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Theosomnia: A Christian Theology of Sleep, Andrew Bishop, Jessica Kingsley, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-78592-218-3), 164 pp., pb £45

On a cursory reading of Scripture, sleep might easily be understood as the precursor of sin. From Noah lying in a drunken stupor exposing himself to his daughters, to the disciples slumbering in Gethsemane while Jesus prays, to Jonah napping in the whale's belly while evading God's commission, it seems that things typically go better when people are awake. In Scripture, sleep can also be dangerous, as for the Egyptians (whose firstborn are struck down while they repose), for Samson (who suffers an emasculating haircut), and for Sisera (who gets a tent peg hammered through his skull).

Yet in this imaginative and insightful interdisciplinary study, the Anglican theologian Andrew Bishop suggests that such a negative assessment of how most of us pass a whole third of our lives depends more on secular notions of efficiency and the relentless individualized pursuit of goals such as health, wisdom and knowledge, than on grounded Christian theological reflection. On a closer reading of Scripture, it becomes clear that there is good sleep and bad sleep. The wise and foolish bridesmaids are designated not by the fact that the foolish go to bed while the wise keep vigil, but by their differing levels of preparedness for the day to come. Eve is born out of the side of a deeply sleeping Adam. Abraham has his destiny revealed to him during sleep. Jacob sees the angels ascending and descending while slumbering. The child Samuel sleeps in the temple and receives instruction from God. The infant Christ finds repose in the manger. Joseph is warned in a dream to lead his wife Mary and her child Jesus on their journey to safety in Egypt.

Bishop develops this positive imagery of sleep christologically. Jesus sleeps in the boat on the Sea of Galilee even during the storm, which suggests that sleep may be a 'Christological posture' of 'radical openness to the Father' (p. 24). The term 'theosomnia' is coined by Bishop to mean 'God-sleep', that is, a state of gifted trust that, because it posits a source of control and renewal outside of the willing self, may rightly be regarded as graced. As we enter into this sleep, we are released from our cares and worries. Such sleep is sacramental, being identified by the outward and visible signs of closed eyes and recumbency, which signify the inward spiritual graces of refreshment and perhaps also of dreaming. Moreover, Bishop argues that, from the perspective of the doctrine of creation, sleep is prior to wakefulness. This is because, in the Genesis 1 narrative, evening precedes morning rather than the reverse. This suggests that, theologically, sleep should be viewed as a condition for the numerous individual acts of human creativity that, in some small way, recapitulate the original act of creation, rather than as a reward for tasks already completed.

However, Bishop also observes that the effigies that adorn many medieval and early modern tombs suggest a close association between sleep and death. Often reclining on pillows, and sometimes even surrounded by a canopy suggestive of a four-poster bed, such figures appear to be sleeping, or even sometimes to be awaking from sleep, rather than to be permanently deprived of life. We are further reminded of this by the term for the dormitory version of tombs, a 'cemetery', which literally designates a 'sleeping place'. In Christian tradition, the very language and representation of death thereby refute the notion that it is the absolute termination of life. Resurrection will follow at the end of time, when the whole created order will be gathered into a single whole and be united with the Father in heaven.

If death is represented as sleep, then sleep, it might be added, may be regarded as a preparation or practice for death. The temporary giving up of conscious embodiment that sleep entails anticipates the more decisive surrender of bodily existence that constitutes the end of earthly life. It is no mere coincidence that the time around sleep is frequently when intimations of mortality weigh most heavily on the mind. Yet this time may also be profoundly generative of human faith and relationships. As preparation for sleep, the Christian faith may be handed on to children, such as through prayer or by bedtime reading, or other intimacies may be shared.

At no point in building his case does Bishop sacrifice scholarly rigour for the sake of practical application. On contrary, his work is a model of how these two often unhappy bedfellows may be

successfully combined, weaving together threads from sources as diverse as the Rule of Benedict, Gregory the Great, Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux, Merleau-Ponty, Bonhoeffer, Rahner, Balthasar, Nancy, the seventeenth century medic, poet and polymath Sir Thomas Browne, and the office of compline. With a final chapter that includes proposals for spirituality and ministry, Bishop's admirably unusual book deserves a wide readership among theologians, students, church groups and individual Christians.

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