

Hans Boersma. *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Hans Boersma, the J.I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, has published works spanning various theological topics, including projects on violence and hospitality, the *Nouvelle Théologie* school of Catholic theology, and a recent book of sermons. In the book under review, Boersma approaches the Cappadocian through the lens of embodiment and virtue. This volume provides a robust overview of the numerous ways the human body is portrayed in Gregory's theology, while offering a new methodological lens by which to view that theology.

Essential to the methodology is Boersma's deployment of "anagogy," a method of interpretation of spiritual accounts, particularly popular among medieval theologians. However, as the author argues, the term is "much broader than its use later in the Medieval ages" (2). Gregory uses anagogy broadly, employing it to show how Scripture can give insights into broader spiritual realities, not merely realities in the future. Boersma argues that Gregory's entire theology can be classified as anagogical, going so far as to say that for Gregory, the purpose of life itself is anagogical in character (3): anagogy is then not just a hermeneutical strategy or a means of doing exegesis. It is instead a process of participation within divine virtue, and thus the human being's attempt to ascend to the life of God.

*Embodiment and Virtue* is divided into nine chapters, each of which attempts to show the importance of anagogy for Gregory's thought. Boersma attempts to establish this theme early on in his description of Gregory's notion of *diastema*, a theory of extension that relates to all of created order, including time and space. Gregory's emphasis on the *diastemic*, measurable character of created existence suggests that God created the world distinct from Godself (12). To say that the created order is *diastemic* is to argue its impermanence. Boersma generally employs *diastema* to explain the depth of space between human bodies and God, using the term to explain capacity as opposed to a mere spatial gap. He also argues that temporality is ultimately to be overcome by human beings (31). *Diastema* thus acts as the force which both limits human bodies in their temporality and provides access for

potential ascension to the Divine.

The temporality of human experience, and the need to ascend to the life of God, is where virtue becomes important. Following a similar trajectory of thought as *diastema*, virtue is the means by which human beings surpass their limitations and temporal distance. Human interaction with divine virtue happens through various means. It can occur through interaction with scripture, by employing an anagogical approach that moves beyond limitations bound by historicity and allows scripture to be experienced as divine revelation (53). Boersma reminds readers that Gregory had a high regard for Scripture as divine revelation, even if he lacked confidence in the ability of human reason to comprehend essential meaning. Yet it is ultimately faith, not reason, through which anagogy takes place.

Virtue can also be acquired through observation of the bodily senses, allowing the human being to participate through imitation (99). Virtues are embodied in, and in turn are perceived and expressed through, the senses during human interaction. Pervading the core tenets of Gregory's theology is a voice calling for embodied virtue as participation in the life of God (215).

Although the author's writing is incisive, readers would undoubtedly benefit from previous experience with patristic thought and methods. Boersma's project provides a useful overview of Gregory's understanding of embodiment and human placement within creation. The author nicely covers secondary subjects under Gregory's study of the body, such as scripture, gender, death, and slavery, while expressing concern over recent attempts to consider the depiction of the body in the Cappadocian's theology as only rhetorical. Gregory has re-emerged in recent years because of his vibrant theology, particularly as it relates to theological anthropology and the body's role in relation to the infinitude of God.

While providing a useful overview, Boersma underplays the stimulating aspects of Gregory's thought by being too concerned with placing the Cappadocian within the standard categories of Platonism. While those categories are natural aspects of any discourse on Gregory, Boersma leaves little room for discussion of other potential philosophical influences, or of occasions when Gregory's thought opposed the Neoplatonism of his day.

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