
Exeter Professor Morwenna Ludlow understands very well that authorial intention and subsequent interpretation can vary widely. Her interest and broad work in early church history, patristic theology, and reception theory has led to her extremely detailed work concerning contemporary interpretation of church and Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa. While students of Gregory will find a healthy measure of his theology treated in this volume, Ludlow’s project is concerned chiefly with identifying how recent scholarship has painted Gregory and what factors color the resulting theological portrait. She keenly asks what sense of authority Gregory is given in reference to issues of contemporary import as well as what methods and disciplines have been brought to bear on an interpretive reading of his texts. Like a true post-modern, Ludlow understands flexibility to be a mark of comprehensive understanding and suggests that Nyssen’s own text, theologically motivated, opens itself to this manner of interpretation.

The construction of Ludlow's argument is based on four theological categories: trinity, soteriology, anthropology, and revelation. Each of these categories highlights a range of perspectives that noted Gregory scholars bring to the debate. In the first section Ludlow argues with great specificity that T.F. Torrance’s interpretation of Gregory is based very much on the assumption of Nicene orthodoxy. In Torrance’s reading, Nyssen thought has been tainted by Hellenistic philosophy over and against the work of the other two Cappadocian fathers. He introduces what becomes a very important element in Ludlow’s thesis: contemporary readers tend to anachronistically apply later developments as a canon by which to measure Gregory’s orthodoxy. Robert Jenson does not share Torrance’s outlook. He finds that Gregory and his Cappadocian counterparts envisaged the evangelization of Hellenism and fought to stem the tide of the Platonic (and later Augustinian) monad. Jenson suggests that Gregory’s Trinity can be better understood in terms of experiential or economic salvation history, so that the functioning persons form the being of the Godhead, not necessarily the relationships or processions within the Trinity. Both Torrance and Jenson to some degree read Gregory into their own tradition. Ludlow takes a critical stance looking at text and interpreter to conclude that both Torrance and Jenson make interpretive mistakes that construe the work of Gregory as favorable to their point or perspective on orthodoxy.

Ludlow gives the impression that she is a very astute fly on the wall of similar theoretical conversations between theologians discussing Gregory Nyssen. At some
points she enters into the conversation with the interlocutors to make critical remarks about their arguments. Her critical arguments are not developed at length, but her comments are helpful insofar as they temper the sometimes extreme propositions of the theological voices.

The section on soteriology leaves the reader encouraged as it very gently sways the survey of Gregory’s classical atonement from a negative light to a positive one. Mainstream proponents of Anselmian and Abelardian atonement theories do not respond well to Gregory’s ‘Fish-hook’ metaphor for the deception of the devil. The perspective of these authors is challenged by Hastings Rashdall who finds in Gregory a tendency to remove horrible western eschatological images of punishment and replace them with the healing of the sinner. F.W. Dillstone also pulls Gregory away from the harsh criticism he has received for using grotesque metaphor and points out that, in the marketplace of ideas that seeks hearts and minds, Gregory’s picture effectively transmits the theological lesson. Deception may be employed, but, as Daniel Migliore points out, it is to show that evil is not overcome by force or brutality, but by the foolish plan of God through weakness. In Gregory’s own Arian context it was an effective way of showing that the ‘merely human’ condition of an incarnate Christ was more than enough to accomplish salvation.

Nyssen’s ability to gently weave together the richness of physical reality with spiritual growth is a theme that comes out of his Christology and soteriology. Through this subtle line of argumentation Ludlow demonstrates the difference between theological and literary perspectives. She shows that interpretations devoted to a particular traditional atonement theory are suspect and critical of Gregory, whereas approaches that take into consideration literary flair, pedagogy, and incarnational theology cast Gregory in a whiter light.

Ludlow’s conclusion about Gregory of Nyssa scholarship meets up nicely with her conclusion about Gregory’s guiding theological point. In essence, Gregory’s writing lends itself to ambiguity because he never intended to land solidly on any particular interpretation. The variety of disciplines that reflect upon and inform Nyssen texts never seem to nail down a particular conclusion because Gregory’s own method reflected a deeper theological truth: epektasis. A wide range of metaphor, imagery, and prescription exist in Nyssa’s texts to provoke lifelong process and transformation of the human individual into participation with the divine (epektasis). Gregory provided tensions and ambiguity in his writing in order to create a space for introspective thought and decision on the part of the reader. His goal was to force
his readers to wrestle and come to grips with what he had to say and its application in their own soul-developing process of salvation.

Ludlow’s project demonstrates the space created by Gregory into which a host of scholars, employing all sorts of tactics, have entered in order to struggle with ideas and find reasonable applications for his ideas into their own streams of thought. While Ludlow provides general forms for understanding where scholars are positioned as they make these struggles – static, reformatory, and adaptive – she rightfully recognizes the inadequacy of making generalizations. In the end this is a remarkably complex and subjective project.

A monograph at this level requires the incoming reader to have a substantial grasp of theological, literary, and philosophical terminology. While the book is refreshingly clear in places, in other places the very technical argumentation eclipses the greater points. Sentence construction does not always lead to understanding and a number of typographical errors can be found throughout the text and quotations. This book is very useful to the student of Gregory in its survey of the wide range of perspectives and apparatus applied to his work – it can help pull the student out of a narrow channel of interpretation by providing a good survey of the variant possibilities. Furthermore, Ludlow’s gentle critique and guiding hand provides a vista-like view of the traditions and influences that go into those variants of Gregory Nyssen scholarship.

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