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### **A brief review of *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures: Volume 4: From Christ to Jesus***

I have the privilege of reviewing the fourth volume of this series, which deals primarily with what psychological studies can contribute to the quest for the historical Jesus. I come to this task as the current chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the SBL. I hope that by being here I can further the dialogue between our guilds that the volume itself has helped to establish.

Let me say that the book as a whole is excellent and contains many fine contributions and insights that will now have to go unnoted: there is no time to comment on each of the fourteen articles. Rather, I will organize my remarks in two categories, appropriate for the dialogue between our groups.

First, please allow me to respond to some of the complaints about my field that surface here – and then, second, I would like to share a summary evaluation of the psychological portraits of Jesus from the perspective of what I might chauvinistically describe as “mainstream” historical Jesus research. These are defensive and offensive categories, though I hope I can engage in both without being *offensive*.

On the defense – Harold Ellens, Walter Wink, and Hal Childs all contribute articles that are critical of historical Jesus studies at a fundamental level: that is, they question the very legitimacy of the enterprise, asking whether it is possible to study Jesus in such a manner.

They raise a number of points – both Ellens and Wink make reference to an apparent paucity of data. But that is a relative consideration. There *is* less reliable data for studying Jesus than, say, Abraham Lincoln, but there is considerably more data for studying Jesus than there is for a good number of ancient figures whose lives and ideas historians have sought to reconstruct.

The *relative* paucity of data is widely acknowledged within the guild of Jesus studies which, in the twentieth century, has been characterized by appropriately diminished expectations. Limited data does not mean *no* results, it means *limited* results. So, historical Jesus scholars do not envision producing anything like a modern biography on their subject.

A deeper criticism concerns the inevitable subjectivity of the enterprise. The sharpest critique comes from Hal Childs, who has also published a dissertation on this topic. Childs

maintains that it is impossible for scholars to study the historical Jesus because their own biases will always affect their work, including judgments concerning which data are relevant and which methods appropriate. As evidence he cites the diversity and plurality of images that such studies have produced, and then, he offers by way of illustration an analysis of John Dominic Crossan's work, which he thinks is driven by an inherent (and possibly unwitting) subjectivity.

With regard to the diversity of portraits, I think that Childs exaggerates the situation. He says that the research has led to an "increase of Jesus images rather than the limiting of Jesus images" – and on this I believe that he is simply wrong. While the number of Jesus studies has increased dramatically over the years, the number of *substantially diverse images* has steadily declined. Many proposals have been dropped, and many scholars have either recanted or revised their positions in light of superior arguments or new discoveries. If one traces the history of the discipline from 100 years ago to 50 to 20 to 10 to the present, the movement is toward ever greater consensus.

And as for Childs' Exhibit A – the work of Crossan – it should at least be noted that, within the guild of Jesus scholars, Crossan is often regarded as particularly idiosyncratic with regard to method. When his *Historical Jesus* book came out, it was widely criticized within the guild of Jesus scholars for doing exactly what Childs claims it does: allowing results to determine method. What was often said was that Crossan had intuited a certain image of Jesus and, consciously or subconsciously, constructed a method that bore this out. Now this may or may not be true -- now is not the time to resolve the matter. The question, rather, is whether it is warranted for Childs to use Crossan's work as his paradigm for showing what is typical of the guild, when the guild itself was virtually unanimous in critiquing the aspect of Crossan's work that Childs presents as representative.

As for the broader issue of subjectivity, I think that most everyone involved in historical Jesus studies today is aware of the problems with modernist conceptions of truth and meaning. We are well aware that no reconstruction of Jesus can be regarded as anything more than a *reconstruction* – from a particular perspective and in line with particular criteria.

Still, some things happened and other things did not. And *sometimes* it is possible to determine with a fair chance of accuracy which are which. Most of us do not *have* to do this to support our theology or maintain our faith – we just want to do it, because we are scholars and we think that what is knowable is worth knowing.

And, so, I dissent not only from Childs but also from Walter Wink who is his ally on this point. Wink says that "most scholars study the past *in order to change its effect on the present*" (p. 213). To the contrary, I think that many historians study the past to find out what happened. Curiosity. It is not a crusade; it's just their job.

Wink himself makes all sorts of claims about the historical Jesus that might not stand up to scrutiny as historically verifiable facts. He has a list of such assertions on pages 217 - 218. He simply states, for instance, that Jesus condemned all forms of domination, especially those that involved hierarchical power arrangements or economic exploitation – but in our most reliable material, Jesus tells parables that present the punishment and torture of slaves as typical social behavior and, far from critiquing such domination, he uses it as illustrative of God's treatment of

humans. Or, again, Wink simply asserts that Jesus condemned anything and everything that smacked of racial superiority or ethnocentrism. But scattered across all strata of the earliest material are bigoted anti-Gentile sayings: Gentiles are castigated as an entire class or race of people -- not individual Gentiles, but Gentiles *as a whole* are associated with vanity, tyranny, and sin. Even their best behavior is self-serving. God does not want to hear their long-winded prayers or heal their diseases. They are regularly grouped with hypocrites, traitors, and whores.

Walter Wink, in my opinion, is a provocative *theologian* and I personally appreciate his declared goal of reconstituting Christianity in a more humane direction. But what Wink does in his chapter in this book is *not* representative of historical Jesus studies. The quest for the historical Jesus is not a quest for a humane Jesus or a quest for an appealing Jesus or even for a relevant Jesus. We are not looking for a Jesus we can follow – we already have that (well, I do) – in our stories and myths and creeds and hymns and canons and confessions. If the *historical* Jesus turns out to be a stranger and enigma to us (Schweitzer's words) we will suffer that disappointment – he may, at least, satisfy our curiosity.

Now let me turn to the various attempts at psycho history that allow this book to make a vital contribution to the field. As practically every author notes, the discipline of psycho history has been marginalized within Jesus studies – indeed, it has been ignored. That, I now think, has been to our impoverishment. There is more here than we thought. We have not paid adequate attention.

Donald Capps devotes three full chapters to summarizing psychological portraits of Jesus that were done by a number of persons throughout the twentieth century. I found these chapters to be quite a bit more interesting and profound than I had thought they would be. I will mention just one by way of illustration: the work of a certain Jay Haley, about which I knew almost nothing. In 1969, Haley analyzed the “power tactics of Jesus Christ,” presenting him as a master tactician who manipulated people and events. Haley appears ignorant of any serious critical work on the Gospels that would have given his book a chance at credibility in our guild. He knows nothing about multiple attestation or the criterion of dissimilarity – or even *basic* source theories. As a result, he thinks he is offering the world a study of the historical Jesus, when in fact he is analyzing the *canonical* Jesus – indeed, more often than not he is analyzing the *Matthean* Jesus - - not a historical figure *per se* but a character in a story that was inspired by an historical figure. One might as well do a psychological analysis of Julius Caesar based on Shakespeare's play.

But wait . . . it turns out, Haley's work is replete with promising insights. It could be accidental -- there is, after all, some overlap between the Matthean and historical portraits, especially when the former is stripped of supernatural elements, as Haley is wont to do. In any event, I noted many similarities to contemporary studies of Jesus from the perspective of cultural anthropology. The latter *is* more context specific, but Haley's suggestions often get at the rhetorical effectiveness of certain tendencies recurrent in the Jesus tradition. He unveils the power dynamic inherent in claiming that one is not advocating a change while in fact advocating for *fundamental* change – presenting radical deviations as “truer expressions” of tradition. Almost all Historical Jesus scholars would grant that Jesus did this – Haley helps us to understand why or, at least, with what effect. The same may be true for his analysis of Jesus' blistering attacks on his social superiors – Haley unveils this as a “power tactic” (p. 131) in a

manner quite compatible with what cultural anthropologists today describe as challenge-riposte scenarios within an honor-shame society. But Haley's work was done before theirs – though he is not cited in any of the major works on this subject.

My conclusion, with regard to Haley, and the others whom Capps discusses: there are babies in these psychological bathwaters. Sometimes, they are very tiny babies – but they are there.

Which brings us to the work of the big three: Capps himself, and John Miller, and Andries van Aarde. Most of us in the Historical Jesus Section do have at least a passing familiarity with their work. I don't think we always know what to make of it. We do recognize that here are three people who know what they are doing – they are informed with regard to biblical criticism and are consciously in dialogue with the less exotic contributions of “mainstream” historical Jesus scholarship.

Of the three, I think that I find the work of Miller the most promising and I want to say a few words in his defense. I noticed in reading this book that he seems to be the odd one out. Both Capps and van Aarde pick on him a bit – so does Charlesworth who claims that Miller reads the Gospels as though they were objective biographies, ignoring the redactional tendencies of the evangelists (p. 43). I don't think that Miller does do that.

Rather, Miller advances a hypothesis about Jesus that, on the surface, is completely credible. It is by no means certain, but when applied to the Jesus tradition, it does help to explain a number of anomalies. The problem for Charlesworth and others, perhaps, is that *some* of the material that Miller's hypothesis helps to explain comes from secondary and tertiary sources that Jesus scholars do not usually accord much attention: material from Luke's so-called “L” source for instance. Jesus scholars prefer to stick with Mark and Q.

But this is hardly a valid criticism. We should not fault Miller's hypothesis if it helps to explain *more than* what is found in our first-tier tradition. We should only fault it if it actually conflicts with what *is* found in that primary source material (e.g., Mark and Q). I don't see that it does. This doesn't prove that his hypothesis needs to be accepted, but it does mean that it ought to be considered -- it warrants our attention.

Like all hypotheses, Miller's proposal is based in part on supposition – in this case, the supposition that Jesus enjoyed a loving relationship with his father Joseph, but that the latter died at an inconvenient time, leaving Jesus to assume the role of surrogate father for his family. There is no direct biblical data to support this – but Miller shows that much in the adult life of Jesus (as reported in biblical accounts) reflects a person whose tendencies and perspectives would be explicable in light of those dynamics – e.g., the passages in which Jesus addresses adult women as “Daughter.”

Capps and van Aarde offer rather different hypotheses, albeit ones that are also based on suppositions for which there is no direct biblical data.

Capps supposes that Jesus was an illegitimate child; furthermore Joseph did *not* adopt Jesus; rather, Joseph accorded the status and privileges associated with being first-born to his biological son James – who was Jesus' half-brother. Thus, Jesus grew up marginalized within his own immediate family – no marriage was arranged for him, and he was not taught the family trade.

Again, Capps thinks that such a scenario explains many things in the stories we have of Jesus, but the hypothesis itself has virtually no support in any early or reliable traditions.

There is nothing to indicate with any certainty that Jesus was ever believed to be illegitimate. The virgin birth stories found in “M” and “L” *might* have arisen in the early church as apologetic responses to Jesus’ illegitimacy but they could also be midrashes on famous birth stories from the Old Testament or Hellenistic fables to provide Jesus with a myth of origin equivalent to certain Greek Immortals. The one instance in Mark where Jesus is referred to as “the son of Mary” (Mark 6:3) *could* be a slur on his legitimacy, but it is also possible that it is Mark himself rather than the citizens of Nazareth who refers to Jesus in this way, and it *could* be that he does so for no more complicated reason than that he knew the name of Jesus’ mother but did not know the name of his father. Perhaps Mary was better known to Christians in the years after Easter than Joseph was.

Now, again, my point is not that Capps is wrong. No. The point is that Capps’ hypothesis about Jesus’ birth and upbringing is based on suppositions for which we have no direct or solid evidence. It is no sure thing.

In any event, Van Aarde goes even further than Capps. He constructs a hypothesis that supposes Jesus to have been completely fatherless – an illegitimate child raised by a single mother. The biblical Joseph is a fiction. Again, Van Aarde believes that this accounts for much, including the adult Jesus’ devotion to defending fatherless children and husband-less women.

The suppositions now are really piling up, one upon another. Yes, it is possible that the character Joseph who appears in a couple of late biblical tales never actually existed; but it is also possible that he did. There is not much in the way of historical evidence to support his existence -- but there is nothing at all to support his non-existence. And though it may be possible to read some of the Gospel stories in the manner van Aarde suggests, it is not *necessary* to read any of them in that way: *maybe* Jesus forbade divorce out of some passion for the injustice it produced for women, but he never explicitly says that this is the reason—and other rationales could be offered. *Maybe* the children whom Jesus welcomes and calls the greatest in the kingdom were orphans or bastards – but nothing in the tradition actually says that they were.

To sum up, all three of these scholars – Miller, Capps, Van Aarde – are attempting to base their psychological portraits of Jesus on suppositions about his birth and upbringing – and that is the aspect of his life about which we are most in the dark. It is axiomatic among Historical Jesus scholars to work primarily with the material found in Mark and Q (and only then in light of some limiting criteria, and ideally, only with material that possesses multiple attestation). But there is nothing in Mark or Q regarding Jesus’ birth or upbringing, much less regarding his relationship – or lack of a relationship – with his father.

It seems that what these scholars are doing, then, is working from the end back to the means: they are suggesting possible upbringings and father-son relationships (or lack thereof) that would be likely to produce the sort of adult we see.

Forgive our skepticism, but Historical Jesus scholars are constantly being told that *they* are going out on a limb trying to recover facts and reconstruct scenarios concerning the grown man about whom we do have some limited data. As a result, we are a chastened and cautious bunch –

and I think it stands to reason that we will be slow to embrace reconstructions of possible scenarios that would provide psychological explanations for the behavior evident in the portraits we have so tenuously advanced.

For the most part, historical Jesus scholars have been more focused on analyzing data –archaeological and textual– than on advancing hypothetical reconstructions. But there is nothing wrong with our guilds approaching this matter from opposite ends. Perhaps we will meet in the middle.

Of the three primary conjectures advanced thus far, I personally think that Miller’s is the most promising, perhaps because it seems the least *conjectural* – it seems to me to have the most contact with the data we have. Of course this could just be due to some subconscious projection on my part. And I have this uncomfortable feeling that now you’re all going to want to know about *my* relationship with *my* father in order to discern whether that could be the case.

I am speaking only for myself – my colleagues in the Historical Jesus Section may prefer Capps or van Aarde – or none of the above. I do hope that they will at least join me in giving this work the attention it clearly deserves.