

GYÖRGY KUSTÁR: THE ROLE OF MIMESIS IN  
UNDERSTANDING THE TEACHING OF JESUS

### Abstract

In our dissertation we dealt with the question of mimesis, and how it appears in the narrower and broader environment of Jesus, even in the acts and words of Jesus himself. The question is based on a specific hermeneutical approach (may be called "mimo-hermeneutic"), which primarily perceives texts of the synoptic gospels not as repositories of teachings, but reads the texts related to the life and teaching of Jesus as instructions, as "paradigms of discipleship", or "mimetic reference points" aiming to maintain and support Christian lifestyle. This reading method, besides that it became nowadays popular, is a necessary consequence of a paradigm shift in text-related approaches. According to Marshall McLuhan, we live in the age of second orality, in which not only the means of communication but also the structure of consciousness has been changed.

The bultmannian school, with its existential-ontological determination, interpreted the idea of discipleship not as a pattern of life. The reason of this is that the stake of this theological interpretation is to thrust the questioner into the relationship with God, which is a reality beyond the language of theology, and even beyond language itself. Accordingly, Bultmann and his followers state that the relationship with God can not be described, because at the moment of defining and objectifying this connection we're talking not *from* the relationship, but *about* it. As a result, theology can only circle around its topic, circumscribe, but after reaching her limits, she must subside into silence, opening the way for the entry into the unspokable. Another consequence of the bultmannian thesis is that the ethical formulas of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus respectively are not instructions of one or another kind: every ethical formulation is secondary, while they are only departure gates to the real invitation that is the imperative to follow. As a result, every specific ethical guidance is suspicious: it can awaken the false theological idea of „legalism“ and „salvation through acts“ that, according to Bultmann, even because of the sovereignty of God, cannot be part of theological thinking. But the consequence of this statement was that "following Jesus" became an empty concept that existential theology was unable to fill with content.

On the other hand, our study of orality-research drew attention to the fact that an important aspect of the functioning of ancient cultures is a marginal issue of this discipline's discourse. That is mimetic learning. Since orality-research focuses on the ancient forms of communication, and draws conclusions in order to map orality's conscienceness, the other form of „performance“, the analysis of deeds is marginalized, and only appears as hints in sporadic comments. Walter J. Ong's research, however, points out that the text of the oral culture is focused on the present, „close to human lifeworld“, agonistic, participatory, and its role is to perpetuate the knowledge of society and to formulate its ethical standards as well. By stating this, he is in continuation with the thesis of Erik Havelock, according to which the medium of oral culture is the complex story material that these communities learn, conserve and transmit. But this conclusion is one-sided: to "identify with the subject of cognition", as Ong puts it, would assume a more direct, intimate relationship with the object of perception. Our recognition that deeds and mimesis had a fundamental role in oral cultures, accompanied with the relevance of the thesis of McLuhan, that we live the time of „new orality“, can further our understanding of the new era that desires for followable patterns and not abstractly formulated truths.

In the first chapter, we dealt with the problem of „Sitz im Leben“ and found that after the initial skepticism in which the analysis of the genres in the Gospels restricted the validity of the gospel texts to the situation of the ancient church, in some circles the interest in the teaching of Jesus was renewed. It is also due to Joachim Jeremias's work that more and more emphasis has been placed on the supposed original context of Jesus' teaching. With the discovery of „Palestinian coloring“ in the tradition, the chances of uncovering the "situation of Jesus" seemed to become an accomplishable task. Heinz Schürmann, on the other hand, reaches similar conclusion with the use of sociological research, namely that the original context of Jesus' tradition is as decisive as the sociological reality of the post-Easter era. Being positive about the authenticity of Jesus' tradition, he was able to show that certain traditions reflect the way of life of Jesus and his disciples. Likewise, Gerd Theissen goes in this direction: he thinks that the radical Jesus-tradition reflects the disciples' Jesus' lifestyle. He takes the assumption as his starting point that we also have chosen as one of the basic principles of our study, namely, that there is no point in conserving a tradition that is not legitimized and maintained by a viable way of life. Theissen's thesis, however, is problematic at some point: he considers the radical tradition of Q to be the basis of the "wandering charismatic " way of life that characterises the Jesus movement. Nevertheless, his main theorem seems to be appropriate: were his disciples followers in the full sense of the word, it would be difficult to assume that they had not learned or had not imitated Jesus' lifestyle. This statement was made in sporadic remarks by theologians who apply oral research in their theological endeavour (Kelber, later Dunn) and in more detail by Birger Gerhardsson and his disciples. They precipitated Theissen in their assumption that Jesus is to be considered as a teacher who consciously carries out his activities, arranges his teachings in remarkable rhythmic forms, but more importantly, he teaches through his actions. He performs symbolic deeds that his disciples and the public must interpret. Moreover, *meshalim* is "anthropomorphic" because it is not their purpose to formulate general truth, but rather to find practical answers to practical questions of life. Behind this is the view that the teacher is not only the interpreter of the Torah's norms, but also the embodiment of her. James D. G. Dunn puts the concept "impression" right on the spot of discipleship, which is the indelible and decisive impression left in the disciples caused by the personality, the teachings and deeds of Jesus. As we have seen, the *Sitz im Leben* is getting closer to the Jesus situation, and scholars dealing with the historical Jesus are becoming more and more optimistic about the reconstruction of his context. This tendency is to be welcomed with some reservations, as it recognizes the benefits and significance of Jesus' earthly ministry.

We tried to show that the traces of mimesis can be found in antique cultures, on the one hand in the normative intent of texts, and on the other hand in the way in which a teacher could be followed and was followed in Jewish and Hellenic cultural environments. In the second chapter we attempted to map this correlation. Eric Havelock's analyses have shown that the experiences of oral cultures are not framed in theoretic, abstract concepts or statements, but are basically narrative. This means that the epics on the one side are "encyclopedias" which include the knowledge of the era (shipping, construction, cooking, etc.) and on the other side function as "ethical codices". However, the expected behavior is not conveyed at the level of strictly defined norms, but within the framework of the dramatic conflict. The positive or negative action of the heroes, the way of the solution, and the intervention of the gods revolve around both "expectable" and "expected". Narration exerts its didactic influence by events woven into its texture. The significance of this thesis is that the text is ethical in the sense that it encourages imitation. We noticed while examining Ion's dialogue that the actor "represents" by his role. His gestures and body make him the one he is displaying - and thus imitates the behavior of the heroes on the scene. The re-presentation of the act, the game of the body, the act is therefore not an ancillary or secondary element of the performance, but an

essential part of it. This recognition led us to the question of whether the Gospel texts are not similar in function. If the "Jesus stories" do not merely want to narrate, but also want to be patterns of expected ethical action, then the function of the texts not exhaust in echoing the bultmannian call to repentance but operates as paradigm for discipleship. In order to prove this, the examination of a Hellenic genre, the *chreia*, which according to Wernon K. Robbins were imported to Judaism from the Greeks, helped to test this assumption.

The *chreia* as succinct and often witty story or statement, is always linked to a person and characterizes him. Its purpose is to provide a description of a person, which can then be used as part of a larger argument in rhetorical speeches, as a positive or negative example. Thus, *chreia* is often "useful for life", that is, it has a character-shaping power: it has a moral message. Mapping the broader and narrower hellenistic educational situation, our result was that mimesis, i.e. the encouragement for imitating the positive example, from epics to historical works, is an essential pedagogical demand and task. In the Gospels, Wernon K. Robbins demonstrates the traces of the genre convincingly. This is important to us because his result adds to the understanding of the intent of gospel stories. Robbins' results are complemented by a new trend in New Testament research that discovers narrative elements in the earliest layers of tradition. The significance of this is that the story itself may be "teaching" that is, not only through *logia* can maxims of lifestyle be stated, but through a situation or conflict resolution in the flow of the narrative as well, in the way the greek prose or poetic genres clearly demonstrate. Thus Gerhardsson's thesis is reinforced, who says that rabbinical stories could in many cases serve as sources of halachic teachings and he presumes a similar function to the anecdotes in the Gospels. On the basis of all these, the hypothesis that prioritizes the sayings and treats stories as their illustrations proved to be wrong. The story itself is also "useful for life": its purpose is to formulate a moral message and example.

We then looked at the educational environment of the late antique Jews to get closer to Jesus' situation. Examining the jewish texts of the Hellenistic era, we discovered that in them the following of a virtuous model plays a fundamental role. Mimesis of the great heroes of the past was not only an opportunity but a requirement, which is also confirmed in certain popular philosophical documents by the fact that whoever follows the good "imitates" God. The great figures of the Jewish past as heroes become the embodiment of a particular virtue in a way that they show the way: in case of Daniel, of persistence, in case of Fineas, of adherence, in the case of Moses, of humility. The parts of Testimonials that contain the instructions of the perishing are often refer to the great heroes of the past. While we have shown this, it has also been demonstrated that teaching examples penetrate the whole society and not just the circle of the literate elite. By the role of the teacher, described as "father-son" relationship within the tradition complex called "little tradition" (Horsley), conserved and transmitted the traditions of the most important heroes that could serve as mimetic examples. If there were synagogues in Jesus' time, and at least teaching took place there, these „houses of instruction" could be places that fostered the mastering of the stories, and the memory of the heroes. Although the function of the synagogues existing at the time of the second temple period is controversial in many ways, we consider Josephus and the accounts of Flavius and Philo of Alexandria as reliable sources in this respect, all their clear apologetic intentions notwithstanding. According to them, Torah training takes place on Saturday at the "gathering place" (synagoge). The extent to which these places were available to broader layers is still questionable. However, the role of the parent can be a further point of reference in examining this question: the call for reciting the Shema is for everyone. The child not only acquires the professional knowledge of the head of the family, but also the general rules governing pious life. These, at least according to the testimony of 4Maccabees, include the stories of Old Testament heroes. And if we investigate rabbinical anecdotes from the 2nd century and beyond, we find similar

thrusts in them. In these stories, the acts of the "master" are public, and his actions become teachings, exemplary reference cases. The reason for this is that the master himself, according to the general idea, is the "incarnated Torah", not only through his words, but also through his deeds. Although our analyzed examples did not originate from the age of Jesus, we assumed that in the time of Jesus this educational mechanism worked in a similar way. There is no compelling reason to assume that the way in which knowledge is passed, which is essentially unchanging in antique societies, is fundamentally transformed in a couple of decades.

It is an unfortunate fact that we only have informations from the pre-Jesus era and from the 2nd century AD, but hardly any from the time of Jesus. We tried to bridge this gap through the analysis of the Gospels' traditions, by working with the earliest units, which can be found in the saying source Q. Thus, in the third major chapter, we dealt with the analysis of Jesus' deeds and teachings to determine whether Jesus himself considered his deeds to be exemplary, and whether Jesus' environment was thus related to Jesus' teaching. We have found that not only later stories see Jesus as a "teacher" whose deeds are appreciated by his followers as didactic events, but as far as retrievable, according to the tradition closest to Jesus, Jesus himself had the intention to lead by example with his way of life and to encourage mimesis (e.g. the question of John the Baptist). The analysis of certain sections also showed that the Jesus' public activity is accompanied by constant evaluation and criticism, and the audience always pondered the harmony between the student's actions and words (e.g. the Beelzebub-controversy, Jesus the gluttonous and drunken, or Jesus's teaching of John the Baptist), the master's Torah interpretation and its relationship to the interpretations of the „schools“ in his age (e.g. the question of fasting). Jesus does not question this reception mechanism anywhere, but merely refutes or adjusts concrete conclusions.

In relation to Jesus, we have seen that he lives in accordance with his own message: he moves to Capernaum from Nazareth, leaves his family, chooses being unpropertied and remains unmarried for the Kingdom of God. He deems his astonishing deeds and healings as the realizations of the Kingdom. We know from the tradition of Jesus that although not all the followers, but some of them choose a similar way of life. Peter claims to have left everything for Jesus. The sons of Zebedee followed Jesus by "leaving their nets behind". We may think that the consequences of these acts stick to them as stigmata: leaving the "place" designated to them within the narrower and broader kinship and community causes shame, which not only effects the person but also the family, among other things because of their departure the families may have had to face financial problems due to the loss of workforce. In some cases, following Jesus was really meant "come to hate" the parents or accepting homelessness, at any rate to deny themselves, that is, to refuse their kinship and honor based on their social status. We have pointed out that the decisive features of Jesus' activities are also „copied“. Exorcism and healing, for example, remain a practice in the ancient church, whose purpose and significance was similar to that of Jesus, even though, as we tried to show through the tradition of healing the lunatic boy, the practice and the technique of exorcism also changes. Master and follower, paidagogos and mathetes, Jesus and his disciples, seem to teach in a similar relationship: the teacher is someone who teaches with his life an example of a personal lifestyle. Certain stories in the gospel therefore have a major role to play in providing a pattern to imitate. While in the time of the ancient church the Master is no longer present and cannot teach directly with his life, two possibilities remain: either to follow the followers of Jesus, who are familiar with the way of life of Jesus due to their relationship with Him, or to gain instructions from the life of Jesus narrated in the oral and written traditions. These traditions' functions seem to be to retain the pattern, and be an assistance to memory of discipleship. Of course, the two options were probably not in an either-or, rather in a complementary relationship. However, in the frames of this dissertation, it was not possible to explain this.

### Theses of the dissertation

1. **Mapping the role of mimesis is based on the premise that oral cultures, as according to many in modern cultures also, are essential for oral cultures.** The legitimacy of this suggestion is being proved by the exploration of the conclusions of orality-research, the Hellenistic texts and documents and through an examination of the New Testament. Moreover, the informations provided by sociology and cultural anthropology were considered.

2. **The thesis, based on this premise, is that certain parts of the gospel texts, which describe Jesus' teachings and deeds (or the details of the letters in which Paul refers to the imitation of his own Christ's life), are in fact mimetic stories. They want to record the parameters of following Jesus.** They do not disclose any universal norms or ethics, but formulate and apply the current problems of being a follower of Jesus.

3. Known 4th-5th Century Codices, which well represent the circle of the normative books of Christianity, are essentially testimonies of the transitional state of orality and literacy. In this period, oral consciousness still permeates the use of texts. Manuscripts themselves are not canonical in the sense that they communicate their own truths as normative and immutable authority, but support a practice and use them in response to the needs of a living community. **The gospels are likely to serve the same purpose in their own time of creation: they are memory assistances.** Papias still prides himself in the middle of the second century that he himself organizes and interprets the collection of Jesus' sayings. In other words, oral and written traditions coexist and support each other. And if the texts point beyond themselves, the question is to what.

4. The knowledge, which was passed on primarily through verbal means, was handed down from the master to the disciple and in the ancient school context in the frame of a teacher-student relationship, even, through the interpersonal channel of the father-son relationship. In every case, directly from the authority person to the student. **Our thesis is that in antiquity mimesis is an essential element of this learning process, while "learning" is much more than a simple knowledge transfer.** In Hellenic education, the aristotelian principle of mimesis prevailed when the stories of the cultural public domain became part of the students' knowledge. For example, memorizing the chronies about the great figures of the past at the basic level of rhetorical training when writing and reading skills were formed, was also about acquiring knowledge of the most basic virtues and vices. However, this is true not only in Hellenic, but also in Jewish education: the great exemplars of the Jewish past, in the Hellenistic-Roman era, bear the traits of Hellenic heroes and become the embodiment of virtue. Though the idea of „imitating“ God also appears, remains sporadic. However, the "path" of the Almighty can be imitated, and the one treading this path will be an example to others of piety and knowledge of God.

5. **From this follows the fifth thesis: the statement that the method in spoken and written "mimetic teaching" is not fundamentally different:** the thorn story or enlightening debate narrative supposed to represent and describe through a made or witty teaching the very person who is held worthy of following and of mimesis.

6. This recognition can even lead to the re-thinking of the intention of Jesus' teachings and actions in the synoptic gospels. **Our thesis is that in many cases the apophthegmata and words reporting Jesus' actions are "mimetic memoirs", that is, they are used to call back to the adherence of**

**Jesus.** The purpose of tradition is to preserve the Master's actions worthy to follow, in order to give instructions of how to follow him.