Structures of Epic Poetry

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Volume III: Continuity

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DE GRUYTER

Contents

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Greek biblical epic: Nonnus' *Paraphrase* and Eudocia's *Homerocentones*

Abstract: The term 'Greek biblical epic' is ambiguous because it suggests two concepts that have to be nuanced. It seems to refer to a subgenre of epic, but whether at all these poems can be considered as a group in terms of genre is doubtful. Alternative labels, which are sometimes used, are biblical paraphrase (which widens the scope to non-hexametric paraphrases) and cento poetry (which points out the formal relation with cento poetry on other topics, but separates Eudocia from Nonnus). One may also wonder to which degree the Greek examples of hexametric poetry with biblical topics indeed deserve the label 'epic' if at first sight their epic character is restricted to their versification and elements of vocabulary and style. Nonetheless, this chapter prefers the term 'biblical epic' over 'biblical paraphrase' because of the subtle presence of epic structural elements it aims to show in the two examples under consideration.

The first part of the chapter focuses on microstructural elements in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*, which give his Gospel narrative epic grandeur. Moving from very small to slightly larger such elements, the chapter presents an analysis of the function of epithets, the occurrence of semi-formulaic speech introductions, the use of colourful descriptions of the passing of time, and the presence of a full-blown *ekphrasis* of a lamp as the poem's lengthiest 'original' passage (i.e. without direct equivalent in the Gospel of John).

The second part of the chapter deals with the *Homerocentones*, which by definition consist of epic 'building blocks', i.e. of lines from Homer which are reordered to tell the story of the Old Testament and (mainly) the Gospels. This part of the chapter, therefore, necessarily focuses on different parameters. It looks at the overall structure of the *Homerocentones* (in the so-called 'first redaction'), at the epic elements in the proem and at the way the centonist makes use of Homeric type-scenes (e.g. *xenia* and banquet) to give shape to similar scenes in the Gospels.

1 Introduction

Biblical epic is an umbrella term for all poetry in a classical epic form, i.e. hexameter poetry, dealing with topics from the Old or New Testament. Although the elements of the story are determined by the biblical hypotext, (micro-)structural elements from the epic 'hypo-genre' (beside the meter) are also used to shape this biblical

content into its new epic form. It is on these elements that I will primarily focus in this chapter. I will successively discuss two important Greek examples of biblical epic: Nonnus' *Paraphrase* and the *Homerocentones*.

In comparison with the rich biblical epic tradition in Latin, there is much less material on the Greek side.[1] Two 5th century church historians (Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.16 and Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18) tell us about the genre's Greek pioneers, whose work has not survived. They claim that a father and son, both called Apollinarius, reacted to the famous edict (362 AD) of emperor Julian (prohibiting Christian school teachers to teach classical literature) by rewriting and reshaping both the New and the Old Testament to follow the generic conventions of classical genres of Greek literature: epic (the Pentateuch), tragedy (other parts of the Old Testament), and Platonic dialogue (the New Testament).[2] There is, however, some doubt about the historicity of Socrates' and Sozomenus' vague and contradictory accounts. Gregory of Nazianzus, himself a prominent voice in the contemporary Christian response to Julian's edict, for instance, never mentions the *Apollinarii* and it is unlikely that he would not have known of their work. This influential man's own indignant reaction against Julian (Greg. Naz. Or. 4.4.101 and 5.1) partially explains the importance that later Christian authors (like Socrates and Sozomenus) as well as modern scholars ascribed to Julian's edict as a turning point in the history of early Christian literature and as catalyst for the birth of classicising Christian poetry. Today, the historical impact of Julian's in fact very short-lived edict (it was withdrawn in 364 AD under the new emperors Valentian and Valens) is believed to have been much smaller than we were made to believe by later Christian propagandists.[3]

Without these two *Apollinarii*, there is no Greek 4th century counter-part for Juvencus (who moreover wrote *before* Julian's edict, under the first 'Christian' emperor Constantine), but a few examples of shorter (epigrammatic rather than epic) biblical poetry can be mentioned. The famous *Codex Visionum* contains – besides the *Visio Dorothei* – also eight shorter Christian poems: all of them were clearly inspired by the Bible with two paraphrasing passages from *Genesis* and two others from the *Psalms*.[4] Gregory of Nazianzus' own *Dogmatic Poems* 12–28

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1 See Schubert and Bažil on Latin biblical epic and *Vergiliocentones* in this volume. General studies are Roberts (1985) and Green (2006), both with a Latin focus, as well as Agosti (2001b) on Greek biblical epic.

2 I paraphrase Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.16. According to Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18, the distribution of genres is slightly different, but the Pentateuch is rephrased in epic hexameters in both versions of the *Apollinarii* story.

3 See esp. Agosti (2001b, 68–71).

4 See Agosti (2001a), Agosti (2001b, 71–2), Agosti (2002), and Miguélez-Cavero (2013).

deal with biblical topics, too.[5] Most of them, however, merely list Bible books, laws, miracles, biblical characters, etc. rather than retelling any stories from the Bible. *Poem* 17 (12 lines, retelling 1 Kings 17.7–24) and *Poem* 28 (6 lines, retelling Sibylline 4.35–41) are the only two in which a narrative is briefly developed. The heterogeneous corpus of the *Sibylline Oracles* (Imperial period, juxtaposing earlier and later chunks) also contains larger passages which retell parts of the Old and New Testament (e.g. Book 1: the story of Noah's ark) and could be regarded as biblical epic in the broadest sense.[6]

Much more interesting for the purpose of this chapter, however, are the more substantial examples dating from the 5th century. I will leave aside the *Metaphrasis of the Psalms*, which was for a long time believed to be the work of one of the *Apollinarii* – a third Apollinarius may have been the source of the confusion[7] – but has now been dated convincingly to the mid-5th century. With the explicit aim of restoring some of the original poetical qualities of David's Hebrew psalms (cf. *Metaphrasis*, praef. 15–23 and 29–33), the metaphrast proceeds as a very faithful 're-translator' (shunning even the smallest additions, omissions, or clarifications) of the prose psalms of the Septuagint into archaising hexameter poetry. This approach as well as the non-narrative character of the psalms themselves make this ambitious poem less suited for further analysis in this chapter.[8] My focus, instead, will indeed be on two other products of the mid-5th century AD: Nonnus of Panopolis' *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* and the *Homerocentones*.

The fact that Nonnus, too, like the author of the *Metaphrasis*, rigidly follows the structure (bible line after bible line) of one specific bible text has led Rey (1998, 62–3) to the general conclusion that the traditions of Latin and Greek bible epics differ essentially in that the Latin authors show a greater independence from the biblical model than their Greek colleagues. While certainly true for the *Metaphrasis* and probably also for Aelia Eudocia's (wife of Theodosius II) unfortunately unpreserved Old Testament paraphrases,[9] Rey's conclusion needs to be nuanced with regard to Nonnus. Compared with, for example, Juvencus on the Latin side, he indeed

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5 With two exceptions (*Poem* 18: 102 lines; *Poem* 27: 106 lines), they are all between 5 and 39 lines. These two exceptional poems also differ in their approach to the biblical material. *Poem* 27 reads as a personal reflection on the wisdom revealed in the parables, *Poem* 18 offers a detailed comparison between the genealogy of Christ in Matthew and Luke. See also Beirne (2011).

6 See Lightfoot (2007).

7 See Agosti (2001b, 87).

8 On the *Metaphrasis of the Psalms*, see Ludwich (1912), Gonnelli (1987), Agosti (2001b, 85–92), and Faulkner (2014).

9 Cf. Photius' review of her hexametric paraphrase of the Octateuch and the books of Zachariah and Daniel. See also *Bibliotheca* 183 (Bekker 128a) 17–20 ὡς μηδὲν ἐκείνων δεῖσθαι τὸν τούτοις ἐνομιλοῦντα. Τὰς μὲν γὰρ διανοίας οὔτε παρατείνων οὔτε συστέλλων ἀεὶ φυλάσσει κυρίας. Καὶ

stays more faithful to the structure of his model (he does not add a proem,[10] nor does he combine the Gospels into a harmonised narrative), but he certainly goes a few steps further than Juvencus in the way he expands on the Gospel text, both in order to embellish it stylistically as an epic poem in Nonnus' own distinctive style and to explain the Gospels to his audience. The examples discussed below have been selected to illustrate this.

The *Homerocentones*, finally, are, like its Latin predecessor the *Cento Vergilianus* of Proba, a different type of biblical epic altogether.[11] The choice of the form of the cento, the recombining of lines from Homer, Vergil, or sometimes other canonical poets, such as the Greek tragedians,[12] as a way of creating new poetry, implies an extreme fidelity to – in our case – Homer and, necessarily, also important restrictions as to what content of the biblical model *can* be rendered at all. The *Homerocentones* are commonly referred to as Eudocia's work, but the question of authorship is actually rather complex.[13] The *Homerocentones* are transmitted in multiple versions or 'redactions'. In the manuscripts they are attributed either to Eudocia alone, to Patricius and Eudocia, or to Patricius, Eudocia, Optimus, and Cosmas of Jerusalem. Two epigrams explain the role of the first two: Patricius wrote a first version, Eudocia revised it thoroughly.[14] What is generally considered the 'first redaction' (2354 lines, 53 episodes) may represent the result of Eudocia's work, while Patricius' 'original version' is presumably entirely lost to us (see below under section 3). The 'second redaction' (1948 lines in 50 episodes),[15] attributed in one manuscript to all four authors, is according to Rey (1998, 29–38) an anthology

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ταῖς λέξεσι δέ, ὅπου δυνατόν, τὴν ἐγγύτητα καὶ ὁμοιότητα συνδιαφυλάσσει. The Greek text is quoted from the edition of Henry (1959).

10 From a structural point of view, the paraphrase of the so-called prologue of the Gospel itself (Nonn. Par. 1.1–13 < Joh. 1.1–5) actually functions as a proem to the poem.

11 Telling of the cento's status as a distinct phenomenon within the biblical epic genre is Proba's absence from the studies of Roberts (1985) and Green (2006). In surveys of Greek biblical epic the *Homerocentones* take up a much more central position; cf. Agosti (2001b), Whitby (2007), and Whitby (2016).

12 This is the case, for instance, in the *Christus Patiens*, attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus, but probably written (much) later. Only about a third of the text consists of lines from the tragedians in this particular case. The rest is original.

13 See esp. Rey (1998, 13–59) and Schembra (2007, *pp*. xxv–clxxxi).

14 These two epigrams have been transmitted in one of the oldest manuscripts that contains the first redaction (as well as in other, later manuscripts) and must have served an introductory purpose. The first epigram, *De Homerocentonibus Patricii* (AP 1.119), is a summary of the content of the cento of Patricius. The second is attributed to Eudocia and praises Patricius, but also explains how she improved his version. See Usher (1997), Rey (1998, 18–25), and Sowers (forthcoming).

15 Approximately 700 of these lines are new in comparison to the first redaction. See Schembra (2007, *p*. cxliv).

composed of episodes from perhaps even more than the four mentioned cento-authors. According to Schembra (2007, *p.* cxliv) it is the result of the revision of Eudocia's text by one anonymous later poet. Yet, another manuscript tradition has preserved much shorter versions of the same centos (619–735 lines, again with new lines added). There is some discussion as to whether the smaller differences between them make them count as one, two, or even three additional redactions.[16] For convenience, I will in what follows only consider the first redaction in the edition of Schembra (2007).

2 Epic structures in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*

As mentioned already, the macrostructure of Nonnus' *Paraphrase* is predetermined by its Gospel model and is, therefore, by definition un-epic. However, on a micro-structural level Nonnus organises his narrative according to the conventions of epic poetry and his own late antique interpretation of the genre.[17] I will briefly look at several such small, but – as I hope to show – structurally significant epic elements in the Gospel narrative:

1. Epithets, which add to the general epic tonality and are used for characterisation purposes,
2. Speech formulas, with their important role of structuring dialogical exchange,
3. Conventional time indications, which stand out as poetically elaborate transition passages,
4. Ekphrastic elaborations, which add to the poem's *enargeia*.

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16 Schembra is the first to distinguish three smaller redactions (Schembra, 1996; Schembra, 2000; and Schembra, 2007, *pp.* cxlix–clxxxi), whereas Moraux (1980) and Rey (1998, 16) earlier distinguished only two. In a review of Schembra (2007), Demoen (2008) expresses his doubts as to whether the much smaller differences between the shorter versions allow for a distinction between three separate redactions.

17 As an epic poet, Nonnus has a particular style, which helped to establish his authorship of both the *Paraphrase* and the (genuinely epic) *Dionysiaca*; cf. Golega (1930). There is also common ground between his works on the level of themes (e.g. wine) and imagery (e.g. metaphors of light and darkness). See esp. Shorrock (2011).

2.1 Epithets

One of the most striking characteristics of Nonnus' paraphrastic style is the amount of adjectives he uses, which add colour to the sober Gospel narrative.[18] A striking epic feature of his style is the frequent combination of adjectives, 'epithets', and proper names of individuals, places, and ethnic or religious groups of people, sometimes with a Homeric ring to them, as in the following examples:

> Nonn. Par. 1.170 and 4.252 τανυπλοκάμων Γαλιλαίων
> Nonn. Par. 2.57 and 7.35 ἀκερσικόμων Γαλιλαίων, cf. κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοί (31× in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*)
> Nonn. Par. 4.214a φιληρέτμων Γαλιλαίων, cf. Φαίηκεσσι φιληρέτμοισι (6× in the *Odyssey*)[19]

In both cases, the context does not explain the reference to the length of the Galileans' hair or to their passion for rowing, but together with the other epithets for the same people (Nonn. Par. 4.90 φιλοστόργων Γαλιλαίων, 4.195 φιλοχρίστων Γαλιλαίων, 4.202 θεοστόργων Γαλιλαίων) and region (2.3 ἀεξιφύτου Γαλιλαίης, 4.250 εὐπύργῳ Γαλιλαίη, 4.252 πόλιν ἀγλαόπαιδα … Γαλιλαίων) they seem to contribute to a positive presentation of a hospitable region with friendly inhabitants,[20] which is in sharp contrast with the presentation of the "bold" Hebrews[21] and especially the high priests[22] and Pharisees.[23] The familiar epithet of Zeus, ὑψιμέδων, has been

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18 See Golega (1930, 49–55, esp. 49): "Die Sprache des Nonnos ist vor allem gekennzeichnet durch die *Epitheta*; durch ihre überreiche Verwendung erhält der Stil des Nonnos einen unerträglichen Schwulst und Schwall."

19 The text of the *Paraphrase* is that of Scheindler (1881), which is still the most recent complete edition.

20 See Livrea (2000, 163). The long hair of the Galileans has given rise to many hypotheses. Agosti (2003, 130 n. 303) and Shorrock (2011, 61) both think of a possible iconographical connection, and while Agosti looks at the iconographical representation of the actually long-haired Galileans in Jewish art, Shorrock points out that the long hair of the Galileans also makes Christ and his followers iconographically resemble Dionysus and his Bacchants (cf. Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*). Smolak (1984, 6), on the other hand, sees them as the "Fußvolk" of Christ, just as the anonymous long-haired Achaeans are to the Greek heroes.

21 As, for example, in Nonn. Par. 8.43, 8.113, and 8.141 θρασὺς Ἑβραίων … λαός.

22 The high priests are dubbed throughout the poem as ἀγήνορες, ἀθέσμιοι, ἀναιδέες (3×), ἀπειθέες (2×), ἄφρονες, ζηλομανεῖς, μεμηνότες, and φθονεροί.

23 The group of Pharisees are dubbed throughout as ἀγχίνοων, ἀκηλήτων (2×), ἁμαρτινόων (2×), ἀπιστοτάτων (3×), ἀρχεκάκων, βαρυζήλων, δολορραφέων, νοοπλανέων, ὑπερφιάλων, ζαμενής, and only rarely, with more neutral attributes, as ἀσιγήτων, θεμιστοπόλων, or ὁμοφραδέες.

adopted as an epithet for God by the Christian poetic tradition (11× by Gregory of Nazianzus, 21× in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*).[24]

Another set of epithets used to characterise Mary of Bethany is also very informative for our analysis. When she is introduced in Nonn. Par. 11, the reader's attention is immediately drawn to the repetition of the phrase Χριστοῦ καλλιέθειρα θεηδόκος (11.4 and 11.8), a solemn formula which both highlights her function as Christ's host[25] and the beauty of her hair, with which she will later wash Jesus' feet. This event is announced quite elaborately in 11.4–7, and described in detail in 12.10–16, where Mary is given the Homeric epithet εὔκομος (12.13). Twice (11.4 and 12.13) the reference to the beauty of Mary's hair precedes the reference to the use of her hair for washing Jesus' feet. The "beautiful hair", therefore, could be seen to have a proleptic function in the narrative, but simultaneously also aestheticises the Gospel scene of the foot-washing, which in later times became a popular subject of paintings.

In contrast with the aforementioned example of the "long-haired" Galileans, the epithets used for Mary in Nonnus' *Paraphrase* clearly vary according to the context of the story in which she figures. Her hair is only mentioned when it is relevant for what follows. In another passage, she is described as ταχύγουνος (11.101) because she rushes to meet Jesus. At the same time, her fellow townsmen see her as φιλόδακρυς (11.103)[26] because they think she is in such a hurry to mourn her brother Lazarus at his tomb. By varying the adjective that describes Mary according to the perspective of the narrative, the paraphrase seems to emphasise the shift in focalisation that is already present in the Gospel model.

2.2 Speech formulas

Nonnus' speech introductions are interesting for several reasons. They are conventional and formulaic in form and thus reminiscent of the very origins of the epic genre. Not unlike the speech introductions in, for example, Homer or Apollonius Rhodius, they offer much more information to the reader than the simple "and he said" that is typical for the Gospels. Thus, they do not only add epic colour to the Gospel narrative, but – as my examples will show – also provide the reader with a clear interpretation framework, explaining the words of the Gospels' characters already before they have been spoken.

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24 Cf. Caprara (2005, 230): "lo stilema ὑψιμέδων θεός si può considerare formulare all interno della tradizione cristiana." See also Demoen/Verhelst in this volume.

25 Note that Mary and not Martha of Bethany receives this title of honour.

26 Also used for Mary Magdalene in Nonn. Par. 19.137 and 20.2.

I propose to look at two episodes in particular, to which I will return in later sections of this chapter: the encounter of Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well and the miracle of water being turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. The encounter at the well contains quite a long dialogue, during which Jesus speaks seven times and the woman replies six times. In 9 of all 13 speech introductions, we find the formulaic pattern which is also predominant in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*: 1) an (often expressive) verb of speaking, followed by 2) an adjective to characterise the tone or intentions of the speech, and 3) a form of μύθος or φωνή to refer to the speech itself or the voice of the speaker.[27] Hence, when reading Nonnus' *Paraphrase*, our interpretation of the dialogue – which is still essentially the same dialogue as in the Gospels – is guided by the introductory line to each speech and, in the first place, by these adjectives, which are an integral part of the speech formula. The woman's answer to Jesus' request for some water cannot be misunderstood as an impolite refusal (she is not unwilling to help, but simply curious), because her words are explicitly marked as inquisitive (Nonn. Par. 4.33 φιλοπευθέι).[28] Jesus' enigmatic answer, on the other hand, is explicitly marked as enigmatic (4.42 ἀσημάντῳ) so that the reader will understand that his words will not have to be taken at face value and that further explanations will follow. The reader is certainly not left as ignorant as the Samaritan woman, nor as the reader of the Gospels.[29]

In three instances, our attention is, moreover, drawn to the interpretative particularities of the dialogue. The fact that Jesus asks the woman for water is presented as a paradox: he is the Lord of the waters, asking for water (4.27 καί μιν **ἄναξ ὑδάτων** ἀπὸ κάλπιδος ἥτεεν **ὕδωρ**).[30] Similar paradoxes are highlighted when the

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27 See D'Ippolito (2003, 505–13), D'Ippolito (2016, 375–84), and Verhelst (2017, 35).

28 According to Livrea (1989, 157) this adjective expresses throughout the *Paraphrase* a specific type of curiosity, "loaded with soteriological expectations."

29 Also in this case, it is possible to identify a pattern: introduction formulas with ἀσημάντῳ (always introducing speeches by Christ, such as in Nonn. Par. 3.15, 7.124, and 10.22) describe Christ as pronouncing messages, which are mysterious and incomprehensible, but, above all, inspired or even oracular. See Caprara (2005, 178).

30 See Caprara (2005, 166–7) who points out parallel strategies of expressing the same paradox in Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* (PG 73) 296.28–9: "pretending to be thirsty, he said 'give me to drink'"; see also *Homerocentones* 1074–5: "He knew everything and responded with these words: 'Show me the city, and give me water to quench my thirst.'"

woman speaks: she unknowingly speaks the truth while she lies about her husband (4.79–80),[31] and she unknowingly speaks to Christ about Christ (4.124–6).[32]

Similar features of the speech introduction formulas can be pointed out in the episode of the wedding. In this passage of the *Paraphrase*, two subsequent speeches of Jesus are respectively marked as wine-bringing (2.30 οἰνοσσόον ἴαχε φωνήν) and winy (2.39 οἰνωπῇ δ' ἐκέλευσεν ἄναξ σημάντορι φωνῇ) by the adjective that is part of the speech introduction formula. The first time, it announces the miracle of the wine that still has to take place, and both times it emphatically highlights Jesus' act of pronouncing his instructions to the waiters as the very deed that brings about the metamorphosis. In the Gospels this direct connection between Jesus' words and their miraculous effect is left entirely implicit.[33]

2.3 Descriptions of the passing of time

Another quite conspicuous epic feature in Nonnus are his conventional descriptions of passing time.[34] As Giraudet (2012) has shown, Nonnus in this respect, too, faithfully follows the Gospels, in the sense that he generally does not add or leave out any indications of time. He highlights them by rendering them in a poetical (epic) fashion, often with a strong emphasis on the circular movement of time,[35] and with ample attentions to the colours of night and morning.[36] And he does not refrain from incorporating – pagan – personifications of time either, as can be seen in these two examples: Nonn. Par. 6.66b–9a ἀρτιφανὴς δὲ / γαῖαν ὅλην ἐκάλυψε μελαγχρήδεμνος ὁμίχλη, / καὶ χροῒ ποικιλόνωτον ἐπισφίγξασα χιτῶνα / ἀστερόεν σελάγιζεν, "The newly appeared black-veiled darkness soon covered the whole

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31 Nonn. Par. 4.79–80 εἶπε, καὶ **ἀγνώσσουσα**, πολυσπερέων περὶ λέκτρων / **ψευδομένη**, Σαμαρεῖτις **ἐτήτυμον** ἴαχε φωνήν.

32 Nonn. Par. 4.124–6 εἶπε, καὶ **ἀγνώσσουσα** γυνὴ μαντώδεϊ φωνῇ / **Χριστῷ Χριστὸν ἔλεξεν**, ἀοσσητῆρα δὲ κόσμου / ὀψὲ μολεῖν ἀγόρευε, τὸν ἐγγύθεν εἶχε μολόντα. See also Caprara (2005, 235): "un potente *hysteron-proteron* narrativo."

33 Livrea (2000, 199) interestingly connects Nonnus' explicit mention of the power of Christ's voice with John Chrysostom, *In Johannem* (PG 59) 135.24–40, which mentions a contemporary theological discussion as to why Christ did not have a more active role in the Cana miracle and, related to that, the broader discussion about Christ's human/divine nature and power to perform such miracles: "some say the Demiurge is another, and that his deeds are not his."

34 Cf. Wenskus and Wolkenhauer in volume II.2 on time in classical epic.

35 As, for example, in Nonn. Par. 1.128, 4.190–1, and 5.12–13.

36 Cf. Nonn. Par. 1.167–9, 2.1–2, and 21.19: the mentioning of the pink or purple colour of Eos recall Homer's ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἠώς (27×).

land, wrapped her body in a speckled chiton of stars and shone brightly";[37] 6.146–7 ἕως ἔτι καμπύλος ἕρπων / αἰὼν εὐρυγένειος ἀτέρμονα νύσσαν ἀμείβει, "As long as broad-bearded Aion with his bent back, moving steadily forward, still passes the eternal turning point."[38]

But Nonnus' elaboration of the descriptions of the passing of time are not (always) merely a decorative feature. In the passage of the encounter at the well, the specific time of the day is mentioned twice, while only once in the Gospel model. On both occasions a connection between the time of day and the actions of the characters, which in the Gospels was left implicit, is made explicit. In 4.24 the "sixth hour" (Joh. 4.6) is called the "*thirsty* sixth hour" (ἕκτη … δίψιος ὥρη), which announces and simultaneously explains Jesus' request for water. In Nonn. Par. 4.30–1 the same moment of the day is evoked a second time, and this time more elaborately as the "*lunch* hour that gallops through the sky around the middle turning-post." This time it serves to explain why Jesus is alone at the well; his followers have gone into town to buy lunch. Just as in the speech introduction formulas, meaningful adjectives are added in these descriptions of time to guide the reader through the Gospel text and towards a rich interpretation in which all aspects of the narrative are connected.[39]

2.4 *Ekphrasis*

Finally, as an already slightly larger epic structure, I can point to the presence of *ekphraseis* in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*. Whereas an increased attention for colour (e.g. the rosy day-breaks) and other visual elements (such as the beauty of Mary's hair) can be noticed in all parts of the poem, Nonn. Par. 18.16–24 is a genuine example of *ekphrasis* in the narrow (modern) meaning of the term as a description of human-made objects, like, famously, the *Iliad*'s shield of Achilles.[40] This passage

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37 A very similar description of the night can be found in Nonn. D. 18.160–1. See Ypsilanti (2014, 124–9), who traces the imagery back to Homer and the tragedians, but also, and most prominently, to the Orphic tradition.

38 Time in Nonnus' *Paraphrase* also typically gallops away on horseback (Nonn. Par. 4.31, 5.12, and 8.94), which vaguely recalls the traditional representation of the chariot of Helius; cf. Agosti (2003, 309). See also Nonn. Par. 3.79 and 6.179–80 for two further references to *Aion* as a grey-haired, bearded personification of time. Cf. Franchi (2013, 436–7).

39 Cf. Hom. Od. 17.170a ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ δείπνηστος ἔην. See also James (1981, 124), who observes that in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* the epithets that occur in descriptions of time are – like in these two examples from the *Paraphrase* – often "contextual", in the sense that they "serve to relate the temporal expression explicitly to the narrative context."

40 See Harrison on *ekphraseis* in classical epic in volume I.

describes the lamps carried by the soldiers who come to arrest Jesus. The lamps are mentioned in the Gospel model, too (Joh. 18.3 λαμπάδων), but the long description is Nonnus' addition entirely. With its nine lines it is probably the longest 'original' passage (i.e. without equivalent in the Gospel) in the entire poem (Nonn. Par. 18.16b–24):

> καὶ ὁμόστολος ἀνήρ
> χερσὶ πολυσπερέεσσι μετάρσιον ἄλλος ἐπ' ἄλλῳ
> λύχνων ἐνδομύχων ἀνεμοσκεπὲς ἄγγος ἀείρων,
> ἄγγος, ὅπερ δονάκεσσιν ἀμοιβαίοισι συνάπτων
> 20 πυκνὰ μεριζομένοισι γέρων κυκλώσασο τέκτων
> ἀστερόεν μίμημα καὶ εἴκελον ὀξέι δίσκῳ
> μεσσοφανὴς ὅθι λύχνος ὁμοζυγέος διὰ κόλπου
> ὀξὺ φάος πολυωπὸν ὑπὸ σκέπας ἔκτοθι πέμπων,
> ἀκροφανὲς σελάγιζε πολυσχιδὲς ἀλλόμενον πῦρ.

In this company, the one man next to the other held up high in the air in his wide-spread hands a lantern that shelters for the wind the light that is within: a lantern, which an old wood-worker gave a circular shape by joining together thick crisscrossing split reeds. It is the very image of a star and similar to a bright sphere. In the middle of it is a lamp, which through the hollow structure and from under its large-mesh cover sends out a bright light. With leaping flames visible at its edge, it spreads a fractured light.[41]

A reason for Nonnus to introduce such an elaborate *ekphrasis* has been sought in the symbolic meanings of light and darkness, which are important throughout his poem.[42] Kuiper (1918, 268–9) found a plausible explanation for it in the combination with a passage only a few lines later when the soldiers kneel before Jesus (Nonn. Par. 18.41–2). Together with this reference to the kneeling soldiers (also present in Joh. 18.7), the strong emphasis on the soldiers' lanterns, which are explicitly compared to stars and spheres, may be meant to trigger a comparison with the Old Testament passage (Gen. 37.9) where Joseph in his dreams sees the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him.

Though we may indeed be able to explain its presence from a theological point of view (as the NT realisation of an OT prophetic dream), the formal aspects of the *ekphrasis* also connect this passage with the tradition of *ekphraseis* in epic poetry. This then invites us to notice the systematic order in which the different elements of the lamp are described in detail. The description zooms in carefully from the lamp-bearers, via the lantern, to the lamp itself, only allowing the light to

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41 All translations of Nonnus' *Paraphrase* and the *Homerocentones* are my own.
42 See Franchi (2016, 253). On light and darkness in the *Paraphrase*, see also Ypsilanti (2014). Agosti (2014, 159–60) interprets the *ekphrasis* of the lamp as that of a dematerialised object, with symbolic effect.

escape the lamp (Nonn. Par. 18.23 ἔκτοθι) and illuminate its surroundings (i.e. to reconnect with the larger picture) at the very end of the description. The reference to the old wood-worker, a more humble counter-part of the Iliadic Hephaestus, meanwhile temporarily transports the reader away from the Gospel context to the place and time of the lamp's creation.

3 Epic patchwork in the *Homerocentones*

Despite the important differences in technique and composition between biblical paraphrase and biblical cento, it is worthwhile to combine the analysis of both for the purpose of this chapter. Compared with Nonnus, who closely follows the Gospel text in a line-by-line 'translation' into poetry, in the case of the *Homerocentones* the technique of the cento warrants a different, in certain respects much closer relation to the epic genre. With slight adaptations only, lines from Homer are quite literally the building blocks for these poems. From the elements pointed out as aspects of epic stylisation in Nonnus, epic speech formulas[43] and descriptions of the passing of time[44] are therefore almost by default present in the cento as well. Formulas combining epithets and proper names, on the other hand, are naturally absent because the cento technique does not allow replacing Homeric with biblical proper names. There are – to my knowledge – no elaborate *ekphraseis* of works of art, but I will return to ekphrastic tendencies in the *Homerocentones* in a broader sense later in this discussion.

    The particularities of the cento form, however, urge me to look at different parameters first. In this respect, it is important to mention that, when compared with their Latin counter-part, Proba's *Cento Vergilianus*, and other extant Latin centos,[45] the *Homerocentones* consist of slightly larger epic building blocks. Not half lines, but full lines are the standard unit, most often with only minimal adaptations.[46] Especially in the first redaction, there are many blocks of two, three, and

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43 One 'popular' formula is also very common in Homer (31× in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα (5× in the first redaction, 7× in the second); less common in Homer (3× in the *Odyssey*) but even more frequently applied in the cento is τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε θεοκλύμενος θεοειδής (9× in the first redaction, 7× in the second). In the latter case the Homeric proper name Theoclymenus is re-interpreted by the centonist as "he who is heard by God" (Schembra, 2006, 267) and in combination with θεοειδής used as a formula to refer to Christ.

44 In the first redaction, five episodes start each with a different Homeric expression to describe daybreaks: *Homerocentones* 635, 702, 1825, 2159, and 2333.

45 Cf. Bažil on Proba's *Cento Vergilianus* and Latin cento poetry in this volume.

46 See Alfieri (1988) on the second redaction; on the Latin centonists, see Bright (1984).

even up to six consecutive lines.[47] This makes the quoted passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* much easier to recognise. To a contemporary reader, versed in Homer, this must certainly have created a different dynamic between the cento and its hypotexts. There is, however, some discussion as to whether such larger structural units were acceptable at all from the perspective of the cento rules and aesthetics or whether they should rather be regarded as flaws.

The epigram of Eudocia (see above) is at the centre of this discussion. In it she apologises for the δοιάδες in her work, which, as she admits, are there by necessity: she and Patricius did not have the luxury position of their predecessor Tatian (Eudocia, *De Homerocentonibus Patricii* 119.19–29, AP 1), the author of a cento about a mythological topic, to write about the same places, heroes, and gods as Homer, but they had to find a way to describe biblical subjects and characters alien to Homer (AP 1.119.30–3). The crux here is the interpretation of the elsewhere unattested word δοιάδες (AP 1.119.16 and 1.119.21), which by critics has been given two different meanings. Schembra (2007, *pp*. clxxxviii–cxci), Rey (1998, 24), and others have read and translated it as "double meanings" or "ambiguous lines", in the sense that words and expressions from Homer mean something else entirely in their new context.[48] To me, this is indeed the meaning that fits best in Eudocia's broader argument about the contrast in subject matter between the Bible and Homer.[49] Usher (1997, 313–14) and Sowers (2008, 90–1), however, call in the convincing evidence of a later anonymous gloss in one of the manuscripts and argue in favour of an interpretation of δοιάδες as "double lines" in the sense of "successive lines in Homer".[50] The gloss proves, in any case, that a later, Byzantine reader has understood it that way. If their interpretation is correct, the numerous doubles (and much longer sequences) in the first edition were something the centonist sought but apparently did not manage to avoid.[51]

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47 See Usher (1997, 314).

48 The friendly Homeric apostrophe δαιμόνιε, for example, no longer means "poor fellow", but rather "you demon". See Schembra (1994) and Schembra (2007, *p*. clxxxix).

49 Cf. Agosti (2001b, 79): "il contesto fa piuttosto pensare che la polemica vertesse anche in questo caso sull'uso corretto dei versi di Omeri."

50 Cf. Schembra (1993) and the epigraph to Eudocia's epigram in the *Neapolitanus* II.C.37 (one of the manuscripts in which the shorter 'third' redaction is transmitted, late 14th–early 15th century): "This is the apology of Eudocia, the splendid woman who corrected the present Homeric cento composed by a certain bishop, Patricius; the apology is about her editing him, and about the fact that two successive Homeric lines are never found next to each other in the Homeric cento which Tatian composed on a post-Homeric theme using verses taken from Homer; whereas in this poem of hers there is much of this sort of thing". This translation is taken from Usher (1997, 314).

51 Usher (1997) also sees it as clear proof that Eudocia's preface refers to the 'first recension', hence 'Eudocia's version'.

The second interpretation of δοιάδες, has, moreover, been connected with the rules for writing cento poetry in Ausonius' preface to his *Cento Nuptialis*.[52] In this preface Ausonius states that one should either combine two half lines into one line or use a full line and the first half of the next line, but never two entire lines because that would be rather tasteless (*ineptum*), and certainly not three in a row, which would be simply ridiculous (*merae nugae*).[53] Although even Ausonius did not always follow his own rules – and presented them as rules with a touch of irony – this actually quite accurately describes the cento technique as witnessed in most Latin centos.[54]

But were Greek centos composed according to exactly the same rules? Or does the basic difference between using Vergil and using Homer, and, probably in connection to that, between using half lines and using full lines as a standard structural unit, also lay at the basis of other subtle (and less subtle)[55] differences between the cento traditions in the two classical languages?[56]

In accordance with the general line of approach in this volume, the question I will focus on in the following paragraphs is to what extent the *Homerocentones* are composed of epic structures other and larger than the Homeric lines with which they are assembled. I will first briefly look at the structure of the first redaction as a whole, and then in more detail at the presentation of the story in two selected episodes.

3.1 Overall structure and proem

The first redaction of the *Homerocentones* comprises 2354 lines. After a brief proem (*Homerocentones* 1–6), it contains a preamble with material from the Old Testament

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52 Cf. Usher (1997, 314) and Sowers (2008, 91–2).

53 Cf. Usher (1997, 53).

54 See esp. Bright (1984).

55 As, for example, the difference between one final single-authored cento (Proba) and a multi-authored living corpus (the *Homerocentones*).

56 Unfortunately, there is little on the Greek side to compare with. The same Tatian is also mentioned in Libanius, but his work has not been preserved. The few secular centos (AP 9.361, 9.381, and 9.382) that are preserved in the *Anthologia Palatina* [AP] are all very short, but confirm at least Alfieri's observation (1988, 140) that Latin and Greek centos differ in that Greek centos use entire (iconic, formulaic) Homeric lines, whereas Latin centos mostly recombine half lines from Vergil. A Homeric cento on the Lazarus story by Cometas Chartularius (AP 15.40) from the 9th century also deserves to be mentioned in this context as a continuation of the type of biblical cento found in the our corpus. It is however much freer in the way it combines phrases from Homer with new material.

(7–91: the Creation and the Fall of Man) and a fascinating episode (92–205) drawing on patristic sources (but without specific biblical model), in which God the Father exhorts his son to take human form and by his death bring salvation to humanity.[57] The remainder of the poem contains episodes from all four of the Gospels, starting with the Annunciation (206–74) and ending with Christ's Ascension (2333–54). The one 'original' episode (92–205), as it were, appends a divine assembly to the structure of the biblical story, which very much like in the *Odyssey* kick-starts the narrative proper and is followed by a messenger scene (the Annunciation) in which the divine plan is then put in motion. Could this be an epic story pattern emerging? In any case, it also contributes to the cyclic structure of the *Homerocentones*, which ends with the reunion of Father and Son in heaven.

The proem shows the poem's overall ambiguous relation with the epic genre very well (*Homerocentones* 1–6):

Κέκλυτε, μυρία φῦλα περικτιόνων ἀνθρώπων,	Hom. Il. 17.220 + Hom. Od. 2.65
ὅσσοι νῦν βροτοί εἰσιν ἐπὶ χθονὶ σῖτον ἔδοντες,	Hom. Od. 8.222
ἠμὲν ὅσσοι ναίουσι πρὸς ἠῶ τ' ἠέλιόν τε,	Hom. Od. 13.240
ἠδ' ὅσσοι μετόπισθε ποτὶ ζόφον ἠερόεντα,	Hom. Od. 13.241
5 ὄφρ' εἴπω τά με θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι κελεύει,	Hom. Il. 7.68
ὡς εὖ γινώσκητ' ἠμὲν θεὸν ἠδὲ καὶ ἄνδρα,	Hom. Il. 5.128

Hear, innumerable tribes of men who live in these regions
and all who are mortal and eat bread here on earth
and all who dwell near the dawn and the sun
and all those that are behind towards the cloudy darkness,
so that I will tell what my soul in my chest urges me to
and that you will know well both the god and the man.

It starts in the second person with an emphatic apostrophe to the intended audience, which comprises every mortal man on earth. This is a strong claim of the universal nature of the message and presents the poem very clearly as a proselytising effort.[58] In line 5, the focus only briefly shifts from the audience to the narrator himself, with a first person verb of speaking. The theme of the poem, "both the god and the man", or rather "the god-man",[59] is announced in a result clause, expressing the hoped for effect on – again – the audience, hereby claiming also a clear didactic purpose for the poem ("that you will know well").

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57 See Schembra (2006, 77 and 106–19).

58 According to Agosti (2001b, 84) the intended audience of the *Homerocentones* consists of two groups: Christians, who would recognise the biblical references, and the pagan elite to whom the cento presented a Christian interpretation of Homer.

59 Schembra (2007, 87).

Though formally recognisable as an epic proem, the place where the epic narrator most prominently speaks in his own voice and introduces the subject,[60] every line in this proem seems to be selected to avoid connotations with the epic proems of Homer.[61] By only using lines from passages of direct speech in the Homeric poems, the voice of the Homeric narrator is silenced. And, indeed, the traditional invocation of the Muses is absent as well, but this absence is filled in two ways. Formally, it is replaced by the invocation to the audience. As the source of inspiration for the poet, it is replaced by the mention of θυμός. This may be read as an internalised impetus for writing poetry, but has also been interpreted as the centonist's way of referring to the Holy Spirit who, for example, also in the preface to the Latin biblical epic of Juvencus serves as the Christian equivalent of the pagan Muse.[62]

3.2 The Samaritan woman's hospitality

Whereas references to the Homeric proems seem to be avoided in the cento's proem, the cento engages much more directly with specific Homeric episodes when rewriting episodes from the Gospels. Certainly when compared with Nonnus' relatively faithful *Paraphrase*, the epic transformation of the Gospel episodes has a much larger impact on their narrative structure.

In the episode of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the complex structure of the Gospels' dialogue between Jesus and the woman is condensed into three speeches.[63] Though many of the elements from the Gospels are still there – in some form or another – the story is rearranged entirely. First, there are two short speeches by Jesus. In the first (*Homerocentones* 1064–71), he reproaches the Samaritan for her sexual conduct, and only in a second, one-line speech, he asks her for water (1075). This reverses the order of events in the Gospels and puts all emphasis on the Samaritan's sexual conduct, which in the Gospels was never

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60 Cf. Sowers (2008, 95): "The centonist takes up the role of the invocational poet." See Schindler on proems and the invocation of the Muse in classical epic in volume I.

61 Cf. Schembra (2006, 80), who concludes that, all things considered, the proem does not show any manifest similarities to any classified type of literary proem.

62 For the interpretation of θυμός as Holy Spirit, see Schembra (2006, 86). Cf. also the significant role of the Holy Spirit in the preface to the *Metaphrasis Psalmorum* 52–62. See Agosti (2001b, 89).

63 For Nonnus' version, see above. Cf. Schembra (2006, 319), who notes the difference between the dialogue "a tratti sticomitico" of the Gospels, and the long and uninterrupted speeches of the characters in the cento "esemplato sulle ῥήσεις omeriche."

explicitly criticised.[64] Jesus' two speeches are finally followed by the Samaritan's long reply (108⁰–122) in which she offers him hospitality, marvels at him, and asks him for his name. There is no reference at all to the mysterious "living water" from Joh. 4.10–14 and Christ is never identified as Christ, but instead the Samaritan bids him farewell with the assurance that "because they both owe their life to the other" – the reason why is never mentioned – "they will always remember each other". The story only starts to make sense completely when one fills in the missing details from the Gospel text and realises the centonist's intriguing innovations.

But the question here is whether and to which extent the cento's presentation of the Gospel story is conventionally epic and, more specifically, Homeric. In my opinion, Usher (1998) has made an important observation by pointing out the significance of the Homeric type-scenes for the centonist's process of composition:[65] Usher argues that when describing a certain type of situation in the Bible, the centonist drew on a corpus of similar scenes in the Homeric epics. In this case the situation at the start of the Gospel episode (a traveller meeting a local and asking for water) will probably have triggered an association with the type-scene of the *xenia*, the welcoming of an unknown guest.[66] Thus, the centonist recombined lines from existing *xenia* scenes to create a new scene, in which several of the conventional actions of the *xenia* follow one another: the way to the city is shown, food and drinks are promised, and the stranger is asked to reveal his identity, while only the latter element, the postponed revelation of Jesus' identity, is actually also a topic in the Gospels. The other elements are logical additions from a Homeric perspective. The keyword ξειν-, which is used eight times anaphorically at the beginning of the line in the speech of the Samaritan woman, is hereby clearly used "as a semantic trigger."[67]

Four books (and four *xenia* scenes) of the *Odyssey* are predominant throughout this episode: Book 6 with Odysseus' encounter with Nausicaa, Book 8 at the court of Alcinous, and Books 17 and 23 where Odysseus meets Penelope, but she does not recognise him at first. Together they have provided 62 of the 108 lines of this cento.[68] If we now zoom in on the speech of the Samaritan woman (*Homerocentones* 108⁰–122), in which the density of *xenia* motifs is at its highest, it is possible to observe that this speech also contains lines from four additional conversations between guests and hosts in the *Odyssey*: Mentor's welcome at Telemachus' table

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64 See Sowers (2010, 27–30) for a reading of this scene in relation to contemporary Christian morals.

65 See Usher (1998, 101–46) and, specifically on this episode, Usher (1998, 113–29).

66 Cf. Ripoll on epic arrival scenes and Homeric hospitality scenes in volume II.2.

67 Sowers (2008, 115). See also Usher (1998, 117) and Schembra (2006, 325).

68 Cf. Usher (1998, 113). My own count is based on the edition of Schembra (2007).

in Ithaca (*Odyssey* 1), Mentor-Athena's reaction to Nestor's invitation to spend the night at his palace (*Odyssey* 3), Telemachus' welcome at Menelaus' place (*Odyssey* 4), and Odysseus' welcome at Eumaeus' house (*Odyssey* 14). The line in which Mentor-Athena refuses Nestor's kind offer of hospitality by announcing her return to the ship (Hom. Od. 3.361) is employed twice at *Homerocentones* 1089 and 1122. In the Gospel context the line announces the woman's return to her town. It occurs both near the beginning and as the final line of the Samaritan's speech, thus enhancing the unity of the speech.

The process of associative composition can be seen in the constant return to lines from the same Odyssean context. This can be both single lines as well as larger structural units. Already in the earlier speech of Jesus and now throughout the speech of the Samaritan woman, the cento moves back and forward in the famous dialogue between Odysseus and Nausicaa in *Odyssey* 6:

> *Homerocentones* 1066–8 < Hom. Od. 6.286–8
> *Homerocentones* 1073–4 < Hom. Od. 6.66–7
> *Homerocentones* 1075 < Hom. Od. 6.178
> *Homerocentones* 1088 < Hom. Od. 6.194
> *Homerocentones* 1093–4 < Hom. Od. 6.191–2
> *Homerocentones* 1097–8 < Hom. Od. 6.158–9
> *Homerocentones* 1101 < Hom. Od. 6.187
> *Homerocentones* 1104 < Hom. Od. 6.154
> *Homerocentones* 1105–6 < Hom. Od. 8.550–1
> *Homerocentones* 1108–11 < Hom. Od. 8.552–5
> *Homerocentones* 1113–14 < Hom. Od. 6.160–1
> *Homerocentones* 1115–16 < Hom. Od. 8.461–2
> *Homerocentones* 1117–18 < Hom. Od. 8.467–8
> *Homerocentones* 1119 < Hom. Od. 8.487

In *Homerocentones* 1091–2, *Odyssey* 8 is introduced into the cento (Hom. Od. 8.236–7) only to become truly dominant in the second half of the speech:

Near the end (*Homerocentones* 1113–14), a brief return to Odysseus and Nausicaa in *Odyssey* 6 (Hom. Od. 6.160–1) seems to serve as an onset to move to their mutual goodbyes in Book 8, which appropriately stand at the end of the speech of the Samaritan (*Homerocentones* 1115–18):

1115 χαῖρε, ξεῖν᾽, ἵνα καί ποτ᾽ ἐὼν ἐν πατρίδι γαίῃ
     μνήσῃ ἐμεῦ, ὅτι μοι πρώτῃ ζωάγρι᾽ ὀφέλλεις. (Hom. Od. 8.461–2, Nausicaa to Odysseus)
     τῷ κέν τοι καὶ κεῖθι θεῷ ὣς εὐχετοῴμην
     αἰεὶ ἤματα πάντα· σὺ γάρ μ᾽ ἐβιώσαο, κούρην.[69] (Hom. Od. 8.467–8, Odysseus to Nausicaa)

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69 The centonist has added the final –ν in κούρην in order to adapt the perspective of Odysseus to that of the Samaritan woman.

> Farewell, stranger, and hereafter even in your own native land
> may you remember me, for to me first you owe the price of your life.
> Then I will there, too, pray to you as to a god
> all my days, for you, have given me, a maiden, life.

By combining the perspective of Odysseus and that of Nausicaa in the speech of the Samaritan, the centonist transforms the relationship of Odysseus, the shipwreck, and Nausicaa, the princess who saved him, into that of the Samaritan and Christ from the Gospel, in which not the host who provided water, but the divine guest, the life-giver (ἐβιώσαο, 1118),[70] is venerated as a god. The paradox of their mutual relation of benefactor and beneficiary[71] is aptly expressed in the juxtaposition of Odysseus' and Nausicaa's opposite perspectives.

An obvious pitfall for such an analysis of course is the impossibility ever to answer the question to what extent a contemporary reader would have been expected to come to this kind of conclusions. He simultaneously would have to be able to take into account a Homeric and a biblical interpretation of the text.[72] We can, however, be relatively sure that some readers certainly would get the full picture. Eudocia herself is the best example: she read the cento of Patricius and sought to improve it by "making it more true to the biblical model" (Eudocia, *De Homerocentonibus Patricii*, AP 1.119.5 ἐτήτυμα), but also more "harmonious" (AP 1.119.6 ἁρμονίην) and more "Homeric" (AP 1.119.7–8).

3.3 Wedding feast in Cana

My second example is the wedding in Cana and, in particular, its long opening passage (*Homerocentones* 537–94). The lively and detailed description of the wedding party is in sharp contrast with the complete absence of any description in the Gospel model and could by itself be regarded as an epic feature of the cento. It is an *ekphrasis* in the broader – ancient – sense of the word, as the lively description, in this case, of an event.[73]

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70 Cf. the Gospel's "living water".

71 Cf. also above: Nonn. Par. 4.27 καί μιν ἄναξ ὑδάτων ἀπὸ κάλπιδος ᾔτεεν ὕδωρ.

72 Cf. Sowers (2010), who in his analysis juxtaposes two interpretations, each representing a possible line of approach for different members of the contemporary audience.

73 Webb's (2009) broad definition of *ekphrasis* is based on extant ancient handbooks of *progymnasmata*. Although descriptions of works of art are not specifically central to the ancient theory of *ekphrasis*, they do take up a special position. In this specific case, it therefore seems no coincidence that the feasts described on the shield of Achilles provide many of the details of the cento's *ekphrasis* of the feast in Cana.

The lines are culled from only a few Homeric passages that are connected to the central theme of the banquet.[74] At 542–3 the first reference to a wedding feast is provided by two consecutive lines from *Odyssey* 4: Menelaus preparing the wedding of his daughter. The same episode and description are used four more times (*Homerocentones* 551, 576, 584, and 586–8) to fill in further details of the feast. Other passages from the Homeric epics that are incorporated extensively in this description are the wedding, the harvest feast, and the dancing on the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18 (Hom. Il. 18.545–6, 18.549–50, 18.554–6, 18.585, and 18.589–92), and, from *Odyssey* 1, the description of Penelope's suitors who are feasting in Odysseus' palace (Hom. Od. 1.571, 1.573–5, and 1.577). All typical elements of a Homeric banquet scene are present: the preparations such as the bringing of fire wood and the slaughtering of animals (*Homerocentones* 557–66), the eating and drinking itself (567–83), and the after-dinner dances (584–92).[75]

In an attempt to combine, once more, a 'biblical' and a 'Homeric' interpretation of this scene, I propose to look at two lines in particular (544 and 578). In both cases, the Homeric context may seem to contain a warning that the supply of wine will be finished soon, which then could be read as a proleptic reference to the miracle that – in the Gospel story – is about to happen: *Homerocentones* 544 < Hom. Od. 14.96 ἦ γάρ οἱ ζωή γ᾽ ἦν ἄσπετος· οὔ τινι τόσση, "in truth this property was great past telling. No one owns so much"; *Homerocentones* 578 < Hom. Od. 12.327 οἱ δ᾽ εἵως μὲν σῖτον ἔχον καὶ οἶνον ἐρυθρόν, "now so long as they had grain and red wine."

Line 578 already has a proleptic function without taking into account its Homeric context. This line clearly implies that the supplies will run out at some point, but becomes truly ominous when the Odyssean context is taken into account: Odysseus (Hom. Od. 12.260–419) is telling the story of how he and his men were stuck on the island of Helius and not allowed to slaughter Helius' cattle. The end of the story is well-known: as soon as the supplies run out, Odysseus' men disobey and slaughter the best cows, for which they are punished with a shipwreck which only the innocent Odysseus survives. In the context of the wedding of Cana, this line seems to connect as well as oppose[76] the vengeful reaction of Helius in the *Odyssey* to the generous one of Christ in Joh. 2.

Line 544 – at the beginning of the cento's description of the lavish wedding – is in itself much less conspicuous, but its Odyssean context and the repetition of

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74 Usher (1998, 101–4) discusses the episode of the wedding at Cana in terms of a Homeric assembly scene.

75 Cf. Bettenworth in volume II.2.

76 Cf. the opposition between the concepts of "imitation contrastée" and "imitation analogique" as employed by Bažil (2009) to interpret Proba's relation to Vergil. See also Bažil in this volume.

the same Odyssean passage later on in the episode, make it notable. The line that immediately precedes line 544 in the *Odyssey* is used fifty lines later at 594 in the *Homerocentones* by the centonist to conclude the description of the wedding, to indicate that there is a problem with the wine supply, and to make the transition to the virgin Mary's intervention (Joh. 2.3): *Homerocentones* 594 < Hom. Od. 14.95 οἶνον δὲ φθινύθουσιν ὑπέρβιον ἐξαφύοντες, "and our wine they waste, drawing it forth wantonly."

Both consecutive lines are part of the speech by Eumaeus (Hom. Od. 14.80–108) in which the faithful swineherd tells the beggar/Odysseus about the behaviour of the suitors, who are wasting all the immense supplies of Odysseus' rich household. By separating these two lines and putting the one with the seemingly innocent reference to the wealth of supplies at the beginning of the wedding description, and the other one with the ominous reference to the spilling of wine at the very end, the centonist has, as it were, encapsulated the entire description of the wedding in Eumaeus' concerns for his master's property.

In both cases, the Homeric context enriches our reading of the cento's Gospel narrative. Although it is indeed impossible to know to which extent the cento was intended to provoke the associations that now strike at least *this* modern reader as significant, an interpretation like this may help to give an impression of the complex process of association (in our latter example: Joh. 2.3 with Hom. Od. 14.95–6) and after that of organisation and harmonisation (splitting Hom. Od. 14.95 from 14.96 and 'stitching' both into their new context) that certainly must have taken place at the centonist's writing table.

4 Type-scenes and themes in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*

I propose to conclude this chapter by making a circular movement myself and taking the observations on the *Homerocentones* back to my analysis of Nonnus' *Paraphrase*. Is it also possible to discern (traces of) epic type-scenes in the *Paraphrase*, like for example that of the storm in Nonn. Par. 6.70b–3:[77]

ἥ τε θάλασσα ἀνέμου μεγάλου πνέοντος διεγείρετο. (Joh. 6.18)

The sea was being stirred up by a hard-blowing wind.

70   ἐπειγομένης δὲ θυέλλης
ἀγχινεφὴς ἐπίκυρτος ἐπυργώθη ῥόος ἅλμης,

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77 Cf. Biggs/Blum on storm scenes in volume II.2.

καὶ δολιχοῖς ἐλατῆρες ὕδωρ ἐχάρασσον ἐρετμοῖς
ἀντιπόροις ἀνέμοις βεβιημένον

As the storm rushed, arched waves of salt water were raised to a towering height close to the clouds and the rowers with their long oars could barely scratch the water that was in the power of the clashing winds.

The paraphrast here clearly elaborates on the matter-of-fact mentioning of a storm in the Gospel and gives it epic grandeur by making the waves tower sky high. The effect of the changed weather on the activity of the rowers is made explicit and hints at the powerlessness of men on a raft or in a boat during a storm.[78] The rather strict form of the line-by-line paraphrase, however, does not allow for a more extensive elaboration of the storm scene.[79] In this respect, the 'epic' features of the *Paraphrase* are restricted to a microstructural level.

When looking once more at the scenes of the Samaritan woman at the well and the wedding at Cana, a few interesting similarities with the cento's 'epic' presentation of the same Gospel episodes can, however, be noticed. Nonnus also emphasises the hospitality-aspect of the encounter at the well, albeit much more subtly than the cento.

Δός μοι πεῖν (Joh. 4.7)

Give me to drink

δεῦρο, γύναι Σαμαρεῖτι, τεῆς ἐπιβήτορι πάτρης
δός μοι δίψαν ἔχοντι πιεῖν ξεινήιον ὕδωρ. (Nonn. Par. 4.28–9)

Come on, Samaritan woman, give me, a visitor to your fatherland who is thirsty some water to drink as a gift of hospitality.

The plain and simple question of Jesus to the Samaritan woman to give him water to drink is briefly elaborated upon, and in this elaboration subtly contextualised in a setting of *xenia*, of the duties of hosts towards their guests, which is entirely absent from the Gospel: the Nonnian Jesus refers to his own status as a traveller in the woman's country (τεῆς ἐπιβήτορι πάτρης), which casts him in the traditional role of guest and her in the role of host, and he also refers to the water as ξεινήιον ὕδωρ.

Similarly, Nonnus' wedding at Cana is more elaborately described with the addition of lively details, such as the mention of the waiters running around

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78 See also Franchi (2013, 365): "Seconda la tendenza poetica, la semplice tempesta giovannea … si tramuta nei versi nonniani in una poetica e simbolica descrizione del mare in tempesta, ricca di elementi classici."

79 Cf. the truly exceptional status of the lamp *ekphrasis* discussed above in section 2.4.

with empty cups (Nonn. Par. 2.14–16). There even is an (again subtle) mention of dances in the reference to the groom as ἀρτιχόρευτος ("recently celebrated in the dance", 2.49), which briefly evokes the after-dinner dancing, entirely absent from the Gospel, but prominently present in the very Homeric description of the wedding in the cento.

In both cases, interesting parallels can be drawn with the way Nonnus treats the same themes and uses the same vocabulary in his more genuinely 'epic' *Dionysiaca*. Gigli Piccardi (1995) has convincingly shown the parallels between the episode of the Samaritan woman and the description in Nonn. D. 4.252–9 of Danaus' digging a well for his hosts, the thirsty inhabitants of Argos. Among the many correspondences between the two passages is also the reference to ξεινήιον ὕδωρ (Nonn. D. 4.258 ~ Nonn. Par. 4.29), though, as Gigli Piccardi (1995, 157) points out, it is in this case the guest who offers water to his hosts, and not vice versa. Whichever of the two passages Nonnus wrote first, he twice quite explicitly connects a gift of water with the theme of hospitality.

Ἀρτιχόρευτος, on the other hand, is a neologism that is only found in Nonnus and which in the semi-formulaic language of the *Dionysiaca* is used as recurring epithet for a groom.[80] It also occurs in two other passages in the *Paraphrase*, twice accompanying the substantive ἑορτή and referring to a Jewish religious feast. In this case, it seems that the common association of feasts and dancing, and especially weddings and dancing, has in Nonnus' poetry been consolidated on the level of the epic language (as a fixed expression), rather than as part of a type-scene.

5 Conclusion

In both poems analysed in this chapter a combination of two factors is responsible for certain limitations regarding the use of epic structural elements. The first factor, shared by both, is their biblical subject matter, which implies different types of situations and other kinds of heroism in comparison with the common patterns found in 'traditional' 'heroic' epic. But the most important restriction is the specific poetic form of these poems, which is different for both, but in each case subject to an equally strict set of rules: that of the hexameter paraphrase vs. that of the Homeric cento. To what extent can both poems nonetheless be called 'epic'? Throughout my analysis I hope to have shown the subtle and varied ways in which elements from

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80 It is used four times, of which three times it is combined with νυμφίος, just as in the Cana episode.

the epic tradition are used to give shape to the Gospel story as well as to interpret it. Both the *Homerocentones* and Nonnus' *Paraphrase* are products of a time and of a literary context in which different forms of 'epic' flourished alongside one another – e.g. Nonnus' more traditionally epic *Dionysiaca* and Eudocia's hagiographical epic *Martyrdom of St. Cyprian* – while the Homeric poems remained the basic text of reference in school education, were glossed and annotated by learned scholars, and allegorised in the context of Neoplatonic and Christian interpretations. It is this context which offers the strongest argument for an interpretation of these poems as epics, and this not only on a formal level, but with full attention for all subtle reminiscences to contemporary as well as earlier epic poetry.

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