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**Boundary Issues: Exploring Patterns of Recognition (*Epignosko)***

**in Homer’s *Odyssey* and *The Gospel of* *Luke***

In many Core Text and Great Books programs in the US, both secular and Christian, students are exposed to one or both of the Homeric epics. They may also encounter texts from the Old Testament as well as one of the Gospels. Having taught the Homeric epics and the Gospel of Luke in separate contexts for a number of years, I noticed that a certain inter-textual narrative landscape began insinuating itself into my thinking, particularly with regard to the theme of recognition or non-recognition, as the case may be. In what follows, I want to look at the literary and cultural similarities between the use of the term *epignosko* (recognition) in the final books of Homer’s *Odyssey* (following Odysseus’ return to Ithaca in the disguise of a stranger/beggar), and the final chapter of *The Gospel of Luke*, in which Jesus appears as a stranger, first to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, and then to the eleven.

I will not be arguing for a whole scale literary mapping of one text onto the other, or suggesting that this comparative reading has paradigm shaking implications for Gospel studies. In the case of Homer, we cannot even reference a singular, primary literary progenitor, and as a result the Homeric influence on Luke remains a slippery, supple and even subtle thing. Nevertheless, a comparative reading does reveal a complexity and density of Homeric allusion in the narrative pattern of Luke’s Gospel, particularly in chapter 24. Given the brevity of this paper, I will limit my interpretation of inter-textuality in Homer and Luke to small narrative units involving Odysseus, Penelope, and Laertes in the final books of the *Odyssey,* and Jesus and the disciples in Luke 24. I hope to show that Luke’s interpretation of *epignosko* in chapter 24 of his Gospel is best understood as mediated to the Christian text from within a Homeric horizon. I will then ask how this mediation might enhance the understanding of Great Books students in a Christian university whose understanding of Gospel source material is often limited either to their evangelical upbringings or to the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts of early Christianity they often encounter in general education courses in Religion.

As I mentioned above, the word for recognize in both the *Odyssey* and the *Gospel of Luke* is *Epignos,* a compound Greek word consisting of *Epi* (meaning - upon) and *Ginosis* (meaning - knowledge). The root of this term is, of course, gnos (*γνως)* from which the English word “dia**gnos**e” comes. In English it is often spelled Nous, which means reason or knowledge as opposed to sense perception.

In both the Odyssey and the Gospel of Luke, the term *epignos* is intended to convey detailed, secure, and penetrating knowledge of *a person*, as opposed to a body, a sign or a message. In both the *Odyssey* and the *Gospel of Luke*, *epignos* is understood within the context of four distinctive narrative patterns: 1) the disappointment and disillusionment of those awaiting the return of their Lord, 2) the Greek code of *xenia* or hospitality to the stranger, 3) the juxtaposition of receiving a message (i.e., that Odysseus will arrive home soon or that Jesus is risen) with the realization of its truth through “living proof,” and finally, 4) the loving surrender of one’s heart as the necessary sign of the true recognition of the person of Odysseus and of Jesus.

Recognizing a person at the profound level required by *epignos* presupposes a personal relationship – one based not on an external appearance but on experience over time, on mutual disclosure and inner attunement. Once Odysseus arrives on the island of Ithaca and is disguised as a beggar by Athena, he gradually reveals himself to, or is revealed by, a number of characters, all of whom know him based on image, physical signs, or heroic deeds. Telemachus has heard grand stories of his father from Helen, Nestor, and others during his search for Odysseus, and Athena makes the beggar appear god-like so that his son will recognize him. Once he is welcomed into the palace, Odysseus (disguised again as a beggar) is offered a bath and a meal, according to the code of *xenia*. While bathing his legs and feet, Odysseus’ old nurse, Eurycleia recognizes the scar he has borne since he was a child and was gored by a boar: “in a flash, she knew the scar (19.445). Odysseus then tests the cowherd Eumaeus and the swineherd Philoetius by asking them, “How far would you go to fight besides Odysseus? Say…a god brought him back- would you fight for the suitors or your kin? Tell me how you feel inside your hearts?” (21.221-225). After receiving their oath of loyalty, Odysseus reveals his scar and they acknowledge him as their king. As for the suitors, they seem to know the master has returned even before he finishes stringing his bow.

The word used to portray Eurycleia’s knowing of Odysseus is gnos (*γνως)*, knowledge or reason. Such knowledge certainly involves more deductive reasoning than the sense perception of Argos, “ long enduring Odysseus‘ dog” (17.319), who knows his master has returned on the basis of sense perception. At the moment he sensed Odysseus standing by

He thumped his tail, nuzzling low, and his ears dropped,

though he had no strength to drag himself an inch

towards his master (17:330-333).

While poignant, these early recognition scenes are meant to emphasize physical recognition; they do not involve the deep penetrating knowledge of a person required by *epignosko*. In fact, the person who has the most intimate experience of Odysseus, and who thus should recognize him with the most certainty, is actually the last one in the household to fully acknowledge him as the man himself. Is this because Penelope does not know the stranger in her midst is Odysseus? Of course not. She knows who he is, and she uses deductive reasoning to ascertain as much during her interactions with the stranger, even going so far as to plot with him surreptitiously regarding the slaughter of the suitors. Why then does she continue to hold out even after the stranger has slowly revealed his true nature to her as *polymetis*: the man of twists and turns? He claims that he is one of Odysseus’ men and that he has seen him alive. His stories are lies, but Penelope knows he is cunning and mendacious. She too is wily and has kept the suitors at bay through her own duplicitousness. Odysseus interprets her dream as a prophecy of his return and states,

twist it however you like,

your dream can only mean one thing. Odysseus

told you himself—he’ll make it come to pass.

Destruction is clear for each and every suitor

Not a soul escapes his death and doom (19. 624-629)

It is one thing, however, to deduce from clues who a person is, and quite another to recognize him, which requires that one actually convey one’s thorough and piercing knowledge of that person. Deductive reasoning can only get Penelope so far:

Her heart

In turmoil, torn…should she keep her distance,

probe her husband? Or rush up to the man at once

and kiss his head and cling to both his hands? (23:96-99)

Although she acknowledges his physical presence, and “numbing wonder filled her heart as her eyes explored his face. He seemed… Odysseus to the life” (23.107-108), Penelope will not “speak to him, ask him questions, look him in the eyes” (23.12-121) until he shares with her “secret signs, known to [them] but hidden from the world” (23.124-125). In her last act of craftiness, she tests the stranger by asking Eurycleia to move the bedstead from the couple’s bedroom so that the stranger can rest. While it is masked in anger and cruel accusation (after all, he is Odysseus), her husband’s acknowledgement of the secret sign that is “living proof” of their most intimate and personal bond- the immovable olive tree around which the bed is built- is the revelation Penelope needs to finally convey her penetrating knowledge of the person of Odysseus: “Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender,/ recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered” (23:231-32). Neither the stories and prophecies of Odysseus, his heroic deed of slaughtering the suitors, the testimony of Eurycleia and Telemecus, nor the transformation of the stranger by Athena into the youthful, glistening man she watched sail from Ithaca twenty years ago is enough proof for Penelope: reason must give way to a kind of recognition- the word Homer uses to describe Penelope’s recognition is ανα*γνουσ*η, anagnouse, a form of *epignos-* that connotes knowing with certainty, a recognition that comes from the deepest resources of the heart.

If we turn now to chapter 24 of Luke’s Gospel, we find that the disciples, Cleopas and his companion, also do not recognize Jesus in his exalted- in this case resurrected- form. We know from previous sections of Luke that on three occasions Jesus has announced his passion to the disciples: (Luke 9:22, 9:44-45, and 18:31-32). So they knew he would have to suffer, be crucified, die and rise from the dead. They know this, but their previous knowledge is not enough for them to truly “recognize” its manifestation in the person of the resurrected Christ. These two disciples have left Jerusalem, disappointed and disillusioned, having abandoned “the way” on the very day that the promise of Jesus’ entire life was being fulfilled (the day of the resurrection). Jesus draws near and walks with them, but he is a “stranger” to them: “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (*New Revised Standard Version*, Luke 24:16). The two refer to Jesus not as the Christ or the risen Lord, but as a “prophet.” They say that they were hoping Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel but their hopes have turned out to be groundless. The narrative pattern that follows suggests that Luke is appealing to the general cultural knowledge of his Hellenistic audience, particularly with regard to the Homeric pattern of *epignosko*.

After listening to Cleopas and his companion relate the recent events in Jerusalem, the stranger reprimands them, saying, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (24:25-26) In very short order, Luke narrates a sequence of events in which, like Odysseus, the stranger Jesus attempts to quell the doubts of those closest to him by revealing prophecies concerning his life in the third person: “beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (24.27), thereby preparing the disciples for a deeper kind of recognition than one involving the senses or deductive reasoning. As in the *Odyssey*, the scene of true recognition involves a test, even as it unfolds in the context of *xenia* (hospitality). As the stranger walks “ahead as if he were going on” (24.28), the two apostles ask him to stay with them because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over. The true test occurs when the three are at table. Given the fact that Jesus is depicted at table far more Luke’s Gospel than any other, (eight including the Last Supper), it makes sense that the disciples would recognize the stranger as the resurrected Christ in the very moment “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (24:30). This is the equivalent of the “secret sign” and “living proof” that Penelope acknowledges in the scene involving the olive wood tree.

Luke writes, “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him epignosan (επε*γνωσ*αν).” He uses a variation of the same word, *epignos,* used by Homer to emphasize the transition Penelope undergoes from seeing to truly knowing in her acknowledgement of the true person of Odysseus. When the two disciples return to Jerusalem and join the eleven, they tell “what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known *egnosthe* (εγνωσθη) to them in the breaking of the bread” (24.35). Like Penelope, who “felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender,/recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered” (23:231-32), the disciples bear witness to the axis upon which true recognition depends: a conversion of heart on the part of the knower. As they head back to Jerusalem, Cleopas and his companion ask, “were not our hearts burning within us as he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us” (24:32).

In a Great Books classroom in a Christian university, the pairing of the *Odyssey* with the *Gospel of Luke* opens up a number of “readerly” possibilities for students, both mimetic and spiritual. Having engaged in a close reading of the *Odyssey*, they become part of the Hellenistic audience for whom Luke was writing his Gospel. Evangelical students may find validation in their conviction of Christ as the word of God and the Bible as the source of essential spiritual truth. Luke’s focus on *epignos* may merelyconfirm their belief in individual conversion and the atoning work of Christ. At its most promising, however, acknowledgement of Luke’s narrative pattern in Chapter 24 as closely following that of Homer in the *Odyssey* challenges students to accept the Gospel as a text; a text that invites further study of how the early Christian authors incorporated a range of cultural references, narrative patterns, metaphysical concepts, and rhetorical constructions into their writing, and further, what that process - slippery, supple, and subtle as it may be-could mean for their own-most recognition of Christ.

Works Cited

*The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1996.

*New Revised Standard Version Bible*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007. Print.