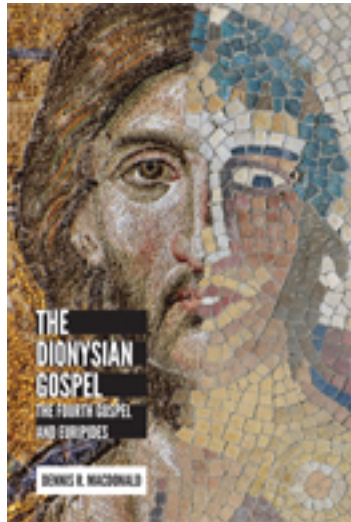


RBL 12/2018



Dennis R. MacDonald

The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017. Pp. xviii + 250. Hardcover.
\$79.00. ISBN 9781506423456.

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Well known for making bold connections between New Testament texts and classical Greek literature, with the use of what has come to be known as mimesis criticism, Dennis R. MacDonald's latest offering explores the Gospel of John and Euripides's *Bacchae* in this interpretive matrix, with provocative results. While Johannine scholars have for a long time identified and elaborated the Dionysiac and Euripidean motifs in the Fourth Gospel, this book takes the connection further than any predecessor.

To say that this book puts the Fourth Gospel and Euripides's *Bacchae* in conversation is, however, to oversimplify MacDonald's more nuanced and fascinating thesis. Unlike most recent scholarship on John, which has abandoned the source-critical and *literarkritischen* approaches that dominated in the mid-twentieth century, MacDonald takes seriously the precanonical history of the text that has come down to us as the Fourth Gospel. More to the point, he adopts something very like the three-stage model of Johannine redaction articulated by Urban C. von Wahlde in his recent commentary. MacDonald is most interested here in the first stage of that composition: a text he calls the Dionysian Gospel. He argues that the Dionysian Gospel was composed by followers of Jesus in direct competition with Dionysian religion in the early Roman imperial period. The text at this stage is in a direct, mimetic relationship to Euripides's popular play and is shot through with analogies in plot, characterization, and vocabulary. MacDonald argues further that no ancient reader would be able to miss the allusions. Rather than setting the canonical Fourth Gospel in conversation with this one play by Euripides, as the book's title might suggest, MacDonald's more sophisticated thesis is that the earliest version of the Fourth Gospel

was in conversation with Dionysian discourse represented especially, but not exclusively, by the language of Euripides's *Bacchae*.

The book is arranged in four parts. After an introduction, which lays out a roadmap and offers an initial justification for the proceedings, MacDonald discusses in part 1 “The Beginning of the Johannine Tradition” (1–23). Part 2, “The Earliest Gospel Stratum and Euripides' *Bacchae*: An Intertextual Commentary” (23–124), is the heart of the book, moving through the reconstructed Dionysian Gospel sequentially, at every stage pausing to point out and comment on likely allusions or echoes of the *Bacchae* and other Dionysian texts, such as the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus. Part 3, “Rewriting the Gospel” (125–36), looks briefly at the changes introduced in the first redaction of the text that would become the Fourth Gospel, and part 4, “The Final Gospel Stratum and a Johannine Corpus” (137–72), looks at changes introduced in the final stage by the figure MacDonald refers to as the Epilogist and at the process by which John's Gospel came to be packaged together with 1–3 John and the Revelation as the Johannine Corpus. Three appendices supply the reader with “A Conjectural Reconstruction of the Dionysian Gospel” (173–202), an abbreviated narrative account of Euripides's *Bacchae* (203–18), and a discussion of the Pericope Adulterae (219–22). The book is ended with a bibliography, an author index, and an index of ancient sources. This is a highly visual work, outfitted with several images of Dionysian connection and dozens of texts lined up synoptically to showcase parallels of words, phrases, and ideas between the sundry texts.

The parallels collected by MacDonald between the Dionysian Gospel and the *Bacchae* are too many to enumerate here in full. A selection, however, is in order. Just as in John the heavenly Logos assumes a human body, so “Dionysus declared that he ‘changed into this mortal / appearance’ (53) in order to reveal his power to unbelieving Thebans and to punish Pentheus, their king” (30–31). Just as in John Jesus is identified by many names and titles (Logos, light, the one-of-a-kind God, the chosen one of God, king of Israel, Messiah, son of Joseph, rabbi, son of man), so also “Dionysus was notorious for his multiple titles,” including Bacchus, Bromios, Iacchos, Dithyrambos, ‘the god’, and ‘the child of Zeus’” (39). Just as Jesus's first miracle in John is to change water into wine, “Euripides twice mentions the god's miraculous production of wine in the *Bacchae*” (41). If Jesus purifies the temple, his father's house in John 2, this “resembles Dionysus's intention to vindicate his mother in the place of his birth” (46). Where the Johannine Jesus heals an old cripple so that he can walk again, “early in the *Bacchae* two old men, Cadmus and Tiresias, gain the strength to dance with the worshipping women in the wild” (47). The rejuvenation of Cadmus is also comparable to Jesus's making it possible for Nicodemus, who is old, to be born anew (48–49). Just as the Baptist insists that “it is necessary [δεῖ] that he [Jesus] increase [αὐξάνειν]” (3:30), so Cadmus witnesses to Dionysus that “it is now necessary [δεῖ]—with respect to the child of my daughter, / Dionysus, a god manifest to people— / to increase [αὐξέσθαι μέγαν] him as much as we are able” (*Bacch.* 181–183). This parallel is all the more striking in view of the fact that “the combination of these two words [δεῖ and αὐξάνειν/αὐξέσθαι] appears only here

in the New Testament; it never appears in the LXX” (50). MacDonald draws a dozen or so further parallels between the two texts. The most important of these are the “true vine” discourse and parallels between Jesus and Dionysus in terms of their respective arrests and trials, where the arresting parties are oblivious to their own ironic states of powerlessness in the confrontation.

Finally, it would be difficult to understate the extent to which this book’s contents deal with questions of John’s literary strata and the relationship of John’s Gospel to the Johannine Epistles and the Revelation. Parts 3 and 4 are fully dedicated to these questions, leaving behind any manner of commentary or discussion of the Dionysian elements MacDonald finds in the first edition of the gospel. Given MacDonald’s interest in the historical phases of tradition in the Johannine community, it would have been interesting to have more discussion of what social or religious functions could have been served by the production of a Dionysian gospel and what changed in the community to make those interests or emphases disappear from subsequent writing and redaction. The function of the early Dionysian gospel, according to MacDonald, is to present Jesus as superior to Dionysus, and indeed some of his parallels bear that out, provided one accepts the premise of such a text’s one-time existence. If, for example, one agrees that the Johannine account of the healing of the lame man is a mimetic allusion to the strength Cadmus and Tiresias find to dance, it follows that “John’s Jesus does Dionysus one better: he permanently cures an old paralytic” (48). Likewise, if one accepts that the Jesus’s self-identification as the “true grapevine” is offered in contrast to Dionysus’s identify as god of grapevine and viniculture, then perhaps it follows that he “thus is superior to Dionysus” (84). However, it is less clear how and why later editions of the gospel apparently lost all interest in these Dionysian motifs. Was Dionysian religion perceived as a threat at the time the first stratum was composed and was less of a threat by the time the elder’s disciples came along to revise and expand the gospel? Perhaps MacDonald was wise to resist traveling too much further down this speculative path.

MacDonald rightly acknowledges that major pieces of his argument are less than airtight. Some of his mimetic parallels are stronger than others, and the weaker ones may count only in the final weighing of the evidence if one has already accepted the plausibility of the stronger parallels. Nor is the existence of MacDonald’s reconstructed Dionysian gospel a settled matter. He is surely correct that the Fourth Gospel had a textual history before arriving at its canonical form, but it would be naïve to claim—in the total absence of manuscript evidence—that the first stratum is recoverable. Although MacDonald prints a reconstruction of the Dionysian gospel in appendix 1, he rightly highlights its conjectural nature. The conjectured history of composition MacDonald sets out for the Johannine tradition (that 2 John and 3 John were written first, then 1 John, then the Fourth Gospel in its three stages, then the Revelation) is more defensible, but this, too, is ultimately unknowable. Despite the surprising number of pages MacDonald spends on the old bugbears of Johannine criticism (authorship, history of redaction, relationship to the other Johannine texts in the New Testament), I would be surprised if these arguments have much effect on the field. The abiding interest of the book will remain its part 2, where MacDonald explores

Bacchic themes in the Fourth Gospel. These motific comparisons are worth consideration whether or not one agrees with MacDonald that they were first set out by intention in a Dionysian gospel that can now be recovered and studied.