

A Psychological Biography for *Jesus*: Responding to Donald Capps'

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Don Capps employed a Freudian Model and current biblical criticism models of Crossan, Borg, and others to evaluate the biblical data regarding the person and self-concept of Jesus of Nazareth. This article points to some vulnerabilities for serious criticism inherent in Capps's model and suggests the necessity of a wider range of psychological models for screening the data available on Jesus' development as a person in order to draw conclusions about his nature and motivations. Capps concludes that Jesus was a melancholic personality who was at odds with his society because he and his family were defamed regarding his problematic birth story, resulting in the violent symbolic action of cleansing the temple, thus expressing his arrival at self-confidence and self-affirmation.

KEY WORDS: psychology; biblical studies; Jesus; virgin birth; spirituality; melancholia; biblical characters; gospel narratives.

INTRODUCTION

In his new book, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (2000), Professor Donald Capps has given us a courageous and penetrating investigation of what Jesus would look like if viewed under a Freudian psychoanalytic lens. It is a tour de force in biblical text analysis, in narrative rhetorical criticism, and in psychoanalytic interpretation. The object of his analysis is the Gospel texts. The quest is for a figure in the text, or more precisely, the psychodynamic model of a putative person behind the text. In his worthy endeavor such words as *psychoanalytic*, *psychodynamic*, and *analytic* must be underlined. If one were to summarize Capps's book in terms of Lacan's psychoanalytic model, he or she would conclude that Jesus was deprived

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of empowerment by his birth and environment, and spent his life endeavoring to acquire his phallus. However, Lacan shows up nowhere in Capps, volume, Winnicott makes an appearance insignificantly on nearly the last page, and a rather early form of Freudian theory and model reigns supreme throughout this work. Nonetheless, it is clear that the burden of Capps's book is to demonstrate Jesus' desperate melancholic and utopian quest for his true self, namely, for that personal psychospiritual empowerment that affords one the requisite redemptive interior clarity, identity, and integrity inherent to being a self and to being whole.

EXPOSITION

Professor Capps launches this awesome task upon a platform built of the works of Jesus scholars and social scientists. The former bring expertise that lies primarily in the traditional fields required for biblical hermeneutics, the latter in the field of Freudian psychoanalysis. The biblical scholars are mainly four who are currently very bright lights in their firmament, namely, E. P. Sanders, J. P. Meier, J. D. Crossan, and Marcus Borg. The psychoanalysts, besides Freud, are mainly early Freudian interpreters.

This launching pad brings with it a wide range of specific risks for Capps's work, in that it is inherently vulnerable to three potential broadside critiques. First, the work of the four biblical scholars he has chosen is very controversial, however wise and warrantable their work may prove to be as time and scholarship unfold. Second, the form of Freudian theory that Capps brings to bear upon the biblical and extrabiblical data he presents regarding Jesus does not take into consideration to any significant degree the crucial developments in psychoanalytic theory that have taken place in the United States and Great Britain during the last fifty years. Those new insights include particularly the rise of Object Relations Theory and the development of Self-psychology. Omitting these from the framework through which he processes the data regarding Jesus' developmental biography may leave Capps open to some very lively questions regarding currency and accuracy.

This omission leads, thirdly, to considerable vulnerability regarding Capps's application of the integrated work of the biblical scholars and the psychoanalysts to the analysis of Jesus. Thus, the particular type of analytic interpretation Capps ultimately gives to the biography of Jesus, while it is very creative, internally consistent, and comprehensive, may also, in the end, be a questionable one. The risks he has taken in his monumental research and analysis are heroic in size and quality. It is a very good thing for us that he has not shrunk from these large dangers.

Capps has given us his own careful, accurate, and comprehensive summary of his book. We are fortunate to have that. In the end, his book is 80% platform and 20% his interpretation and analysis of Jesus, including an incisive summary. This is the correct proportion because development of the framework of biblical scholarship and psychoanalytic theory required such an approach. The point is,

then, that the framework and structure of this volume are a strength, not a deficit. However, this approach also prompts the suggestion that now we need from Capps a companion volume in which the implications of his analysis of Jesus' biography are drawn out into a full-orbed, life-sized portrait, so to speak. We have now in hand, in this work, an excellent prolegomenon to a comprehensive psychological hermeneutic of the life of Jesus. Now we need Capps's Jesus, undoubtedly an equally weighty and extensive study.

Having made that point, it is, perhaps, my responsibility in this critique to give some suggestions as to how such a thing might be done. Let me go about that task as follows. First, it was not as clear as I wished it to be, as I read Capps's book, whether the Jesus we get from Capps is a literary character, a mythic figure in a heroic narrative, or a person from Nazareth. At one level, of course, as I think Crossan would suggest, it makes little difference to the ultimate value of this work which of these three figures is the subject addressed. It seems, however, that Capps wants to find the real person from Nazareth, who, in turn, wants to find his true self; not merely a putative person behind a narrative report or a character in a striking literary drama. That distinction needs more clarification and would, in turn, give clearer focus to the suggested companion volume.

Second, Capps's gift to us in this important Jesus study is that he works with great skill to grind a lens, a psychological lens, through which he isolates and identifies an object of focus, analyzes the view of that object in terms of his announced assumptions, and assesses that analysis in terms of his chosen biblical and psychological models. Thus the models that he chose—Sanders', Crossan's, Meier's, Borg's, and Freud's—give great strength to his work. If there are inadequacies in this volume they are in the omission of models which might have given an equally important and perhaps an even more revelatory view of the object, namely, the Jew from Nazareth. One cannot, of course, do everything in one book, but it would be very interesting to see how the vision of Jesus would look through other or additional psychological lenses.

For example, what would the view through the lens be like if the Freudian model employed had been brought up to date with the perspectives of Kohut's Self-psychology or Winnicott's Object Relations Theory? Would Jesus really look psychologically like a melancholic utopian if viewed through the lens of Peter Homan's *The Ability to Mourn* (1989), another way of seeing the early Freud? Similar possibilities could be raised regarding the use of other psychological models as the lenses for the psychological hermeneutic, for example, that of Transactional Analysis, Cognitive Psychology, Behaviorism, or the like. Perhaps some models lend themselves more readily to the requirements of psychobiography than others, but a comprehensive range of perspectives would undoubtedly enlarge the vision of so important a figure as Jesus.

Third, the fact that Capps has limited himself to one specific Freudian model and four biblical perspectives somewhat related to or complementary of each other has resulted to some degree in circular reasoning. He says, in effect, that given

the following notions we can glean from Crossan and the others, it is possible to apply the following Freudian theory to these models. Moreover, the outcome of doing so seems to confirm the models developed by those Jesus scholars, and that confirmation seems to make sense of this Freudian approach to the matter. In part, this approach may be explained simply as the analytic interpretive process inherent in the hermeneutical circle, but it leaves one with the feeling that where we have arrived in Capps's book is at an interesting suggestion but not at a convincing approach to a warrantable, comprehensive, or definitive statement about Jesus. This, I think, is what John Miller is saying in his response. I see my critique at this point to be less a judgment about the limitations of *this* book by my friend Don Capps but a plea for a potential companion volume in which alternative possibilities are explored as vigorously as, and perhaps even more objectively or with less circularity than, this one.

What difference would it make in our psychological view of Jesus' diffused identity if we saw his processing of his father's absence, his own illegitimacy, and his devalued mother as a profound grief reaction with its attendant depression and rage? Or what would it look like to view his personality through Maslow's model of the healthy "need pyramid?" What would happen to Jesus in our psychohermeneutics if we simply resorted to the perspective of William James (1985, 1984, 1983, and 1997) and Gordon Allport (1954) and viewed the behavior and message of the man from Nazareth merely in terms of the rubrics of intrinsic and extrinsic religious function and spiritual expression? Such a challenge is profoundly relevant to Capps's question concerning who Jesus really was and thought he was. Viewing his subject through this model of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity would usefully alter or amplify Capps's portrait. One could extend this challenge virtually indefinitely. Of course, Capps wrote the book that he intended to write and that may be all one can ask of him, and all one can do, in one book.

However, given the inclination among many of us to employ highly theoretical forms of psychoanalytic models in this field of interface between psychology and religion in texts or personalities, this challenge is necessary. That is, the issue must be raised about increasing the use of operational clinical models for viewing what Gerkin aptly calls the "living human document" (1984). This is true whether that document be found to be a literary character in a dramatic narrative, a mythic figure, or a historical person of long ago.

Fourth, despite that claim, it is important to inquire, regarding the type of book Capps has given us, if we really can ask the question he asks regarding *Jesus*, whether a literary character, mythic figure, or historical person. Which Jesus is it we have in the focus of our psychohermeneutical lens? Mark's? Matthew's? Luke's? John's? Paul's? The Jesus of the Apologists or later Patristics? A first-century person from Nazareth in Galilee? In what ways are these one figure? Can we clearly discern the similarities and distinctions from the texts? Are there useful and dependable intimations evident in the texts to identify and amplify these figures? Among these clues, are there intimations that reveal the person *qua*

person? Does that revelation make a difference for our research, and if so, what difference? Do we not need a psychobiography of each Jesus in order to establish a meaningful portrait of any of them?

Moreover, do we not have a different Jesus in the Son of God *logia* than in the Jesus in the Son of Man *logia*? Is not the human Jesus of the Synoptic Son of Man quite different from the apocalyptic, eschatological judge in the Johannine Son of Man? The Johannine Son of Man is merely a function, not a person, and is absorbed into the divine Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. What must we say of a Jesus who refers to himself only as Son of Man, and does so, apparently, in the context of the Enochic Son of Man of the Parables of Enoch from I Enoch 37–71? (Charlesworth 1983, pp. 29–50; cf. also Charles, 1917). Capps and his four noted Jesus scholars have virtually ruled out an apocalyptic eschatological Jesus. If one should introduce that aspect under the psychohermeneutical lens, would we not see a Jesus who starts out in Mark with a self-concept of a man, like the son of man in Ezekiel, called to a human mission of proclaiming God's kingdom on earth? As we watch him walk through the pages of the Synoptic Gospels, would we not see him next, after the multitudes have abandoned him, speaking of himself as a son of man who is the suffering servant as in Isaiah 53, and whom God will vindicate and exalt, like the son of man in Daniel 7:13 ff? And would we not notice thereafter, when the crisis has reached its apex before Caiaphas and Pilate, a Jesus who is caught up in the triumphalist vision of himself as the heavenly judge returning on the clouds of heaven, with all the holy angels, in the glory of God the Father? That is, instead of a melancholic-utopian Jesus, would we not have in view a delusional, psychotic Jesus, lost in his desperate identification with the transcendent mythic figure of I Enoch 70–71?

It is my considered judgment that the textual and historical evidence concerning Jesus leads strongly in the direction of an eschatological figure with an apocalyptic world view and self-concept, specifically of an Enochic type, epitomized by the constant and consistent Gospel references to Jesus, and only Jesus, calling himself the Son of Man while resisting all other titles. Borg's specific rejection of an apocalyptic Jesus, while making his claims for a Galilean mystic, simply ignores the preponderance of historical and textual evidence. This omission is one of the ways in which Capps's choice of foundation brings a crucial vulnerability to his judgment regarding Jesus. My judgment on the matter is in sympathy with the perspective of Boccaccini (1998), and it is my judgment that the view of Jesus as an apocalyptic and eschatological Son of Man, as the gospels have him calling himself, and the view of Jesus as a Galilean mystic, as Borg and hence Capps depict him, are mutually exclusive, in addition to the latter's not doing justice to the evidence.

Was Jesus' unique and unfolding self-concept that of a son of God (Abba) or that of the Enochic Son of Man? Did he progress from Son of Man to Son of God? Why in Mark does he repress any notion of being the messianic Son of David, which is the main messianic concept of official Judaism; or the Son of God,

the Johannine messiah? Placing this question under our lens would alter Capps's thesis fundamentally, it seems to me.

Finally, the question lingers as to whether Capps's portrait of Jesus is that from a lens focused more on Freud than on Jesus? It would be of some considerable interest to see if we could discern how Jesus would interpret Freud, if given half a hermeneutical chance. Perhaps Jesus would paraphrase St. Paul's observations in I Corinthians 13, "Now I see Freud through a lens darkly" (KJV) or "as puzzling reflections in a mirror" (J.B. Phillips). How much can we really know about Jesus when we put on Freud's spectacles and overlay Jesus' portrait with Freud's image?

In any case, I hope that Professor Capps will go forward with this necessary project, so well begun in this volume. When he does, I hope he will take a less theoretical and more clinical approach to his subject, addressing the person of Jesus, as we have him in the relevant documents, in terms of the perspective of a clinical interviewer or a testing psychologist, as though Jesus were a client or patient. The Gospels give us a rich source for a comprehensive therapeutic intake assessment. Taking this approach would allow Capps to start with the figure in the text, "the living human document," and move back into the theorizing or diagnosis. Methodologically, this approach would be much more direct an engagement with the figure in or behind the text than starting with the abstract theoretical models of Freud, Crossan, Borg, and the others. This approach would create a more inherent warrant for the conclusions to which Capps's argument moves.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to raise a few lesser challenges which might also be addressed in further work. First, was Jesus really a peasant? That assumption seems universal in the Jesus scholars and the popular mind. It is clearly a romantic and uncritical assumption. I see no grounds for it in the texts, nor do Capps or his Jesus scholars demonstrate the necessity of this view, though they uncritically employ it. They all hang much of the discussion on this claim. This is particularly true of Crossan, Borg, and Capps. What if Joseph were not just a carpenter but a wealthy contractor, busy with the major building projects which the Romans brought to Galilee? Perhaps Jesus was a project manager for one of Joseph's subdivision developments in Capernaum. There is as much in the texts to suggest this as there is to indicate that he was a peasant. There must be some reason why Paul makes a considerable issue out of the fact that, "Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he was made poor." Is it possible that, while we are speculating here anyway, we might propose that after Joseph's death, Jesus became a wealthy CEO of some major Roman construction project in Caesarea or Tiberias? Faced with such a shift in the assumption regarding Jesus' class, would not a significant footing collapse in the foundation Capps laid for his book?

Second, is Jesus' cry from the cross, "Abba, why have you (betrayed) forsaken me?" not a broadside to Capps notion that in cleansing the temple Jesus purged his deficient mother, found his true father, became his own true father, and clarified his identity, relieving or resolving his melancholy and making his utopia into triumphal reality? Capps addresses this issue briefly and asserts that this possibility is not a significant difficulty. Why not? Capps seems to agree that Jesus could have foreseen the deadly outcome of his action. The Gospel texts suggest that he predicted it. Capps needs to give more attention to this aspect of the text tradition. In the process he will need to deal more directly with attachment theory and protest as a key to interpreting his own thesis.

I am sure that my questions and suggestions arise to some degree from my wanting more from Capps than one volume can offer, and I do not intend to suggest that I know better than my friend. I am certain, moreover, that he has articulate and definitive answers to all of the issues I raise. I hope to have stimulated the continuing dialogue this matter deserves and to have created the occasion and motive for him to continue to share his insights with us. No one else is as good at this as he, nor so grace-ful in doing so.

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