

Adela Yarbro Collins
Yale University

From Psychologizing to Psychological Hermeneutics

When I was a doctoral student in the New Testament program at Harvard in the late sixties and early seventies, the greatest methodological sin a student could commit was to "psychologize." The main taboo was upon any attempt to get inside the minds of the characters in the Gospel narratives. But a student could easily get the impression that any kind of psychological approach to the New Testament was frowned upon.

When I was working on my dissertation, I attended a meeting of the New England region of the SBL. At that meeting, Wayne Rollins made a plea for a Jungian reading of the New Testament. Later, when I was writing *Crisis and Catharsis*, I cautiously made use of some psychological ideas in attempting to interpret the book of Revelation.

Because, in my experience, the legitimacy of psychological interpretations had been contested, if I had been the editor of volume three of the work under discussion today, I would have put David Miller's essay near the beginning, rather than near the end, of the book. His essay is entitled "Biblical Imagery and Psychological Likeness." In it he argues that, in addition to theological and historical readings, there is room for a third way of reading, one in which the images of the Bible are viewed "as profound psychological life-likenesses" (267). He also defends this approach, which he calls "depth-psychological interpretation" against three kinds of opposition. One is the accusation of "essentialism," the claim that archetypal readings imply "a world of essences and essential forms of human meaning" (270). Another is the charge of "reductionism," the charge that a psychological reading involves "a humanization of things divine" or a bringing of the larger into the domain of the smaller (275).

Miller responds persuasively to both of these types of criticism, but a third is more problematic. "This criticism is that a psychological interpretation wittingly or unwittingly presupposes that meaning in texts is separate and separable from a social, historical and political context" (272-73). It seems to me that a psychological reading must presuppose this view or else at least implicitly claim that the social, historical and political contexts of the biblical texts are sufficiently similar to those of the modern period to make such interpretations valid. There is another, I think better, way of dealing with this problem. One way to put it is that we, in a sense, transport ourselves back to the world of a text and interpret it in terms of the ideas we bring from our own time. Another way to put it is to recall that interpretation involves an author, a text and a reader or interpreter. Most approaches emphasize one of these three elements more than the

othertwo. It seems to me that psychological readings are helpfully understood as emphasizing the interpreters and their contexts more than the authors and their contexts.

Ralph Underwood explicitly took this position in his essay, "Object Relations Theory and Mark 15:33-39: Interpreting Ourselves Interpreting the Bible." This essay helpfully points out some of the reasons for the wide range of interpretative possibilities opened up by anomalous texts like Mark 15:38, the rending of the veil of the temple. These reasons have to do with the personal history of the reader and the way the reader relates to the text.

I would like to say at this point that I found all of the essays in this volume interesting and that I learned from most of them. I should also point out, in case it hasn't become obvious by now, that I read this book as a historical critic. So some of the essays were more congenial to me than others. One of the most congenial was Kari Syreeni's essay entitled "Coping with the Death of Jesus: The Gospels and the Theory of Grief Work." In the introduction to this essay, he remarks that "coping with death was just as much a practical issue for all ancient readers of the Gospels as it is for us today" (63). The historical critic in me raises the issue whether ancient readers dealt with the issue in the same way that moderns do. Syreeni's analysis was nuanced and careful enough to lay this question to rest.

In the first part of the essay, Syreeni sketches "a theory of grief work as coping," using an eclectic approach that he characterizes as "psychoanalytically oriented hermeneutical theory." He deals with the historical issue by admitting that the interpretation is not really about "grief work 'in' the Gospels." When we, as readers, join him in his analysis, sometimes we are "behind" and more often we are "in front of the Gospels," rather than "in" them (64). We go "behind" the Gospels to reconstruct events in the formation of the messianic movement founded by the followers of Jesus. We take a position "in front of" the text when we speak about the death of Jesus, yet at the same time inadvertently speak "of many deaths and losses" (ibid.).

In constructing his eclectic approach, Syreeni takes from Freud the idea of "denial," the mourner's inability "to face reality" and "to act reasonably" (64). From Kübler-Ross he selects especially the notion of "bargaining." Bowles and Parkes contribute the notion that grief is a result of attachment to an object that is absent or unavailable. A positive response involves reorganizing or reorienting the original relationship and finding novel objects of attachment to substitute for the absent one. From the neo-Jungians come the concepts of the "recollection and incorporation of the deceased in the memory of the survivors" (66). From the "cognitive and humanistic psychological approach" come four hermeneutical ways of coping: preservation of personal relationships and commitments to particular values, reconstruction of those relationships by transforming commitments and values, reevaluation by transforming the personal relationships and conserving the values and re-creation by transforming both the relationships and the values (68-69).

In relation to the reconstructed historical events behind the Gospels, Syreeni concludes that the veneration of Jesus and the continued waiting for his coming are instances of preservation of the relationship with Jesus before his death (69). Carrying on Jesus' proclamation in spite of his tragic death is also a preserving strategy (73). On the

other hand, the proclamation of Jesus as raised from the dead is suggestive of a more progressive kind of coping, namely, re-creation of the significance of Jesus for his followers and of the way they live their daily lives (69).

As narratives written long after Jesus' death, the Gospels are involved with grief work only in a secondary sense (75). Syreeni argues that grief work is reflected at a fairly early stage in Mark (75). The three passion predictions in Mark "allow the reader to feel anticipatory grief." The ethos of following Jesus leads from initial calling to the cross, a following to death (79). Matthew's portrayal of the crowd shouting "Crucify him!" and "His blood be upon us, and on our children" reflects a regressive response in its expression of aggression toward those deemed responsible for Jesus' death (75). The Gospel of Matthew, however, also emphasizes recollection of Jesus' teaching, a preserving strategy. In contrast to Mark, there is a sense of Jesus' presence in Matthew and more joy than awe (79). All this makes Matthew's Gospel less death-centered than Mark's (80).

The Johannine farewell scene and speech illustrate "many typical features of grief work at its various stages" (77). A regressive response featured is the statement that the disciples will "seek him as 'little children' seek their lost parent" (ibid.). The most progressive strategy comes in chapter 17, in which Jesus "sends the disciples into the world, as his own Father had sent him" (ibid.). The notion of the Paraclete as a substitute for Jesus is also an advanced means of coping (ibid.). The Gospel of Luke, with its placement of the story of Jesus in a salvation-historical framework, constitutes a fully-fledged legitimation of the new order, thus reflecting an advanced stage of grief work (80).

Syreeni's correlation of early Christian history and important themes of the Gospels with grief work provides a new and illuminating way of reading them, a way that builds on the usual historical and literary readings.

I will comment on some of the other essays more briefly. Michael Willett Newheart's essay on "The Psychology of Johannine Symbolism" argues plausibly, from a Jungian perspective, that the Johannine Jesus is an extremely one-sided symbol of the Self because he is portrayed entirely in terms of light; there is no darkness in him. The danger is that we as readers will identify completely with the light. If we do so, "we lose touch with our own darkness and project it onto others, particularly those of a different race, gender, religion, socio-economic class or political party" (122).

Paul Anderson concludes that tensions in the Gospel of John result from the evangelist's ability to hold both parts of various polarities in tension (127). A crisis model of cognitive reflection allows him to conclude that "the cognitive tension between authentic conviction and contravening experience must have moved the evangelist to a conjunctive (stage 5) level of faith" (137). This approach makes better sense of the Gospel in its present form than diachronic approaches can make.

In his "A Psychodynamic Approach to 2 Corinthians 10-13," Anthony Bash argues that it was inappropriate for Paul "to blame the Corinthians, an apparently young church, for failing properly to understand Paul's gospel and for heeding the teaching of others" (157). The appropriate target for blame is those who intruded into Paul's area of ministry. Thus, Paul's attacks on the Corinthians constitute an example of displaced

anger, frustration and aggression (ibid.). He explains Paul's failure to criticize "the super-apostles" more systematically and explicitly as due to his lack of knowledge about their teaching and his perception of his relative lack of power vis-à-vis the Jerusalem apostles. If the issue, however, was not primarily teaching, but loyalty to Paul, it would make sense for Paul to criticize the Corinthians for their lack of loyalty. In that case, his anger and frustration would not be displaced, but directed to an appropriate target.

In the introduction to her article, "The Bible and the Psychology of Shame," Jill L. McNish describes her work as a preacher in the institutional church and as a spiritual director. On the one hand, she noted that "virtually every depressed person" she spoke with had issues that she came to identify as "shame issues." Around the same time, she became aware that many of the events in the scriptures she was preaching about "were most fundamentally about shame" (240). In the first main part of her paper, "The Phenomenon of Shame," she describes and defines "shame" in contrast to "guilt," using psychological theory as well as biblical examples. In the second main part, "The Revelatory Potential of Shame," she argues that shame cannot simply be shed or gotten rid of. Embracing shame has, in her view, "amazing transformative and revelatory potential" (245). In the course of her argument, she presents psychologist Helen Lynd's analysis of "the so-called guilt axis compared with the shame axis" (247). She argues credibly that no individual exists entirely on one of the two axes, but most people "are more heavily tilted in one direction or another" (249). The most intriguing part of her essay is the argument that both Paul and Martin Luther began "their faith journeys on the guilt axis and moved to the shame axis" (249). The historian in me worried about the stereotyping of ancient Judaism and medieval Catholicism. But McNish is not claiming to characterize those global entities; rather, she attempts to infer something about two highly influential religious figures.

Overall, I was impressed with the degree to which many of the authors whose work is included in this volume had mastered both important subfields of the discipline of psychology as well as particular methods of the discipline of New Testament studies. The subfield of psychological interpretations of the Bible has certainly come of age.