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A Psychobiography of Jesus
– Part 1: Personality Traits

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1. Introduction

To study a historical person in the light of psychological theories is fascinating yet challenging. Nevertheless, with all its undeniable challenges, a psychological angle is present in practically all historical endeavors. Behavior must be explained and an assumption of some sort about an analogical relationship between modern behavior and that of the people in the past is inevitable. Otherwise there is hardly any meaningful epistemological basis for historical research. In the series of articles, of which the present writing is the first part, we study the psychobiographical research of Jesus with the three-level approach developed by psychologist Dan P. McAdams. The emphasis will be on the methodological issues, i.e, the challenges the researcher meets both in psychobiographical research in general and especially when studying the life of the historical Jesus.[1]

2. Schweitzer and Psychopathological Jesus Reconstructions

During the so-called First Quest, a number of medical doctors tried to diagnose Jesus, labeling him with mental disorders, against which New Testament scholar and medical doctor Albert Schweitzer wrote his paradigmatic medical dissertation.[2] Although Schweitzer actually only demonstrated that the psychiatric diagnosing of Jesus of Nazareth was impossible, his work has been used to taunt any attempt to combine psychology to historical Jesus research. The influence has been strong, which can be partly seen in the fact that psychology as a discipline has not been significantly applied within the paradigm called the Third Quest which otherwise has utilized a myriad of multidisciplinary approaches to better understand the Historical Jesus and his context.[3]

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1   See D. P. McAdams, *The Person: An Introduction to the Science of Personality Psychology* (New York: Wiley, 2009).

2   A. Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus: Exposition and Criticism* (trans. C. R. Joy; Boston: The Beacon, 1948).

3   For the definition of the Third Quest, see M. Kankaanniemi, "Will the Real Third Quest Please Stand Up?", S.-O. Back and M. Kankaanniemi (eds.), *Voces Clamantium in Deserto* (Festschrift K. Syreeni; Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2012), pp. 108–130. For an example of approaches, see W. Stegemann, B. J. Malina and G. Theissen (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

3. Bultmann, Freud and Scholarly Double Standards

Although psychoanalytical Jesus research was delayed while Freudian psychology triumphed throughout the world, a remotely similar paradigm was applied in Gospel and Jesus studies. Rudolf Bultmann and numerous other form critics maintained that Gospel texts are not describing the reality presented by the text itself, but that they consist of cryptic reflections of life situations (*Sitzen im Leben*) in the Early Christian communities. While it was regarded as impossible to psychologically profile historical figures, complex and detailed analyzes were written about the communities by speculating on the "real meanings" of the texts. On the philosophy of science level, the Bultmannian and Freudian approaches have much in common with both leaning on creative thinking more than empirical scrutiny. Both were also convinced that the primary message, such as the "plain meaning of the text," is not the real one; instead, the hidden world of motives behind it is. It is of course interesting that a psychological framework was rejected as too speculative, while sociological speculations concerning the communities behind the traditions were accepted, sometimes without almost any critical engagement.

4. Erik H. Erikson and Psychobiographical Genre

Danish psychologist Erik H. Erikson launched a new paradigm by writing a psychobiography about reformer Martin Luther. [4] In that book, the life and thinking of the religious figure was explained in a psychoanalytical fashion with childhood experiences and abnormal parental relationships. According to the theory, tyrannical Hans Luther, with his cruelty and strictness, caused trauma to his son Martin Luther and consequently the trauma resolved as theological dogma. Erikson widened the scope of analyzed religious figures to Mahatma Gandhi and was followed by a school of psychobiographists. [5] Soon after psychobiographic writing was criticized by historian David Stannard, who pointed out that, among other things, the empirical support for many psychoanalytical concepts and assumptions is often very weak. [6] Later the psychobiographical scholarship has gained in methodological discipline resulted for example in insightful list of signs for good and bad psychobiography given by William Todd Schultz. [7] He warns, among other things, of using psychological theories that do not enjoy sufficient empirical support.

5. Psychobiographies of Jesus

As already pointed out, it took a while before the first proper psychobiographies about Jesus of Nazareth were published. Not until 1990s did John W. Miller write a strongly psychoanalytical treatise of Jesus (*Jesus at Thirty*) and a bit later Donald

4   E. H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

5   E. H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969)

6   D. Stannard, *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

7   W. T. Schultz, "Introduction", W. T. Schultz (ed.), *Handbook of Psychobiography,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3–18.

Capps a very different analysis Jesus: A Psychological Biography.[8] Adries van Aarde tried to explain the identity and ministry of Jesus by pointing to the lack of a father in Jesus' life. The application of a psychoanalytical approach is common in these books, although especially van Aarde utilizes psychological research only superficially. The biggest differences between the approaches is the judgment of the source quality, i.e., their historical value.[9] Capps and van Aarde lean on the skepticism represented by the North American Jesus Seminar while Miller searches for guidance from the so-called Third Quest scholarship. This is naturally not the only difference. The decisive factor in all psychobiography writing is, of course, the choice of psychological framework, where the differences are often significant. I have elsewhere suggested that psychological research on the Historical Jesus could, instead of undisciplined form critical skepticism, be based on the Third Quest scholars' perhaps a somewhat more empirically critical approach, quite well crystallized by Craig A. Evans: "In my judgment, the most prudent position to take is that, on principle, most material ultimately derives from Jesus, but that most material has been edited and recontextualized."[10] As for the psychological part of the endeavor at hand, we turn to McAdams' three-level model for psychobiographical research.[11] He suggests that a meaningful approach to study a person is to analyze i) his personality, ii) characteristic adaptations like goals, motives, and life plans, and iii) the narratives used to explain one's existence and identity. The strength in this model is the proper and convincing inclusion of both inherited characteristics and environmental influences. The social constructivism associated with identity formation is also given its due heed in the form of handling the identity narratives. It is, for instance, important to ask what a religious person of influence thought he was doing and with what broader narrative he explained himself and his acts. In what follows, we concentrate on pondering the methodological challenges in studying the first level in McAdams' model, i.e., the personality.

6. The Idea of a Personality Type

The theories about personality types are based on the assumption that some attributes and characteristics correlate with each other. Consequently, the occurrence of a certain feature in one's character can be seen to add the probability of the occurrence of another feature or certain type of behavior. When correlating attributes are combined and correspondingly separated from negatively correlating characteristics, it is possible to create clusters of attributes, in other words, personality traits. Meaningful personality categories were sought already in Antiquity. One of the most entertaining and indisputably insightful texts is the book Χαρακτῆρες by Theophrastos (371–287 BCE), in which people are divided utterly cynically into negative personality types. However, the most well-known categorization is the division of personalities into four main groups: the sanguine, choleric, melancholic

8   J. Miller, *Jesus at Thirty* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); D. Capps, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

9   See M. Kankaanniemi, "Jesus the Son of Joseph", S. Byrskog, T. Holmén and M. Kankaanniemi (eds.), *The Identity of Jesus: Nordic Voices* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), pp. 38–69.

10   C. A. Evans, "Life of Jesus", S. E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2002), pp. 427–476 (436).

11   See McAdams, *The Person*.

and phlegmatic characters suggested by Hippocrate (460–370 BCE) among others. This categorizing has been accepted into many languages, but it has turned out to be challenging due to its rigidity and the fact that quite few people represent "pure" forms of any of these categories.[12]

In the 20th century scholars began to search for meaningful personality types with the help of the human language instead of the deductive basic types. In a factor analysis, a great amount of adjectives describing human personality are gathered to statistically significant attribute clusters, which can be regarded as empirically demonstrated personality traits. Probably the strongest research support has been found for the Big Five model, in which there are five continuums describing the basic personality. The five continuums are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and neuroticism.[13] This division has been found applicable in various cultures, which is noteworthy due to the inherently Western nature of scientific psychology. The synchronic ability of the theory to explain personalities in different cultures suggests that it can as well be successfully applied diachronically, i.e., in historical research.

7. Finding Categories

But is there enough historical source material for the psychological evaluation of Jesus of Nazareth? This depends greatly on the nature of the attempted profiling. It is generally, albeit often implicitly, assumed in the historical sciences that if man inevitably belongs to one of few categories, it is possible with relatively scanty information to find out which category is the correct one. It is, for example, assumed that a historical person was a man or a woman and it may take only a passing reference to clothing to reveal which category (sex) the person belonged. One of the best examples of a search for a category is the discussion about Jesus' marital status.[14] Needless to say, the marital status is an existing category. On the other hand, the question of whether Jesus' ministry was somehow motivated by oedipal complex is more problematic since the whole idea of oedipal complex can be questioned.[15] Consequently, it is not enough to search for hints of a category in fragmentary source material, but the very existence and legitimation of the category should first be demonstrated.

If the personality traits are accepted as meaningful categories, it should be pos-

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12   However, it is still the basis for Hans Eysenck's famous and much-used personality theory. See H. J. Eysenck, *Personality, Genetics, and Behavior: Selected Papers* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

13   See, e.g., R. R. McCrae and O. P. John, "An Introduction to the Five-Factor Model and Its Applications", *Journal of Personality* 60 (1992), pp. 175–215 and J. M. Digman, "Personality Structure: Emergence of the Five-Factor Model", *Annual Review of Psychology* 41 (1990), pp. 417–440.

14   For an attempt to demonstrate that Jesus was not married, see J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and Person* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 332–345. For an opposite conclusion, see, e.g., W. E. Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996).

15   For a general introduction to the role of Oedipus complex in current psychoanalytical paradigm, see, e.g., S. Borovecki-Jakovljev and S. Matacki, "Oedipus Complex in Contemporary Psychoanalysis", *Collegium Antropologium* 29 (2005), pp. 351–360. For a critique of the theory, see J. Kupfersmid, "Does the Oedipus Complex Exist?", *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 32 (1995), pp. 535–547.

sible to search for traits of Jesus' personality even from relatively fragmentary source material. As already noted, if the five dispositional traits can describe the human character in various cultural contexts, it is meaningful to presume that people of the past can also be categorized on the same basis. Further, the twin studies have convincingly demonstrated that approximately half of the occurrence of a certain trait can be explained as genetically inherited, which supports the theory according to which the personality traits "push" through despite the cultural milieu.[16] Thus it may be meaningful to claim that Jesus could have been located on the extravert-introvert axis, and hints about this location can be sought.

Needless to say, it is impossible to distribute questionnaires among the disciples in order to survey Jesus' personality. However, it is possible to make a reasonable attempt to analyze implicative information, which could show how Jesus was "located" on personality trait continuums. To do this properly, at least three methodological challenges must be taken into consideration.

8. Evaluation by Others or by Oneself

Before any historical personality is defined, it is important to passingly touch on the problem of differences between one's own evaluation in relation to that of others'. The dilemma of a person's ability to objectively and reliably describe himself, his attitudes and behavior has been much discussed in behavioral sciences. The gospels and traditions behind them are essentially others' descriptions of Jesus. Furthermore, the strong religious connotations attached to the person described are bound to complicate the use of these descriptions in profiling his personality. On the other hand, when the differences between one's own evaluation and that of others' have been studied within the Big Five framework, they have been found relatively insignificant.[17] It is also noteworthy that useful information can be sought from descriptions, which do not directly handle anyone's personality. If, for example, the emotional stability of Jesus is evaluated, it is not necessarily any explicit description the student looks for, but episodes where Jesus' emotional reaction may differ from what can be regarded as normal. The strong outburst at Lazarus' grave, furious acts in the temple, crying for Jerusalem and panic in Gethsemane are significant details in narratives whose emphases are elsewhere than in the actual description of Jesus' personality.

9. Filtering Effect of Transmission Process

It is inevitable that important information about personality features has been lost in the process of the oral transmittal of traditions and redaction of the written sources. No mention, for example, about an angry Jesus is left in Matthew's text (12:9–14) when the evangelist utilized the Marcan story (3:1–6) about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. Neither have the doubts of Jesus'

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16 K. L. Jang, W. J. Livesley and P. A. Vemon, "Heritability of the Big Five Personality Dimensions and Their Facets: A Twin Study", *Journal of Personality* 64 (1996), pp. 577–592.

17 J. Allik, A. Realo, R. Mõttus, T. Esko, J. Pullat and A. Metspalu, "Variance Determines Self-Observer Agreement on the Big Five Personality Traits", *Journal of Research in Personality* 44 (2010), pp. 421–426.

brothers and mother about Jesus' mental health (Mark 3:21) found their way from Mark to Matthew or Luke. Should one take the Stoic demands for the characteristic features of elders and deacons in Pastoral letters as reflections of the prevailing values in Early Christianity, it is readily understandable that emotional peaks are smoothed down in the process of tradition transmission. When it comes to evaluating Jesus' personality, it is evident that this bias cannot be left without due concern.

10. Culturally Specific Context

A student of history meets the challenge of defining certain types of behavior against the proper cultural background. For example, in every social situation being silent does not necessarily indicate introversion, rather there may be cultural codes and rules hindering one from speaking in public. It is possible that an extrovert and talkative woman obeys the commandment (1 Cor. 14:35) "let women be silent" in public, and after entering a private space, start speaking with an extroverted eloquence.

It is also important to realize that the events behind the fragmentary descriptions may have been exceptional. Pontius Pilate is depicted as an agreeable and diplomatic personality in the Gospels, although there is much ground for radically different conclusions in other sources.[18] However, this is not necessarily due to the evangelist's editorial attempt to make Pilate a better suit for his ideological or literary purposes. Exceptional context may result in exceptional behavior in a specific situation and when source material is scanty, there may hide a serious risk for overly speculative conclusions about personality features.

11. Finally

Why should we even try to study the personality of Jesus of Nazareth? The answer is simple. Almost any scholarly research of a historical person necessarily includes at least a cursory look at his personality. Since the Big Five theory has an impressive empirical support, it may be useful when it comes to making disciplined definitions of more intuitive thoughts. In addition to that, the use of analogies with the researcher's own experience and context are unavoidable, and thus the concepts and findings of personality psychology may provide the scholar a tool for the critical analysis of one's own presuppositions. It is hardly a secret that the field of the Historical Jesus studies abound with different Jesus reconstructions. The reasons for this are many, but personality theories may give one little perspective for explaining them. If a scholar's Jesus is a quiet and neurotic conservative, then it is quite evident that his reasoning leads to a different direction than his colleague's, who harbors an idea of an extroverted Jesus, who is open to experiences and sensation seeking.

Attempts to answer "Who Was Jesus?" type of questions presuppose the inclusion of his personality. The idea of a Jesus reconstruction based on sheer facts is naïve. Although most scholars agree with E. P. Sanders in confirming a few indisputable facts about Jesus, these are hardly enough for a meaningful Jesus recon-

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18   Josephus, *Ant.* 18:60–62; 18:85–89.

struction.[19] The "who?" questions often connected to imprecise impressions about personality instead of only so-called facts. One advantage in this approach, when compared to the traditional "questological" one, is that theological presuppositions are not as relevant as they are for example when Jesus' "Christology" is discussed.

Applying the first part of Dan P. McAdams' three-phased psychobiographical model, the study of personality characteristics, to Jesus of Nazareth is challenging. Due to the scantiness and the nature of the sources, as well as the cultural distance, the conclusions often fail to convince. At the same time, however, the model may provide a new and fresh viewpoint to the study of the Historical Jesus. If the general source optimism prevails, it may be possible to build a satisfactory, if somewhat cursory, personality profile of the historical Jesus.

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19   E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 11.