CLASSICAL GREEK POETRY AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: IMITATIONS OF EURIPIDES’ BACCHAE

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Whereas Luke acknowledges his debt to sources at the beginning of his Gospel (1:1–4), it is by no means clear that he had such sources for the composition of Acts. He did, however, have several literary models, some of which came from the Jewish Bible in Greek, but the majority came from classical Greek literature, including Plato’s Socratic dialogues, Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, and the tragedies of Euripides. This study contributes to the investigation of Luke’s indebtedness to Greek literature of the fifth century BCE by monitoring the influence of one Greek tragedy throughout Acts: the Bacchae.  


In this play Euripides tells a tale of hostility to the expansion of a new, enthusiastic religion from Asia Minor: the arrival at Thebes of Dionysus and his followers from Lydia. King Pentheus, outraged by the ecstatic behavior of the Theban women under the sway of the foreign god, including that of his mother Agave, sought to quash the new religion and was punished with death for his θεοµαχία, “god-warring.” The Acts of the Apostles similarly is the tale of the advent of a new religion and violent opposition to it.

Euripides’ Dionysus and Luke’s Jesus have much in common. Both are sons of gods from mortal women. It was at Thebes that Zeus bedded with Semele, who later boasted that she carried the child of the god, but the residents of Thebes refused to believe her and accused her of fornication with a mortal. To add injury to insult, Hera convinced pregnant Semele to demand that she behold Zeus in all his glory; the god of lightning incinerated her in that encounter. The king of Olympus then rescued the fetus, sewed it in his thigh, and took it to term.

The Bacchae begins with the young god on stage disguised as a mortal.

I, the child of Zeus, have come to the land of Thebes—
Dionysus, whom Semele daughter of Cadmus once bore,
induced to do so by a lightning bolt—
after having changed myself into human form from that of a god;
I stand at the springs of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus.³

He had returned to the city of his conception to vindicate his mother and establish his cult with the help of his Maenads, women who accompanied him from Asia Minor after he had established his worship throughout the East.

On leaving the gold-rich fields of Lydia and Phrygia, the sunlit plains of Persia, Bactrian walled cities, and the dangerous lands of Media, arriving at prosperous Arabia and all of Asia that lies by the briny sea, that has cities with beautiful towers filled

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³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.