Review of Jesus

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Don Capps has proposed that Jesus grew up as a melancholic depressive with a diffused identity because the quandary about his birth left him with a devalued mother and absent or defamed father. He resolved this trauma through the symbolic assault upon the establishment by cleansing the temple, thus asserting his self-certification and in one psychologically definitive act purified his mother and affirmed God as his father. This article challenges that model, declaring that Jesus was Joseph’s son, as is demonstrated by Paul’s ignorance of any virgin birth, by the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, and by the testimony of early extrabiblical witnesses. Instead, Jesus is presented in this article as a relatively balanced personality, challenged by a transcendent vision of divine calling.

KEY WORDS: Jesus; virgin birth; Pauline Christology; psychology and biblical studies.

INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of developmental psychoanalysis and psychology, there have been a number of studies of Jesus worked out from that perspective. So far, we have had no rigorous, sustained dialogue about such studies.1 Professor Donald Capps may have changed that with his Jesus: A Psychological Biography. One of the book’s strengths is the careful way Capps has related his proposals to those of others, including my own (1997). I wish to thank him for that care and express the hope that our discussion may foster the serious dialogue this topic deserves. The insights of developmental psychology are pervasive in our culture and increasingly utilized by historians in their studies of seminal figures like Jesus. However, the application of these insights to Jesus’ own life is still rare. I fully agree with Capps

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1For an overview of the literature on this issue, see John W. Miller, The Psychological Study of Jesus: A Review and Critique of the Discussion to Date, in his Jesus at Thirty, A Psychological and Historical Portrait, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp. 103–119.

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that this omission leaves a hole in our perceptions of him that is more debilitating than generally realized. So I welcome Capps’ book for its strong articulation of the need to look at Jesus from the psychological perspective, as well as for its bold proposals, though I disagree in substantial ways with his assumptions and conclusions.

EXPOSITION

Capps’ book surveys several modern studies of Jesus and his social world. With these studies in mind, he offers a radically new set of proposals for imagining the kind of home in which Jesus was born and grew to adulthood. A credible hypothesis regarding that developmental process is of paramount importance for a psychological biography of this kind. The data for such a reconstruction are admittedly sparse but do exist. Something must be made of them. It is on this reality of Jesus’ personal growth from infancy to adulthood that such an investigation into his developmental psychology must focus.

Psychology informs us that a child is not born with a strong sense of trust. This primal attribute is acquired through emotional interactions, usually with the mother, in the very first months of its life. If the emotional interactions are pathological or absent, the trust base does not form and the developmental process is pathogenic. Neither is a child born with a strong or clear-cut gender identity. This, too, is acquired through healthy, subtle interactions with both parents at a time when a child is just beginning to talk. Children are not born with a given set of inner feelings, thoughts, and convictions, for example, about sex or violence, love or kindness. These are acquired during the oedipal years, from three to six years of age, through an intricate interplay of experiences with both parents. Many such experiences are centered on the father. Research on these issues has clarified the picture of how emotions, attitudes, and values of adults are shaped by the primal experiences of infancy and childhood.

Thus, it is to be expected that in a psychological investigation, such as Capps undertakes, close attention must be paid to the circumstances of Jesus’ infancy and childhood, that is, to what was going on developmentally during this formative period of his life. What will come as a surprise to many readers are the conclusions that Capps reaches in this regard. While his proposals may be useful and worthy of our consideration, in the end they do not prove credible.

Let me summarize what I understand Capps’ proposals to be. Capps thinks that Jesus was born into a home and village where it was common knowledge that he was the child of a father who had raped Mary, his mother, at a point in her life when she was betrothed. Ordinarily that would have ended the betrothal, and the man who did this would have been severely punished. However, Capps believes that the rapist was a householder, impervious to legal action, and that Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed, saw no hope for justice. So he married her and had children of his own with her. Nonetheless, he refused to accept, much