

The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology

By R. A. Cadenhead (2018)

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Reviewed by Sara Misgen

In *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology*, a revision of his dissertation at Cambridge, Raphael A. Cadenhead seeks to make three overlapping contributions to late antique studies, patristic theology, and contemporary sexual ethics. First, he wants to address scholarship on gender and sexuality in Gregory of Nyssa's writings (335–394 CE) – particularly that of Verna Harrison, Elizabeth Clark, Virginia Burrus, and Sarah Coakley – which, in Cadenhead's evaluation, ignore the ascetic elements of Gregory's treatment of gender. These treatments of Gregory's works, particularly those informed by critical theories of gender and sexuality, obscure the subtleties of the original gendered imagery by importing ahistorical understandings of the body, gender, and sex, resulting in misreadings. In lieu thereof, Cadenhead offers his own account of what he terms Gregory's 'ascetical theology' (p. 7), paying particular attention to the ways it shifts and develops over Gregory's life through close, historically informed readings of Gregory's major texts. This ascetical theology, deriving from the Greek word *askesis*, 'training,' involves the training of all of one's desires to reorient them toward God. Late ancient Christians, including Gregory, combined these with physical practices, including fasting, abstinence, and self-denial. Finally, Cadenhead applies Gregory's theology to contemporary ecclesiastical controversies over women's ordination, same-sex marriage, and sexual abuse of children, and argues that the comprehensive account of human desire and sanctification present in ascetical theology highlights the impoverished nature of these discussions, as they attempt

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to treat sexual desire in isolation, and not among the other desires. Were Gregory's perspective to be part of the conversation, Cadenhead argues, fuller ethical possibilities around the body and desire could be realized.

The book is structured in three parts, each corresponding to a stage in Gregory's ecclesiastical and literary career. After a brief introduction to the project and a primer on the historical context of Christianity in the fourth century, Part One, 'The Integrative Significance of the Body in the Life of Virtue' (371–378 CE), examines the early phase of Gregory's writings. Here, *On Virginit*y is the focus, and it is used to orient the reader to the meaning and function of 'marriage' and 'virginity' in Gregory's corpus – namely, that the virtues cannot remain separated from each other, and are necessarily entangled with bodily practices like fasting, abstinence, and almsgiving (pp. 57–61). In Part Two, 'The Ascetical and Eschatological Mixture of Male and Female' (378–387 CE), Cadenhead turns to the doctrinal controversies, especially Apollinarianism and Eunomianism, that animated Gregory's career and led to revisions of his anthropology and ascetical theology. Helpfully, he identifies two rival anthropologies – one based around Genesis 1:27, the other on Genesis 2 – that run through Gregory's works of this period but are never resolved (pp. 88–9). In particular, Gregory oscillates on whether humans retain their genitals in the afterlife (p. 5). From there, he turns to a discussion of how the virtues are gendered in this phase of ascetical theology, and how both need to be overcome for maturity to be achieved (p. 87). Part Three, 'Erotic Intimacy with Christ and the Maturation of Desire' (387–394 CE), focuses on how virginity is recast as a purely spiritual category in Gregory's mature theology, so that it can be applied to both married and celibate Christians (p. 123). Through a close reading of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Cadenhead argues that, contrary to recent interpretations, Gregory does not give a 'fluid' account of gender, but rather a hierarchical one, in which the soul switches between masculine and feminine roles at specific points on its ascent to intimacy with Christ: a soul that begins as weak and effeminate becomes a manly soul that is strong in virtue and then the feminine Bride of Christ as it spiritually matures (pp. 145–6). In the conclusion, these are listed among the biggest takeaways of the book: in Gregory's mature thought, virginity is a category applicable to all people, and Gregory's ascetical theology cannot be separated from his use of a gendered hierarchy.

The strongest parts of the work are Cadenhead's close readings of Gregory's texts and the schema he develops for dating them. He shows exhaustive knowledge of Nyssen's corpus and the historical context in which all of the works were written, often detailing historical events to illuminate aspects of Gregory's work. Secondly, Cadenhead wades into debates about

the dating of Gregory's works to present his own well-reasoned chronology of Gregory's writings. This is woven into the chapters themselves, though it is more clearly laid out in an impressively researched and organized appendix (pp. 163–80). Here, Cadenhead has done a great service to teachers and scholars of Gregory's works by compiling all of the proposed dating schemas into clear charts, summarizing the major arguments, and including his own proposal without relying on an assumed linear development of thought. This appendix is an incredible resource for those looking to familiarize themselves with the outlines of scholarship on Gregory's corpus.

Greater challenges arise in the ethical framing with which Cadenhead opens and closes his book, as well as his critiques of theoretically informed readings of Gregory. The implications for contemporary ethics in Cadenhead's scholarship are underdeveloped, a point he acknowledges. As a result, the text only gestures at the ways in which Gregory's vision of the body, sex, and gender as entangled in an economy of desire might shift contemporary conversations about the place of women, gay people, and celibacy in the Christian church (p. 157). Second, Cadenhead's major critique of contemporary scholars who bring Freud, Jung, Foucault, and Butler into conversation with Gregory's writing is that they 'impose post-modern presumptions' (p. 1) onto it, importing 'anachronisms,' which obscure both the premodern anthropology on which Gregory relies and the ascetic elements of his thought (p. 17). However, Cadenhead seems to make this same move in the opposite direction by applying his thoroughly historicized close readings of Gregory's theology of sex, gender, desire, and the body to contemporary contexts that do not necessarily share those pre-modern assumptions. Additional reflections on this point would have strengthened the book's prescriptive aims. Their absence, however, does not detract from Cadenhead's contributions: his impressive historical work, his detailed close-readings, and his knowledge of Gregory's works. This volume will serve readers interested in a more developed understanding of Gregory's thought and historical context well.