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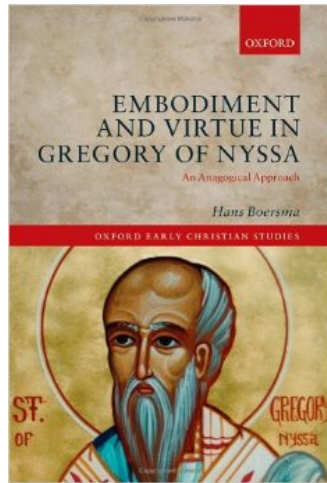
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Hans Boersma  
*Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An  
Anagogical Approach* (Oxford Early Christian  
Studies)

Oxford University Press, 2013

Pp. xviii + 283. ISBN: 978-0-199-64112-3.

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Coleman M. Ford

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One of the most recent offerings in contemporary discourse on the theology of Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335–394) is Hans Boersma’s *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach*, published by Oxford University Press in their Early Christian Studies series. This text represents a critical entry into the ongoing Nyssen discussion on body and gender, as well as broader discussions of the interpretation of Scripture and virtue ethics in a Christian historical perspective.

Boersma approaches Nyssen on his own terms in order to represent the anagogical theology of this fourth century Christian thinker free from notions of a postmodern deconstructionist program. The totality of Gregory’s theology, according to Boersma, is anagogical and the theme of virtue is “pervasive throughout Gregory’s writings” (p.4). Boersma argues against those who take embodiment language too far, admitting that recent treatments “do not do justice to his

overall thought” (p.11). For Gregory, the move from literal to spiritual readings is related “virtuous ascent away from bodily passions to a proper desire for God” (p.14). Additionally, Boersma highlights the idea of participation in the divine. This virtuous life is participation in Christ, and as Boersma demonstrates, this facet of Nyssen’s theology avoids the pitfall of moralism for which recent treatments have argued.

Boersma uses the concept of the body as a lens for his discussion. Chapter one establishes the idea of the “measured body.” The here and now—including a Christian’s anagogical ascent by means of virtue—is part of temporal extension, and for Gregory, “[does] not properly characterize the human destiny” (p.22). Boersma thoughtfully connects Gregory’s understanding of the eschaton as the “eighth day” to the anagogical approach as a foundation for his understanding of growth in virtue. The resurrection of Christ inaugurates the initial participation, and a life of virtue allows one “to ascend so as to participate more fully in this new mode of life” (p.44). Thus, entry into the “eighth day” for Gregory “is predicated upon repentance and a life of virtue” (p.43). In chapter two, Boersma explores the idea of epistemological humility in the exegesis of Nyssen. While interpreting figuratively based on the taxis of the salvific economy, Gregory does not give himself license to neglect the *theologia* of Scripture—figurative interpretation does not mean “open-ended” (p.66). Scripture is vital to a virtuous life, requiring humility in approaching the text. No better place illustrates this fact for Gregory than the Psalter. Boersma explains, “[The] aim of the Psalter is to reshape us by means of virtue into the divine likeness, so that Christ may be formed in us” (p.74). The spiritual *skopos* of the text is key for Gregory and necessary for attuning our lives to virtue like a finely tuned instrument (74, 77).

Chapters three and four provide readers with a necessary corrective regarding the concept of virginity in Gregory's thought. Feminist scholars such as Sarah Coakley, Elizabeth Clark and Virginia Burrhus have led the main discourse on gender in Nyssen. Boersma's interaction is a welcomed addition. Virginity, for Gregory, provides an image of moral purity and "encompasses all human virtues" (p.120). The virginal life of Macrina "gives us an anticipatory glance into the virginal life of the resurrection" (p.87). As such, bodily existence for Gregory is not unimportant. If growth in virtue is the goal of participation in Christ, then having "tunics of hide" aids in growth by presenting opportunities to choose vice instead of virtue (p.134). The goal is not disembodiment—the goal is total embodiment in the likeness of Christ. In chapters five through seven, Boersma highlights Gregory's ethical concerns both inside and outside of the church. Slavery is deplorable based on common humanity and the reality of the *imago dei*. Likewise, Nyssen sharply denounces greed in the face of poverty and homelessness. Concluding the text in chapter seven, Boersma argues against the notion of Gregory as a strict moralist. Responding to the thesis of Werner Jaeger and others, Boersma maintains that a thoroughly theological reading of Gregory rescues him from the charge of moralism. Boersma concludes by affirming the uniqueness of Nyssen as a "thoroughly otherworldly theologian" (p.246).

Boersma offers a corrective to the postmodern reading of Gregory that emphasizes embodiment to the neglect of theology. His theological reading of Gregory dissolves misreadings of Nyssen's supposed moralism. That being said, Boersma could have clarified certain points of Nyssen's theology. For example, if Nyssen believes in bodily extension in time and space only in our current state, how can

he logically affirm a bodily resurrection? Doesn't the resurrection assume some sort of extension throughout time and space? Additionally, a tension exists in how growth in virtue is seen as a form of escape from bodily existence. The observation that Gregory is a foremost "otherworldly theologian" helps explain this view of escapism, but Boersma could have done more to explain whether or not this amounts to a kind of dualism in Gregory. Additionally, Boersma could have done more to bring out the "here and now" implications of Nyssen's thought.

In the preface, Boersma offers a refreshing confession—he did not discover in Gregory what he had set out to find. He was surprised at how little Gregory affirms how the "entire created order—including embodied existence—participates sacramentally in eternal realities" (p.vii). Despite this admission, *Embodiment and Virtue* is a welcomed addition to Nyssen scholarship. It is an especially helpful text to students of early Christian anthropology and ethics. It should also serve well as a text for courses in Cappadocian theology in general. On his own admission, Boersma's expectations were only half met, yet his exploration of Gregory, including his anagogical theology and emphasis on virtue, will serve scholarship well for the next generation of Nyssen scholars.

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