

THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

119. Jahrgang

– Januar 2023 –

Steven, Luke: Imitation, Knowledge and the Task of Christology in Maximus the Confessor. – Cambridge: James Clarke 2021. (X) 232 S., geb. £ 20,00 ISBN: 9780227177525

Luke Steven's recent monograph *Imitation, Knowledge, and the Task of Christology in Maximus the Confessor* is a revised doctoral diss. supervised by Sarah Coakley at the Uni of Cambridge. The author develops a certain 'likeness epistemology', arguing that for Maximus the Confessor the knowledge of God is the result of the achieved likeness of God. S. promises to offer a new route in approaching Maximus' Christology, which is focused on Maximus' notion of imitation and restricted to the rhetorical tools, which Maximus employs in his letters.

In the first chap., S. demonstrates that the knowing-by-likeness methodology is not Maximus' invention, but it is deeply rooted in previous pagan Greek, and also Christian tradition. S. skilfully presents how authors such as, Clement and Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocian fathers successfully combined ancient like-by-like optical theory, mediated through Aristotle, with enigmatic or allegorical exegesis. In the second chap., the author argues that Maximus adopted this method from Gregory Nazianzen, to whom he dedicated most of his *Difficulties*. However, according to S., Maximus went a step further than Gregory developing his 'likeness epistemology' in three main directions, namely 'knowing by love', 'knowing by virtue' and 'unknowing by likeness'. Thus, a human being knows God through love and virtue, because God is the love and virtue *per se*, but also by human desire for God that captures something of the divine transcended reality.

The third chap. is dedicated to the theme of deification as process of attaining the likeness with God. The author dives into Maximus' technical terms of activity, proportion and imitation, claiming that deification is achieved (a.) through the process of likeness or identity of divine and human actions, (b.) in proportion to a human likeness to God and (c.) by imitating Christ in every aspect.

The last three chap.s, according to the author, deal specifically with Maximus' practice of Christology in his letters. The fourth chap. is focused on the topic of praise and persuasion as rhetorical devices employed by Maximus in his letters. S. analyses two letters of Maximus, the 2nd letter on love to John the Cubicularius and the 2nd letter to Thomas. The main argument is that Maximus exercises the argumentative, not rhetorical strategy of praising his addressees for imitating theological issues, he discusses in the letter. According to the author, Maximus praises John for his love for God, before he introduces the topic of divine love and Thomas for imitating the mixture of opposites that Christ displayed, before introducing the theme of Christ's mixture of two natures, divine and human. The fifth chap. deals with the Maximus' strategy of praising his addressees for

imitating particular virtues of Christ's descending into humanity, i. e. incarnation as well as Christ's ascending back to divine hiddenness. The imitation of Christ's descending, which relates to his incarnation, crucifixion and death, are evident in the human virtues of humility, emptying and abasement, while the Christ's ascending, which pertains to his resurrection, ascension and deification, are transparent through the human virtues of passing through visible realities and encountering infinity and divine hiddenness. Finally, the sixth and the last chap. focuses on the topic of Christ's two wills and takes *Opusculum* 1 as the object of analysis. S. argues that Maximus employs the notion of wills together with the notion of desire. According to the author the virtue of humility relates to Christ's aligning of his human to his divine will, while the virtue of desire of his addresses for God is comparable with Christ's human will. S. summarizes in the conclusion that Maximus encourages his addressees first to engage in imitating Christ and then to reflect on him and his attributes.

S.'s monograph is surely in many aspects original and innovative book, but not flawless. Two major authorities for S. and mostly quoted authors in the field of Maximian studies are Andrew Louth and Paul Blowers. The author relies on their work, but also attempts to go beyond, which is not always successful. Unsatisfied with Louth's explanation that the discrepancy between Maximus early ascetic and later dogmatic works is in the different nature of spirituality and dogma, S. proclaims Maximus early works 'authoritarian and dogmatic' in order to explain why Maximus' language of his later dogmatic works is 'dry and more abstract' (4) without substantiating his claims.

The author's promise to offer a new route in approaching Maximus' Christology is also not without problems. First, although S. admits that Maximus' likeness epistemology stems from both the pagan philosophical and the Christian exegetical strand, he is more inclined to place Maximus in the exegetical tradition of Alexandria (48). Maximus' link to Origen and Clement is undeniable, but not fully explored. On the contrary, Maximus' dependence on Neoplatonism, not only pagan, but also Christian, which immensely contributed to 'optical' theory (dealing with vision, light and knowledge) has been largely studied by philosophers in the last few decades and S. has overlooked these studies.

Second, S.'s claim that he will focus his research on Maximus' letters sounds very promising, because they are understudied. Therefore, the reminder of the author that virtually all Maximus' works are letters sounds a bit disappointing, especially due to the fact that he builds his theoretical framework mostly on *Difficulties* and *Answers to Thalassios*, which he later employs in his analysis of three letters: the 2nd letter on love, the 2nd letter to Thomas and *Opusculum* 1. S.'s claim that Maximus applies the argumentative strategy of praising his addressees for imitating the theological issues is convincing but not substantiated by larger number of Maximus' letters. The three letters S. analyses are just small percentage of more than 80 letters and therefore, it would be pertinent at least to mention other letters in which Maximus employs the same strategy of praise for the sake of his argument.

Next, S. applies the same methodology of analysing Maximus' argumentative praise of two wills, like the virtues of love and humility. These categories are ontologically different because wills are natural capacities while the virtues are the results of the proper disposition of natural capacities. Therefore the argument that Christ has two wills points to the natural capacities of his two natures and it is not an example to follow but the natural state of Christ's person.

Finally, when it comes to bibliography it seems that S. does not acknowledge a recent expansion in Maximian studies, and his secondary literature, limited to now already classical readings of Maximus, belongs more to the 20th, than the 21st century with only few titles from the last decade.

Apart from the contribution to Maximus' rhetorical strategy, the monograph may open some new paths in the Maximian studies. First, the section dealing with the topic of 'unknowing by likeness' is very innovative, because it portrays how, according to Maximus, human desire for God may capture something of divine transcended reality, without knowing it. Second, the section of the last chap. which deals with human desire for God and its derivatives is very significant, because it stresses the constitutive role of the desire for God, similar to the role that desire plays in the anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa.

S.'s monograph surely deserves to be acknowledged by Maximian scholarship and I am sure that many scholars will appropriate S.'s findings, like I plan to do in my studies.

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