lines from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to reorder them in the biblical narration about the paradise, the fall, and the life of Jesus. In Eudocia’s cento, new meanings of the Gospel stories emerge. The key to her “Gospel according to Homer” is Gen 2–3, showing the sin of Eve which set in motion God’s miraculous plan of salvation. Jesus, the new Odysseus, is not fighting the sinners, but the suitors; his aim is not destruction, but salvation. The baptism of Jesus is presented in the manner of *Odyssey* as his “homecoming”, the anticipated return to the Father. Jesus is also the new Hector risen from the battle field to meet the Father.

In the Chapter 7, the author offers a summary of the main points of the book. First, the centonists regarded the texts of Homer and Virgil as truly inspired, while their own task was simply to unearth the treasures of wisdom hidden within them. Second, on the micro levels the authors of the centos looked for the appropriated wording in Homer and Virgil to tell the story of Jesus; on the macro level, it was biblical tradition that guided their composition. Third, binding two canonical texts together, the ancient centonists preserved both the *verba* and the *res* or *sensus*, creating thus a cultural symbiosis. Fourth, the author reminds two reasons that brought centos into being: the literary one (the stylistic crudity of the Bible) and the historical one (the persecutions under the emperor Julian). Lastly, KOS, drawing on the observations made in the present books, addresses a couple of issues which emerged in his debate with MacDonald. If the Gospels are polemical emulations of Homer, truly problematic is the absence of the advertised intertextuality. In other words, the allusions to Homer in the Gospel of Mark are too enigmatic to play their polemical role. Consequently, to draw parallel between the Homeric and Virgilian imitation in the centos and the same imitation allegedly present in the biblical texts is anachronistic and does not take into account the different cultural and historical settings of the analyzed texts. Next, from the analyses of the centos results that it is not the Homeric texts that informed a reading of the Gospels, but the other way around. All in all, the author labels “a misunderstanding” considering the centos to be paradigms of how the Gospel of Mark or other Gospels could be composed.

*The Gospel ‘According to Homer and Virgil’* by Karl Olav Sandnes is surely an interesting and very welcome publication. It fills the gap in the studies on the nature of the centos and on the historical circumstances which contributed to their composition. The present book is written in accessible

language and preserves the rigors of the scientific research. It is a good lecture both for the popular readers and for the scholars. Additionally, the author offers well founded and pertinent arguments against the views of MacDonald advertising the far reaching analogies between the composition of the centos and of the Gospels. In his critique of the opponent views Sandnes is very balanced. Ultimately, even if he considers MacDonald's hypotheses a "blind alley", he calls them "a fascinating blind alley, worth strolling down, and yielding much new insight into the world in which the Gospels were interpreted" (p. 242). Rather than telling us how the Gospels were composed the centos can inform us how they were received. Surely *The Gospel 'According to Homer and Virgil'* should be read by everybody interested in the relation between the New Testament and the ancient literary culture.