

BOOK REVIEW

The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology. By RAPHAEL A. CADENHEAD. Christianity in Late Antiquity, vol. 4. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 267. Hardback, \$95.00. ISBN: 978-0-520-29796-8.

In *The Body and Desire*, Raphael A. Cadenhead provides an insightful analysis of the place of desire and sexuality in Gregory of Nyssa's ascetical writings, stressing the need for a diachronic understanding of spiritual maturation. Cadenhead demonstrates that apparent gender fluidity in Gregory's thought must be understood within the context of his larger program of ascetical transformation that progresses through specific stages.

Part 1, examining the early phase in Gregory's career, considers marriage and virginity, primarily in *De virginitate*. Chapter 1 discusses the manner in which virginity supersedes Platonic pederasty and points to Gregory's moderate view of marriage. In a section that will particularly appeal to students of classical philosophy, while stressing that in the ancient world sexual practices were not intimately linked with sexual identity, he shows that Christian celibacy is intended to replace Platonic pederasty; celibacy provides the same beneficial results as pederasty, "fecundity and contemplation of the Form of Beauty," while removing the need for the young male *erōmenos*. In this fascinating section, Cadenhead argues that Gregory actually presents a critique of pederasty.

Chapter 2 shows the implications of Gregory's "integrationist ethic" for his understanding of sexual virtue and vice. In the *De virginitate*, sexual excess is only treated as one of the vices, with gluttony taking center stage. By making fidelity to Christ, the Bridegroom, the factor uniting the virtues, and thus making any sin a form of adultery, Gregory Christianizes the idea originating in ancient philosophy that the virtues support each other.

Chapter 3 develops Gregory's early understanding of Christ as the proper end of desire. For Gregory, the passions do not have to be utterly extirpated but rather directed toward Christ. Discussing Gregory's use of ancient stereotypes that associate courage with males and weakness with females, Cadenhead argues that effeminacy, for Gregory, is not connected with homosexual identity, noting that it

is mentioned in connection with married people. At the same time, the use of male and female imagery “does not refer to ontologically male or female referents”; both male and female imagery are used to depict the soul’s relationship with Christ (70).

Part 2, examining the middle phase in Gregory’s career, considers the effects of the deaths of Gregory’s siblings on his theology and also considers the doctrinal controversies in which Gregory was involved. Chapter 4 shows that in the middle phase Gregory nuances his account of marriage and asceticism; spiritual fecundity is superior, but physical fecundity is still good. Cadenhead also notes, against modern attempts to focus on Gregory’s positive use of female imagery in describing spiritual ascent, that Gregory criticizes female vice and presents a hierarchical picture of the relations between the sexes.

Chapter 5 shows that the deaths of Basil and Macrina led Gregory to consider the possibility that in the resurrection human bodies will not be sexually differentiated. While Gregory resists the confusion of the sexes when addressing married people, when he addresses ascetics, he presents ascetics of both sexes as appropriating virtues characteristic of both genders (89). Cadenhead, moreover, providing insight into an ongoing discussion in the scholarship, concludes that Gregory was not sure if the resurrected body would have genitalia. In considering Gregory’s theory of desire in the *De anima* and the *De hominis opificio*, Cadenhead notes that Gregory makes use for the first time in his works of a distinction drawn by Hierocles and Seneca between *hormai* and *pathē* and suggests that the rationality resulting from being made in the *imago Dei* allows human beings to use their reason to overcome *pathē*. Chapter 6 discusses the influence on Gregory’s understanding of asceticism of the Christological and Trinitarian controversies in which he was involved.

Part 3, focusing on Gregory’s *Life of Moses* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, works arising from his late phase, demonstrates Gregory’s interest in diachronic spiritual maturation. Chapter 7 argues that Gregory shifts to understanding virginity as referring not to sexual continence but to moral purity. This chapter also examines the theme of spiritual development. Under the influence of the Song of Songs, virginity comes to mean fidelity to Christ expressed in morally upright living. This shift means that married people are now capable of “virginity” and of being the Bride of Christ, though celibacy still surpasses marriage. Gregory resolves an apparent conflict between contemplation and virtue by presenting the spiritual life as involving diachronic maturation that occurs in stages. First, the soul comes to a basic knowledge of God. Then, it lives a virtuous, ascetical life. Finally,

it enjoys erotic contemplation of God, in which contemplation and virtue are united.

Chapter 8 considers an innovation in Gregory's later thought: the switches that occur between male and female in the spiritual ascent are presented within a diachronic framework. The soul is presented as maturing from a morally deficient femininity to virtuous masculinity to the femininity of the Bride of Christ. The author argues that the *Life of Moses*, with its exhortation to transition from womanly vice to manly virtue and courtship of Wisdom, is addressed to the spiritually immature, while the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, with its focus on a female Bride, is addressed to the spiritually mature. The two works, thus, treat of two distinct stages, with accompanying switches between male and female, not indiscriminate gender reversals. Cadenhead is also careful to note that this image of the soul as Bride at the summit of the ascent is dependent upon an image of Christ as the Bridegroom and thus upon sexual hierarchy. In his conclusion, Cadenhead seeks to draw out some challenges that his research presents for contemporary conversations relating to ethical issues, particularly "a crisis in what may be described as the 'economy of desire'" (158).

The Body and Desire should be essential reading for anyone who is interested in understanding Gregory's ascetical theology, as well as issues of gender and sexuality in late antiquity. It provides an essential corrective to attempts to read modern theories of gender and sexuality into early Christian theology. Classicists will especially appreciate the attention given by Cadenhead to Gregory's appropriation of classical philosophy, especially Platonism and Stoicism.

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