

BOOK REVIEWS

Hans Boersma, *Pierced by Love: Divine Reading with the Christian Tradition*. Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2023. 280 pp. Hardcover. \$22.99.

Many a Bible college student and seminarian have heard the adage, “The Bible is to be read like any other book.” This mantra means well in its intention to highlight that tools of literary analysis *can help* our biblical reading. However, the inherent flaw of the quip is that the Bible is *like* any other book. Hans Boersma, in his latest work *Pierced by Love*, provides a contrast to this incredibly modern motto. Boersma claims rather directly that, while the Bible is a book, it is not to be read like *any* other book. Rather, the Bible is to be read for the sake of forming human hearts, heads, and bodies Godward. Boersma blazes the trail forward by moving backward in the Church’s understanding and practice of *lectio divina*, or divine reading.

Keeping in step with his thesis that reading the Bible is a uniquely *spiritual* exercise, Boersma does not offer *Pierced by Love* as a handbook to *lectio*. Instead, each chapter is a historically grounded meditation on how each step of biblical reading draws the individual reading into moments of sacramental transfiguration. Boersma describes this spiritual experience as “words on the page” leading the reader to “flesh on the cross.” However, before he begins the journey through each step of *lectio*, Boersma diagnoses the problem of our day: we struggle with a spiritual *acrophobia*, or a fear of heights. Boersma posits the remedy with help from an icon titled *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* and Guigo II’s *The Ladder of Monks*. His solution is found by looking at biblical reading as the Christian pilgrim’s journey from earth to heaven. Then, as if he knew Reformed Baptist reviewers would engage his book, Boersma notes that we must not think of this adventure of divine ascent as one that should stir pride. In fact, he states that the higher one steps on the ladder, the greater one reaches the depths of humility. Only after he sets the ladder does Boersma provide the four rungs which have been recognized as the classical steps of *lectio divina*: *Lectio* (Reading), *Meditatio* (Meditation), *Oratio* (Prayer), and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation).

Over the next three chapters, Boersma mulls over the themes of internal vigilance, the necessity of memory, and spiritual nourishment. In “Paying Attention,” Boersma writes extensively on the sin of *acedia*—sometimes understood as sloth—as a lack of attention and intention, and reading is the remedy. Boersma explains that reading mortifies *acedia* because it orients our minds away from the temporal present toward the expectation of our heavenly home. Following, in “Swirling Thoughts,” he writes on the problem of spiritual dementia the loss of

identity through the lack of true meditation. Boersma ties the act of meditation to repetition—even through reading the text aloud—in order to assemble a “living concordance” or constructing a “mystic ark” which protects the mind from a flood of distracting thoughts. Boersma then ruminates on what it means for the Scriptures to be spiritual food. Drawing from several monastic writers’ thoughts, Boersma determined that as the clean animals chewed the cud, those washed clean by Christ similarly ruminate on his words in their minds and hearts. This is the means by which we taste the sweetness of the Lord and *become* that sweetness through communion with the living Christ in biblical reading.

Boersma commences the latter half of *Pierced by Love* with a chapter on trees considering the Gospels, and primarily the sufferings of Christ, as the foremost encounter in biblical reading. When we encounter Christ on the cross, the mind and the will are equally pierced to the tree with him. This experience, Boersma explains, is a painful one. But, he reminds his readers that to die a cruciform death is to be readied for a resurrected life. He then deepens this blessed pain in the following chapter on tears and *compunction*. As the text confronts shortcomings and pierces readers with the nails of the cross, the reader is to feel the pain of sin being driven out of him, an experience which should often be accompanied by tears. However, Boersma presses onto his next chapter considering contemplation as “the better part.” Outside of the distraction of one’s own thoughts and sins, the day-to-day needs of life also call away from an unbridled pursuit of foretasting the presence of God. For Boersma, the needs of the active life are not a problem; rather these activities remind us of our need to return to the One who is the fullness of life. For Boersma and the tradition, contemplation is not better than fulfilling one’s daily duties in a gnostic manner. Rather, in contemplation one is undistracted in his beholding of the beauty of the Lord.

Boersma draws the book to a close with a chapter on silence and a conclusive word on the whole process of *lectio divina*. Boersma describes the pursuit of silence as the purpose of *lectio divina* because in silence the reader is drawn deeper into the life of God himself. As the world, the flesh, and sin seek to fill the mind and body with noise and pride, reading the Scriptures leads the reader to Christ-centered humility which leads first to death, and then Christ rises demonstrating that sin, death, and the grave have no hold on *anything* claimed by him. Boersma concludes with an extended meditation on *lectio divina* as a method of biblical reading with an advent posture. Reading, meditation, and prayer fight against the modern conception that human beings know *merely* through sense perception. Through each step of *lectio divina*, the living Christ encounters, confronts, and wounds the reader, that they may be prepared for

the second advent of the Bridegroom.

Han's Boersma's *Pierced by Love* is a compelling work on the practice of biblical reading. He is rooted in the Christian tradition and ultimately in the Scriptures to see that the Scriptures *themselves* combat the weakness of human frailty to sanctify the mind and the flesh to pierce the reader with the love of God in Christ and finally leads to preparation for and foretastes of the beatific vision. Boersma's writing style is meditative and compelling, and as often as he draws from texts in the Christian tradition he draws from images, particularly from various monastic artists. The "Swirling Thoughts" and "Trees" highlight Hugh of St. Victor's *Mystic Ark* and Bonaguida's *Tree of Life*, respectively, as explanatory windows on the purpose of *lectio divina* as memory preservation and a gospel encounter.

The book is not without issues. Boersma is consciously Anglo-Catholic and utilizes prayers to canonized saints and Mary as examples from the tradition as aids in compunction. The reviewer struggles in understanding the message being communicated in these prayers, because, particularly in an extended quote from Anselm praying to John the Baptist, the content reads more akin to a Puritan journal entry rather than a full-fledged prayer for aid, divine, or ecclesial.

One last point of critique, which the reviewer found actually *enhanced* the reading experience was that Boersma does not use traditional citations. Rather than using footnotes or endnotes, which often distract from the flow of an author's prose, there is a collection of lines which either commence quotes or ideas derived from sources which Boersma then cites. For this reason, the reader seeking to use this book as a springboard into deeper historical waters may struggle. But, as stated above, the present reviewer enjoyed the uninterrupted reading experience, and he believes that this serves Boersma's greater purpose in meditatively writing on meditatively reading. *Pierced by Love* is unique, challenging, and captivating. The charge to read the Scriptures prayerfully, as an encounter with Christ, and as preparation for heaven, is one that cannot be exhausted.

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