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Jesus and Psychobiography – Part 2: Characteristic Adaptations

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1 Introduction

In the previous part I approached the question of the personality of Jesus within the three-part psychobiographical framework, developed by psychologist Dan P. McAdams.¹ The second part of the theory handles the characteristic adaptations of a person.² It focuses on the individual characteristics that are greatly influenced by growth milieu and life events. Modern psychology knows dozens of theories that could be applied to this part of the paradigm with varying degrees of empirical support. For this article I have chosen one with a rather solid basis in empirical psychological tradition: the attachment theory.³ The research question, if such a concept can be applied to this sort of limited and cursory review, is how the theory could be applied to the study of the historical Jesus. The task at hand can further be divided into two subcategories: a) Is it possible to say anything about Jesus' attachment to his primary caregiver? b) If such knowledge is reachable, how could it be utilized in the study of the historical Jesus?

2 Attachment Theory

Early childhood has been emphasized within Freudian research tradition from its very beginning. With its wild array of creative ideas and explanatory models, the paradigm has received its share of fair and justified criticism for lacking empirical support. However, it has also provided a fertile soil for a more disciplined approach by John Bowlby, who developed and introduced the Attachment theory. According to Bowlby, early experiences regarding the primary caregiver form a certain kind of thought system, memories, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioural models.⁴ The way this caregiver reacts to a child's needs and emotional expressions affects the formation of a secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant or

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- 1 See M. Kankaanniemi, "A Psychobiography of Jesus: Part 1: Personality Traits", *Iesus Aboensis: Åbo Akademi Journal for Historical Jesus Research* (2015), pp. 5–11.
 - 2 See D. P. McAdams, *The Person: An Introduction to the Science of Personality Psychology* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 5th ed, 2008), pp. 253–384.
 - 3 J. Cassidy, J. D. Jones and P. R. Shaver, "Contributions of Attachment Theory and Research: A Framework for Future Research, Translation, and Policy", *Developmental Psychopathology* 25 (2013), pp. 1415–1434.
 - 4 See e.g. J. Mercer, *Understanding Attachment: Parenting, Child Care, and Emotional Development* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), pp. 39–40.

disorganized-disoriented attachment. The attachment type is later repeated in social relations and, according to the theory, it will characterize one's personality throughout one's life.

When it comes to adult attachment models, most energy has been spent on studying romantic relationships and the relationships between the models.⁵ However, the models are operational in other close relations as well, and even in a religious "relationship" with a God-figure.⁶ While the exact classifications vary somewhat, the adult attachment can be divided into four main styles: a) secure, b) anxious-preoccupied, c) dismissive-avoidant, and d) fearful-avoidant. Secure and dismissive-avoidant models are linked to a rather good self-esteem, whereas anxious-preoccupied and fearful-avoidant are associated with negative thoughts about others.⁷

3 Attachment Theory as a Challenge for Historical Studies

When studying a historical person with the Attachment Theory, one faces the familiar challenge of "causality or correlation." Should we analyse the person's behaviour and conclude that usually this kind of behaviour originates from a certain type of childhood attachment? Alternatively, we could focus on his or her childhood and try to find out, for instance, what the maternal attachment has been like. If the attachment has most likely been secure, we could expect the person to behave in a way most typical for the securely attached (individuals). In historical research, data is often scanty, and the researcher may be tempted to define causality so that it is in harmony with more readily available data.

This challenge is not necessarily reason enough to reject the Attachment Theory from psychobiographical research. The attachment style as such is an inevitable psychobiological fact, since no human child survives without some kind of nurturer. Secure or insecure, there is always an attachment relationship and the attachment model is bound to be reflected in later life as well. Secondly, modern brain research has suggested that an attachment relation is related to the process of brain formation and, therefore, the functionality of the structures regulating emotional life and reactions.⁸ The phenomenon is universal; it applies to every human being through all times. Thus, regardless of how little we might know about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, it may be taken as a fact that he was attached to his primary caregiver and nurturer – somehow. Again, as in the case of basic personality traits, we as students are searching for something we know to exist, even if we would

5 See e.g. T. Li and D. K-S. Chan, "How Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Affect Romantic Relationship Quality Differently: A Meta-Analytical Review", *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42 (2012), pp. 406–419.

6 About attachment to God, see W. C. Rowatt and L. A. Kirkpatrick, "Two Dimensions of Attachment to God, and Their Relation to Affect, Religiosity, and Personality Constructs", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002), pp. 637–651.

7 K. Bartholomew and L.M. Horowitz, "Attachment styles among young adults: a test of a four-category model", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61 (1991), pp. 226–244.

8 See O. Gillath, "The Neuroscience of Attachment: using New Methods to Answer Old (and New) Questions", J. A. Simpsons and W. S. Rholes (eds.), *Attachment Theory and Research: New Directions and Emerging Themes* (New York: Guilford, 2015), pp. 39–67.

never find it or be able to convince anyone of our hypotheses on the subject.

4 Attached Jesus

The quantity and quality of useable historical information are of primary importance when it comes to searching for the most probable attachment model of an ancient figure. The Gospels abound with descriptions of Jesus' human relations and emotional reactions, providing plenty of data for analysis. However, if we start searching for Jesus' most probable attachment model from his adult life, a tentative judgement about the historical value of Gospel material is unavoidable. Are we reading about the historical Jesus of Nazareth or projections of Early Christian Community life, or both? Another relevant question is whether we are creating a certain type of attachment model by picking up suitable units and rejecting those going against our pet hypothesis. Would some pericopes, narratives, or entire books paint a picture of a securely attached Jesus, while another collection of source material projected an anxious-avoidant, apocalyptic prophet? In order to give due heed to this dilemma and to aim at a methodologically disciplined approach, it may be useful to pay attention to three factors when it comes to using a certain unit in this kind of analysis.

Question 1: Is the unit historical, i.e., does it describe an actual historical episode with reasonable exactness?

Question 2: How well does the unit tell about Jesus' general behaviour, emotional life, or reactions?

Question 3: Is the psychological explanation of the unit clear or ambivalent?

For example, in Matt. 11:18–19 Jesus tells that he is accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” How could it be used in studying Jesus' attachment style?

4.1 Historical

It is widely assumed in the historical Jesus research that units that tell something negative about Jesus are most likely historical or authentic, or that they give a reliable picture of a historical event – to a relatively great extent. This reasoning is often called the Criterion of Embarrassment.⁹ Why would an Early Christian create a story or saying in which Jesus is accused of being a drunkard? The lack of a convincing answer to this question defends the historicity of this saying. Thus, we may assume that Jesus actually was accused in this way, and it would be logical to reason that there was something in his behaviour that led to this accusation.

4.2 General descriptivity

The accusation probably reflects a consistent way of life or a repeated behavioural

9 I have elsewhere elaborated the dynamics within this criterion. See M. Kankaanniemi, *The Guards of the Tomb (Matt 27:62–66 and 28:11 –15) Matthew's Apologetic Legend Revisited* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010), pp. 57–64.

model, not just a sporadic or single event. Thus we may find it safe and legitimate to say that Jesus had an active social life in which he broke the societal barriers and taboos, him being a religiously observant teacher and still socializing with impure sinners. But is there Gospel material that would contradict this characterization? Would forty days alone in the desert portray a totally different personality: an introvert and a socially avoidant? I would suggest that the forty days of fasting cannot be taken as indicative of Jesus' general behaviour, as the "glutton and drunkard accusation" was an indication of Jesus' personality. The period in the desert was quite likely a religiously motivated and exceptional rite, told and retold with biblical themes, and not – as far as we can tell – a typical everyday habit of Jesus'.

4.3 Psychological explanation

It would appear safe to conclude that Jesus must have harboured rather positive thoughts about people. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain how he approached socially stigmatized people and defended their rights as legitimate children of Abraham. He also seemed to have an active social life – even to the point where this caused his opponents to mock him about it. So, if Bartholomew's and Horowitz's four-category model is applied, two categories are left to choose between. How much information does the pericope provide for deciding between the probability of an anxious-preoccupied model or a secure-attachment model behind Jesus' behaviour? The anxious-preoccupied attachment model is associated with a rather low self-esteem and "clinging" tendencies. This raises the question: was Jesus searching for recognition, appreciation, attention, and emotional intimacy among the lower strata of Galilean society? The explanatory potential of this particular pericope hardly covers this question in its entirety. Perhaps we can reason that low self-esteem would have been better helped by his socializing with the upper stratum, such as the Pharisees and scribes. Since Jesus' brother James had a good relationship with the Pharisees, it is probable that Jesus' family status and background would have entitled him to be in contact with this group. Tentatively we can conclude that this particular pericope suggests a relatively securely attached Jesus.

5 Jesus and His Mother – Deductive Reasoning

As I have already indicated above, there are basically two ways to analyse the attachment model of a historical person. We have briefly handled the inductive way of studying examples of adult behaviour and the logic in reasoning about the kind of attachment model they suggest. Another, often significantly more difficult method is to study material on the person's childhood and maternal relationship. Aware of the obvious challenges in this approach, I still regard it as worth an attempt – if not for anything else, then at least for the purpose of filling one small gap in the massive task of reconstructing the object person's psychobiographical profile.

Independent of the evaluation of the general historicity of the nativity stories, the data on the attachment relationship between Jesus and his mother is very scanty.

Jesus most certainly lived with his mother Mary during his childhood and teenage years, as can be seen in the pericope (Mk 6:1–6) where he is called “the son of Mary.” The fourth evangelist reports that Mary was present at Golgotha and saw the crucifixion. Further, Luke mentions that Mary was an active member in the post-Easter Jesus movement. All this speaks for the assumption that the relationship between Jesus and Mary was “normal,” thus suggesting the secure-attachment model. When, in one episode, Jesus’ brothers and Mary come to see him but are met with Jesus questioning biological family ties, one need not take this as an indication of hostility but as a didactic hyperbole.

It is reasonable to assume that Mary’s pregnancy was premarital but later “sanctified” by Joseph’s acceptance of Jesus and Mary. Whether Joseph was also the biological father of Jesus is a question which escapes the ability of modern scientific exploration of history to tell how things actually happened.

Premarital teenage pregnancies are related to problems with attachment models of children – in modern Western society.¹⁰ This is easy to understand if the consequent stress and depressive symptoms of young – and unwilling – mothers are taken into consideration. The same would have applied to the 1st century Jewish context in many ways, if the pregnancy was not accepted by surrounding people. However, after it was socially accepted, there was no reason for remorse, since giving birth to children was a God-given duty for a Jewish woman. If it is accepted that Joseph “confessed” that he was the father of Jesus, there is no aprioristical basis for doubting a full emotional commitment of Mary to her first-born and subsequent secure attachment of Jesus towards his mother.¹¹

6 Securely Attached Jesus

Defining what is and is not important and useful in historical science is a complicated philosophical question. Is there, for example, some value in determining the most probable attachment style of Jesus of Nazareth? Perhaps there is some value in doing so, but a more interesting topic is certainly the potential of the assumed attachment style to explain some feature in Jesus’ behaviour on a larger scale.

All scholars agree that Jesus’ life was not that of an ordinary Galilean in the Tiberian era. A thirty-year-old carpenter leaves his home, joins the countercultural movement of John the Baptist, and gains a reputation as a successful healer. Much of this crystallizes in the baptism of Jesus, which has been important for practically all reconstructions of the historical Jesus.¹² Very few doubt its historicity, and it also seems to have been a generally accepted starting point for Jesus’ ministry in Early Christianity, as can be seen in the fact that all four canonical gospels practically start from the story about the public ministry of Jesus from his baptism onwards. Thus,

10 S. C. Flaherty and L. S. Sadler, “A Review of Attachment Theory in the Context of Adolescent Parenting”, *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 25 (2011), pp. 114–121.

11 M. Touris, S. Kromelow and C. Harding, “Mother-firstborn Attachment and the Birth of a Sibling”, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 65 (1995), pp. 293–297.

12 See e.g. J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Part Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 18–182.

most legitimate psychobiographical questions are, “Why was Jesus baptised,” and “Why did he leave his home to build a unique career as a healer and preacher of the coming kingdom of God?”.

To roughly dichotomize the approaches, I will mention two groups of scholars, the first emphasizing the psychological troubles, trauma, problems, and tensions in explaining Jesus’ behaviour, and the second seeing a more or less consistent theological agenda here, with much less psychological speculation. For example, Aarides van Aarde annihilates Joseph from the historical stratum and considers fatherlessness and the consequent bastard-status the primary drive behind Jesus’ public behaviour.¹³ John W. Miller sees no problems or tensions between Jesus and his father Joseph, but labels much of Jesus’ actions and attitudes as Oedipal anxiety resulting from his problematic maternal relationship.¹⁴ Bruce Chilton does not apply psychological terminology or concepts but also strongly emphasizes the inner driving force of Mamzer-trauma.¹⁵

But what if Jesus was securely attached, the way 56 % of people are?¹⁶ As a matter of fact, one reason for the wide-spread scholarly scepticism towards applying psychology to Jesus research may be the trauma-centeredness of psychological portraits of Jesus. But the psychobiographical approach does not “need” a traumatic Jesus to justify its methodological existence. As a matter of fact, the source material we have suggests that Jesus had a secure attachment style – very likely deriving from Mary’s committed nurturing of her firstborn, and a good relationship with his father Joseph, who taught Jesus his tradecraft. This may have resulted in a well-functioning emotional life, which gave Jesus the ability to feel empathy for the poor and sick. Perhaps it was the combination of this empathetic perception of the suffering surrounding him, and the realization that he was able to produce experiences of healing, together with the contemplation of Scriptures and tradition that created the basis for Jesus’ exceptional ministry?

It is important to understand that psychology as a discipline can contribute to the historical Jesus research, also in the case of a mentally healthy, securely attached, non-traumatic research object. Sometimes the psychological assessments may give direction to interpretations of important decisions in a historical person’s life. If, for example, Jesus was not working out his trauma, searching for his missing father-figure, or wrestling with Oedipal ghosts when stepping down to the Jordan to be baptised by John, then maybe his move should be studied as an act of joining rather than escaping. It also might give reason to emphasize the effect of Scripture and rational reasoning as initiating factors in the formation of Jesus’ view of himself and his mission.

Historians have no reason to protect Jesus from diagnoses or negative labels if such can be convincingly derived from the source material. However, no medication should be prescribed to a healthy person even if the shelves were bending under

13 A. van Aarde, *Fatherless in Galilee* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2001).

14 J. W. Miller, *Jesus at Thirty* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

15 B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

16 This number comes from the seminal study by C. Hazen and P. Shaver, “Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1987), pp. 511–524.

surplus jars. This choice between approaches is important when studying major choices in Jesus' life. Why did Jesus join John's movement instead of the Pharisees', although his brother James seemed to have opted for the latter? Why did Jesus include sinners into the kingdom of God? And finally, why did Jesus decide to get himself killed in Jerusalem? While human decision making is not an either-or -type of phenomenon that can be regarded as purely emotional or rational, there is a difference between what we understand to be disorder or trauma related behaviour on one hand, and strongly ideologically motivated but normal behaviour on the other hand.

Historical research has to calculate and evaluate probabilities with no hope of axiomatic truths. In psychobiographical profile building, some details are beyond reasonable decision, some beyond reasonable doubt, and then there are a great deal of phenomena between these two extremes. In those cases / In these cases, we have to decide which option is the more probable and proceed with it. When such a factor as Jesus' attachment style is judged more likely to be secure than insecure, this may add to the probability of a non-trauma based explanation being a better way or framework to analyse the later events of his life.