

## Psychological Studies of the Historical Jesus

Psychohistory or psychobiography is a subdiscipline of the social sciences that attempts to construct psychological profiles of historical figures.<sup>1</sup> Both psychologists and historians tend to view such endeavors with skepticism. Psychologists claim it is a risky business to analyze someone without actually putting them “on the couch,” that is, without asking them the sort of questions psychologists want to ask their patients and hearing their responses. Historians prefer to confine discussion of *motives* to what would have been apparent, to what the subject claimed his or her motives were and to what other people might have said the subject’s motives were—a rather different matter from detection of ulterior or hidden motives that neither the subject nor anyone else would have discerned at the time.

Nevertheless, the practice of psychobiography has a rich history: Freud did an analysis of Leonardo Da Vinci, and Erik Erikson wrote psychological biographies of Martin Luther and Gandhi, though few would now consider those works to be exemplars of the genre.<sup>2</sup> The field refined its methodology in the latter part of the twentieth century and became more widely respectable. That said, the possibility of doing a psychological biography of Jesus strikes many as particularly daunting, since we have nothing but third-party testimony regarding him: we have no writings from Jesus himself, only

recollections of things he might have said or done, compiled by people who had never actually met him.

Albert Schweitzer wrote a dissertation on what he called “psychiatric studies of Jesus” that had been produced in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> He regarded such studies with total disdain, and offered a devastating critique of them as wildly conjectural. Nevertheless, such studies continued to be produced throughout the twentieth century, almost always by persons trained in psychology but ignorant of basic methods or procedures employed by historical Jesus scholars.<sup>4</sup>

There was no consideration of sources or application of criteria that might allow for discernment of which material in the Gospels should actually be attributed to Jesus.

For example, a psychological study of Jesus produced by Jay Haley in 1969 basically takes the Gospel of Matthew as a straightforward record of Jesus’s life and teachings.<sup>5</sup> Many of Haley’s observations regarding Jesus’s psychological motivations are offered in reference to comments that Jesus makes only in Matthew, comments that the great majority of biblical scholars would assume Matthew himself added to the story of Jesus when he was redacting the Gospel of Mark. Thus if Haley’s observations are correct, they would apply more appropriately to the psychological motivations of Matthew (a late-first-century Christian evangelist) rather than to those of Jesus (an early-first-century Jewish peasant).

Nevertheless, Haley's work might not need to be rejected in toto: sometimes, almost unwittingly, he does treat material that historical Jesus scholars would deem authentic, and then his observations strike some as illuminating.<sup>6</sup> He regards Jesus's blistering attacks on religious leaders (found in material Gospel scholars would ascribe to Q, e.g., Matt. 23:13–36; Luke 11:37–52) as a power tactic in which one challenges the status of social superiors and so (unless successfully shamed) elevates one's own status. Likewise, Jesus's tendency to claim he is not advocating change while in fact advocating fundamental change (presenting radical deviations as "truer expressions" of tradition) displays a rhetorical strategy familiar to psychologists who study power tacticians.

The new millennium has brought a renaissance in psychohistorical studies of Jesus in that such studies are now being conducted by persons conversant with a historical-critical approach to the Bible. Three major studies produced around the turn of the millennia have attracted the most attention.

In 1997, John Miller published *Jesus at Thirty*, a brief work that sought to draw inferences regarding Jesus's likely psychological state on the basis of widely accepted facts concerning him, and to investigate the Gospel materials in light of this possible psychological portrait.<sup>7</sup> Miller, a theologian and a psychiatrist, starts with the presumption that at the time Jesus began his adult ministry he was unmarried and the oldest sibling in a family in which the

father was no longer present (probably, though not necessarily, due to the latter's death). Miller further supposes that Jesus must have had a loving, caring relationship with his now-absent father as would be suggested by the prominent use of father-son relationships in his parables.

Miller draws on insights from Erik Erickson and Daniel Levinson to describe the sort of identity crisis a person in such a situation would typically undergo. In all likelihood, a man in these circumstances would continue to seek a father figure while simultaneously developing an enhanced capacity for "generativity," becoming in effect a surrogate father to others. Miller suggests this may account for Jesus's extraordinary conceptualization of God as *Abba* (father)—he appears to have emphasized the fatherly nature of God to an unprecedented extent. It may also account for the manner in which he relates to others, evidenced for example in his habit of calling adult women "daughter" (Mark 5:34, 41).

Donald Capps, a specialist in the psychology of religion, starts with an assumption that the legitimacy of Jesus's birth was questionable: his biological father was probably unknown and Joseph did not adopt him but rather regarded James, the second boy born to Mary, as his first-born.<sup>8</sup> The reason Jesus did not marry, Capps suggests, was not (per Miller) because his duties as surrogate father to the family prevented it but because Joseph did not find him a wife. Jesus was a social outcast, excluded from participation in temple religion, and for

this reason he was attracted to John the Baptist's alternative religious movement.

Eventually, Jesus found a fictive identity as the Son of God, believing that the heavenly Abba had adopted him when he was cleansed of his intrinsic impurity (as one illegitimately conceived) by John's baptism. He directed his repressed anger (toward his unknown biological father and toward Joseph) at demons, becoming an effective exorcist. As such, he was able to effect psychosomatic cures of people who suffered from what would now be diagnosed as "somatoform disorders," which include conditions in which paralysis, blindness, deafness, seizures, uncontrolled menstrual flow, and other actual physical disabilities are manifested without any neurological cause.<sup>9</sup> Jesus may be diagnosed as a utopian-melancholic personality: he looked forward to a coming kingdom of God while continuing to seek cleansing from the sexual pollution in which he had been conceived; these tendencies eventually led him to perform an impulsive act in the temple (cleansing an institution that, for him, represented his mother's body). The fact that this led to his death fits with a tendency for melancholic personalities to be suicidal.

Andries van Aarde is a biblical scholar and a member of the Jesus Seminar. His work *Fatherless in Galilee* posits a hypothetical "Ideal type" for Jesus that he believes makes sense of numerous features in the Gospel tradition.<sup>10</sup> Van Aarde thinks that Jesus probably grew

up as the bastard son of a single mother—the very existence of Joseph is a later Christian fiction (the character being based loosely on the character of Joseph in the Pentateuch). Thus he was an outcast and a sinner; as a *mamzer* (the child of an adulterous or incestuous relationship) he was not allowed to marry and he was excluded from Israel's primary religious institutions. Absent a father, furthermore, Jesus's status as a male was not clarified in puberty and so he grew into adulthood displaying female behavior, which in that culture included "taking the last place at table, serving others, forgiving wrongs, having compassion, and attempting to heal wounds."<sup>11</sup> Seeing himself as a protector of other marginalized individuals, Jesus formed an alternative religious community around himself that was largely composed of women without husbands and of children without fathers.

Despite the superficial attention to historical methodology (criteria, sources, etc.), these three studies of Jesus have not received much attention or support within the guild of historical Jesus studies as a whole. There is lingering suspicion about the field of psychohistory (dismissed by some as a pseudoscience), but even scholars willing to grant the possibility of such research note that these studies seem highly conjectural and speculative. Jesus's act in the temple could have been impulsive (rather than calculated), as Capps suggests, but most historical Jesus scholars see no reason for assuming it was. The children whom Jesus welcomes and calls the greatest in the kingdom could have been orphans or bastards, as van Aarde

assumes, but no document actually says that they were. Even more to the point, virtually everything these three scholars say depends upon assumptions regarding Jesus's childhood—and most historical Jesus scholars maintain that this is the one aspect of Jesus's biography about which we are least informed. It is axiomatic in historical Jesus studies to work primarily with material in Mark and Q—neither of which mentions Jesus's birth, childhood, or upbringing. So given a paucity of data, which would be problematic in any construction, these scholars focus on points that seem especially tenuous and make those points foundational for their entire enterprises.

It is possible that Jesus had a loving father who died before he reached adulthood (Miller), or that he had an estranged relationship with a potential father who refused to adopt him (Capps), or that he had no father figure in his life at all (van Aarde). But the mere fact that all three of these scenarios are possible suggests that none of them is obviously preferable. It seems to most historical Jesus scholars that Miller, Capps, and van Aarde are working backward from the ends to the means: they are starting with the adult Jesus evident in the biblical materials and suggesting what sort of childhood traumas and father-issues might have produced that person. But does psychological analysis normally proceed that way, guessing what a subject's childhood might have been like, based on the person they eventually became? And if such a procedure would be somewhat suspect with a current, living subject, should it not be

regarded as even more tenuous with a historical subject for whom significant aspects of the adult portrait remain unclear? Nevertheless, some scholars (including the author of this essay) have been willing to grant that any one (or possibly all three) of these studies could be on to *something*; in time, these projects may come to be viewed as pioneering efforts in a new interdisciplinary program.<sup>12</sup>

Another scholar, meanwhile, has taken up psychological analysis of Jesus in a somewhat different vein. Bas van Os remains critical (though respectful) of the three studies discussed above, but he still maintains that psychohistory does have a legitimate place in historical Jesus studies. Rather than attempting to write a psychological biography of Jesus, however, van Os proposes that different psychological theories may help us to understand certain well-documented aspects of Jesus's life and ministry.<sup>13</sup> In place of a monograph, van Os offers a series of essays. For instance, Jesus's veneration of God as Father may be understood in terms of contemporary attachment theory. His belief that his own death might be beneficial and in accordance with God's will can be understood as a coping mechanism, inspired first by his need to deal with the death of John the Baptist and subsequently refined in light of threats to his own life. His performance of symbolic actions predicated by Scripture (entering Jerusalem on a donkey, cleansing the temple, enacting a new covenant at his final meal) can be understood in light of role theory, according to which a person can position him- or

herself within a cherished narrative, assuming the role of the characters and subsequently playing out those roles in real life.

Whatever one makes of van Os' individual points, most historical Jesus scholars seem to think this modest, thematic approach to psychohistory is more promising for Jesus's studies than are the attempts to produce psychological biographies of a person for whom so much relevant data is lacking or limited.

1. See James H. Charlesworth, "Psychobiography: A New and Challenging Methodology in Jesus Research," in *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures*, ed. J. H. Ellens and W. G. Rollins, 4 vols. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), 4:21–57; Bas van Os, *Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus: New Ways to Explore Christian Origins* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011); Fraser Watts, ed., *Jesus and Psychology* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2007).
2. For bibliography of these and many other works (including studies of Ezekiel, King Herod, Ignatius of Loyola, Augustine, Joseph Smith, and Oscar Romero) see van Os, *Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus*, 13–14.
3. Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, trans. C. R. Joy (1913; repr. Boston: Beacon, 1948).
4. For a survey, see the three chapters Donald Capps contributed to Ellens and Rollins, eds. *Psychology and the Bible*, 4:89–208.
5. Jay Haley, "The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ," in *The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Rockville: Triangle, 1986), 19–53.
6. Donald Capps alerted Jesus scholars to the enduring (though limited) validity of Haley's work in his article, "Jesus as Power Tactician," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2, vol. 2 (2004): 158–89.

7. John W. Miller, *Jesus at Thirty: A Psychological and Historical Portrait* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); see also Miller, "Jesus: A Psychological and Historical Portrait," in *Psychology and the Bible*, ed. Ellen and Rollins, 4:71–88.
8. Donald Capps, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); see also Capps, "A Psychobiography of Jesus," in *Psychology and the Bible*, ed. Ellen and Rollins, 4:59–70.
9. On this point, see especially Donald Capps, *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).
10. Andries van Aarde, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); see also van Aarde, "Social Identity, Status Envy, and Jesus as Fatherless Child," in *Psychology and the Bible*, ed. Ellen and Rollins, 4:223–46.
11. Van Aarde, "Social Identity," 237.
12. I shared my positive estimation of this potential in an unpublished paper at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature Psychology and Biblical Studies Section. Compare Charlesworth, "Psychobiography." Charlesworth thinks that, of these three scholars (Miller, Capps, van Aarde), Miller presents the portrait that has the least congruity with historically plausible biblical data. I think the opposite: Miller is the least conjectural of the three, sticking most closely to what most biblical scholars and Jesus historians would regard as historically plausible data.
13. See van Os, *Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus*. His overall project, however, is more ambitious, namely to construct a psychologically plausible theory of how Jesus could have contributed to the earliest beliefs concerning him, as discerned in key passages of the undisputed Pauline letters.