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*Divine Perfection and Human Potentiality: The Trinitarian Anthropology of Hilary of Poitiers.* Jarred Austin Mercer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xvi + 305.

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The Rev. Dr. Jarred A. Mercer has issued a challenge to academic and practical theologians alike with *Divine Perfection and Human Potentiality: The Trinitarian Anthropology of Hilary of Poitiers*. Mercer encourages the reader to engage with Saint Hilary of Poitiers on his own terms, rather than imposing anachronistic thought-categories onto his work or brushing it off as being a mere steppingstone on the road to more developed theologies, discounting him as an ante-Nicene Father who can safely be laid aside in favour of Augustine. The book seeks to demonstrate how Hilary's anthropology is grounded in trinitarian Christology. In order to understand what it means to be human, Mercer argues, Hilary would have us understand what it means for Christ to be both human and divine.

In Chapter 1, "Divine Generation and Human Potentiality," Mercer explores the thought-world of Origen, Tertullian, Novatian, and Athanasius. He shows how Hilary constructed his trinitarian anthropology on the scaffolding of their imagery and linguistic tools, specifically with reference to John 1:1–4, which for Hilary becomes a foundation for developing his ideas about the eternal and infinite birth of the Son from the Father. Mercer wants the reader to begin thinking about human "potentiality and fulfillment, origin and destiny" as being, for Hilary, "both founded and perfected in the infinite self-giving productivity of God" (54).

At this point I feel compelled to note that there are well over one hundred appearances of the word "birth," and over a hundred more of the word "generation," in this book. Mercer

himself states, “I use “generation” and “birth” interchangeably throughout in reference to Hilary, who directly states that the *natiuitas* is none other than the *generatio* of the Son from the Father” (13, n.1). There are only two mentions of the word “woman,” both found on page 91 and referring to Mary’s use as a vessel from which the physical body of Jesus could be made. On page 171 there is the only use of the word “female,” citing Genesis 1:27 in attributing *imago Dei* to women as well as men. It appears Mercer has opened a door, with his choice of words, to someone wishing to do serious work on what a Hilarian understanding of woman’s humanity might mean in terms of the *imago Dei* or for God as the divine giver of birth.

In Chapter 2 Mercer begins to hint at how finite humans can know an infinite God. From their finite perspective, they can know God infinitely. Holding this notion at the back of one’s mind will be helpful as Mercer develops his reading of Hilary’s anthropology. He notes Hilary’s cautious approach to naming God in any terms other than those found in Scripture and giving historical arguments about name and nature, such as how “Father” and “Son” signify something about God. Hilary equated God’s infinity with eternity in the divine birth discussed by Mercer in Chapter 1, so that the mediation of the *Logos* “is rather a union of two contradictory realities: the infinite and the finite, the limited and the illimitable” (76). Mercer notes here that the tendency of modern scholarship to emphasize “the philosophical shift that takes place in metaphysics” from classical Greek thought to Christianity often takes the focus away from more important categories (80).

Hilary’s reading of Proverbs 8:22 is placed next to the readings of his contemporaries to show how deeply this passage relates to the prologue of John’s Gospel. Mercer now begins to make the argument that “for Hilary, to form a doctrine of God is

also to form an anthropology” (94). Understanding Jesus as being God from God leads to understanding humanity as being meant for “perpetual increase in the divine life” (98).

Chapter 3 considers Hilary on “Divine Unity and the ‘Ladder of Our Nature.’” Mercer explains the importance of John 10:30 for the generations preceding Hilary, both orthodox and heterodox, before reiterating the centrality of divine generation for Hilary. Speaking in terms of Father and Son, indeed, in terms of birth, allows Hilary to imagine a Son who is equal to the Father in every way because of His origin. It allows Hilary to imagine that Jesus Christ could submit to the Father without being in any way subordinate to or weaker than the Father. Hilary argues further for divine unity by showing that the Son and the Father “possess the same Holy Spirit, not two different spirits” (119). This mutual indwelling is, itself, Unity: a divine action showing the Trinity where words fail.

Mercer now shows how Hilary developed the analogical Father-Son language of Tertullian and Novatian. Human finitude in the face of divine infinity necessitates analogical thinking despite its ultimate insufficiency. Hilary comes to an understanding of “image” that weaves together an intertextual reading of John 10:30 and 14:9. The divine nature of the Son is invisible just as the Father is, since they share the same divine qualities. It is in the *incarnate* Christ that we see a visible image of the invisible God, so that “the Father is not seen in the physical body of Jesus, but in the divine works that are accomplished in that physical existence” (144). Christ, “the begotten God, who is Life and received his birth from Life” (147), is the ladder by which finite humanity can approach the infinite God.

Now that the framework has been laid for an in-depth examination of Hilary’s use of language of “image,” Mercer uses Chapter 4 to discuss the Platonic notion of “image” and to trace

the gradual abandonment by Christian theologians of “the classical notion of inferiority” of the image (150). Hilary embraces the idea argued by Basil of Ancyra that “image corresponds with essence, for a substantial image” (155), and this helps him in his argument that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, equal to the Father, having the same divine nature. Now the *imago Dei*, the image of God in which humanity was created, is imbued with a sense of hope. Mercer links this discussion of divine image to a discussion of Christ as the perfect *imago Dei*. He is therefore able to argue that “Hilary’s trinitarian anthropology is necessarily Christological, as Christ is the definition and goal of all human life” (177).

“For Hilary, Christ is the human par excellence, and no one else is” (218). Hilary’s anthropology is that Christ represents normative humanity, whatever fallen human experience without Christ might look like. Mercer notes that Hilary is the first theologian to offer “a theologically coherent explanation of Christ’s possession of a fully human soul and will, while at the same time affirming equal divinity of Christ and the Father, through that human soul and will being predicated on the single subject of the eternal Son of God” (197). Mercer suggests more careful reading of Hilary’s Christology by modern academics is called for. He argues that Hilary’s reading of Philippians 2:6–7, combined with a Stoic (rather than a Platonic) understanding of the Body-Soul relationship will exonerate him from any perceived Docetism thus far attributed to him. Hilary’s portrayal of Christ suffering painlessly can be explained in terms of moral choice.

In Chapter 5, Mercer examines Hilary’s intertextual reading of how John 17:1–6, 1 Corinthians 15:21–28, and Philippians 3:21 illuminate a vision for human potentiality. Mercer shows us an inside glimpse of Hilary painting a beautiful picture in which Christ, taking up humanity through the incarnation, is

then received by the Father in his ascension. In receiving Christ, the Father also receives humanity, which has been assumed by Christ in a unity described by Hilary with the word *universitas*. Mercer argues for a Stoic, rather than a Platonic, reading of humanity: all of humanity rather than “a generalized human nature” (230). Human potential in Christ is a “destined life of infinite increase” (254).

Throughout this work, Mercer critiques the tendencies of modern theologians to read Hilary through lenses that render his thought difficult to understand or even, as Mercer contends, distort his meaning altogether. Hilary understood the complexities of language; he knew how to use the fluidity of language to transform it; he carefully chose his polemical tools and just as carefully excluded certain vocabulary. Knowledge of Latin, Greek and French is helpful for reading this book, but not absolutely necessary. The meticulously organized footnotes and excellent indices invite the reader to swim in the deeper waters of historical theology. *Divine Perfection and Human Potentiality* is a challenging read, but well worth it. You may find yourself eager to read Hilary for yourself, or read him again, and if that happens, I suspect Mercer will have achieved his primary objective.