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Capps' "Jesus: A Psychological Biography" - Book Review

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

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Review of *Jesus*

Paul N. Anderson¹

This new psychobiographical analysis of Jesus by Donald Capps promises to be a controversial but important book. While the venture is an engaging one, new theses about what and why Jesus did what he did suffer the same sorts of challenges as have traditional and critical presentations of the historical Jesus. This review engages theological issues and their implications, historical judgments and their plausibility, and methodological approaches and their fruitfulness.

KEY WORDS: psychobiography; historical Jesus; reparative act; prophetic agency; individualism.

In his new book, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography*, Donald Capps makes a significant addition to his already impressive list of monographs, but this book is sure to draw attention that none of his other projects has evoked thus far. The reason for this distinction is its subject—Jesus—and the innovative set of approaches Capps employs in sketching a psychobiographical analysis of Jesus and his ministry. In particular, Capps views Jesus' ministry and actions through the lens of projections. He contends Jesus confronted, healed, and delivered as factors of counterbalancing specific aspects of his psychological states. Capps' proposals are sure to draw attention, and the work will evoke reactions along at least three major lines: theological issues and their implications, historical judgments and their plausibility, and methodological approaches and their fruitfulness.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Regarding matters theological, Capps' presentation of Jesus as a thoroughly human individual, born as an illegitimate child who was abandoned by his adoptive

¹ Paul Anderson is Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian, Newberg, OR 97132. His book on the Christology of John (1997) explores the origins of John's theological tensions and introduces the works of James Loder and James Fowler into the study of Gospel traditions and their development.

father, is sure to polarize the readership along predisposed lines. One doubts that conservative Christians will be dissuaded from their orthodox views on matters of the virgin birth and Jesus' unique relation to God on the basis of Capps' book alone. Some may not even give the book a fair reading, and this would be unfortunate, as there is much to be learned, particularly, from works with which one disagrees. Liberal readers may find their more naturalistic appraisals of Jesus affirmed by Capps' approach, but it would overreach the evidence to regard the case open-and-shut on the basis of a demonstrated argument. Capps indeed makes his points and raises questions with gusto and with incisiveness, but problems of the "historical Jesus" evade modernistic reconstructions of his identity and ontology as much as they have evaded traditionalistic ones.

If matters of ontology and historicity can be set aside for a moment, Capps' exploration of the perception of Jesus' parentage during his childhood and development is worthy of considering, whether or not the particulars of his parentage can ever be known. Did Jesus, for instance, experience social alienation as a child, *whoever* his real father was, that may have contributed to his inward spiritual development rather than prompting him to resort to conventional religious resources? Not a bad question, and the same question applies if one holds a more elevated appraisal of Jesus' personhood as well. Along these lines, Capps seeks to explore possibilities along theological paths that have been underconsidered, perhaps for repressed reasons.

Then again, it would be a mistake to interpret disagreement with one's argument as resistance to repressed fears, theologically or otherwise. Because Capps develops scenarios rooted in psychology and anthropology, even rationalistic readers may distrust his approach. Conversely, some will associate his findings with greater certainty than they deserve because of his appeal to historical-critical methods and psychological theory. On these matters, one wonders if the tables have been turned over the fundamentalist/modernist debates a century ago. Now it is the modernist mindset, with its positivistic hegemony, that has enjoyed over a century of dominance on the Western theological scene. When antithesis becomes thesis, however, such a move evokes the same sort of critical analysis applied toward other views, and this leads to a consideration of the plausibility of the "historical" reconstructions of Jesus employed by Capps and others.

It may also be interesting to explore the degree to which the shifting of audiences affects the outcomes of Jesus studies. The thought of the Inquisition in centuries past, or even an attempt to present a portrait of Jesus in ways fitting for an audience of Christians, has affected approaches to this subject and their outcomes. The converse, however, is also true. Presenting a portrait of Jesus palatable for a non-Christian audience in a setting where religion and the public sphere are widely separate also adds pressures to one's disciplinary approaches. Whether one's work on Jesus becomes an apologetic for an orthodox Jesus or for an alternative view, such a venture is rooted in specific faith assumptions. The alternative view of Jesus Capps seeks to provide is that of a man who was indeed victorious—not over sin

and death, but over the limitations of societally ascribed identity. Such a view has theological implications, but an appraisal of Capps' work here deserves to be assessed in consideration of his historical reconstructions and his application of disciplinary methodologies along the way.

HISTORICAL JUDGMENTS AND THEIR PLAUSIBILITY

The sort of "psychological biography" of Jesus offered by Capps could only be performed as he did it in the wake of significant Jesus studies—the likes of which have become a recognizable genre over the last two decades. Accordingly, Capps reviews the literature admirably and offers fitting summaries of several of the most significant recent Jesus studies: those of E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg. He also engages meaningfully recent evaluations of such studies by Mark Allan Powell and Marcus Borg. One wonders why the contributions of N. T. Wright (1996) and Bart Ehrman (1999), among others,² are missing from the conversation, and one notes that the most significant scholarly critiques of recent Jesus studies are missing from the text and bibliographies alike. Then again, one cannot cover everything in a single book, and Capps' treatment of the works he does cover is measured and thoughtful.

At this point, however, one runs the risk of misrepresenting the broader judgment of New Testament scholars on the issue of what Jesus was like and how his mission should be understood. Capps limits his primary engagement to four notable approaches, and this restriction may lead to a distortion of the broader field of Jesus studies, which regard Jesus pervasively within Palestinian prophet traditions. Further, Capps fails to incorporate into his theories the psychology of social and prophetic movements. Thus, to psychologize the voice of prophetic reform runs the risk of deflecting the point of the subject's central concern, and this deflection raises several questions.

For instance, why is there no extended discussion of Jesus in the light of Essene Judaism? The impressive contributions by such scholars as James Charlesworth and others³ develop significant insights into the ministry of Jesus in the light of Qumran spirituality and religious concern. Of specific consequence for Capps' study, one might explore psychological aspects of religious sectarianism and opposition to "the world" as a relevant field of investigation here. Nonetheless, Capps does lay helpful groundwork for such investigations in his excellent chapters on "The Psychohistory of Groups" and "The Social World of Jesus' Day" (pp. 69–126). What would strengthen both of these chapters is simply a more psychologically targeted focus on first-century Palestinian society—a topic helped by

²Wright and Borg (1998) have also coauthored a very significant text in which they discuss important issues related to historical Jesus studies.

³A growing body of scholarship examining the Essene movement and other background studies indeed has extensive implications for Jesus studies. See, for instance, Charlesworth (1992 and 1988).

Capps' building on the excellent Theissen/Mertz (1996) text. As it stands, Capps' psychological work is primarily individualistic.

Missing also are significant analyses of Jesus within Jewish prophetic traditions, which could also be viewed from a psychobiographical perspective. Bart Ehrman's work on an apocalyptic appraisal of Jesus adds new vitality to a view the Jesus Seminar had come to reject, but at least part of their rejection of the "eschatological" Jesus was rooted in the misconception that Jewish apocalypticism was pervasively futuristic rather than contemporary in its thrust. Given the total absence (except Acts 7) of "Son of Man" as a confessional christological title, it is hard to explain its pervasive appearance in all four Gospels as a self-designation by Jesus unless it had an origin apart from later traditions. Associations with Daniel's or Ezekiel's Son of Man traditions could explain the connection, but such associations would imply Jesus' self-understanding as rooting in either apocalyptic or prophetic traditions more than Capps' allows. This presentation of Jesus' self-identification is highly relevant to Capps' work, as Ellens pointed out above.

A third set of studies underrepresented by Capps' survey involves the analysis of Jesus as a transformer of Judaism by means of challenging ritual means of purity in the name of God. The works of John Riches and James Dunn⁴ have been notably missing from these studies, and an analysis of the "psychology of religious reform" might well be a fruitful way forward within such investigations. The fact that such studies are missing from Borg's and Powell's surveys makes Capps' selection understandable, but their absence may also hinder his approach to his own interest, which is a reconstructive one. Then again, Capps appears to be aware of these sorts of approaches, but he rejects them in favor of a psychological and introspective lens.

The result of psychologizing Jesus' actions rather than seeing them as aspects of Jesus' "goal" (Riches 1980) is that several important insights into Jesus' ministry are lost or obfuscated by speculation. For instance, is the best way to interpret Jesus' cleansing of the Temple really as an outburst of "utopian-melancholic personality" and to regard it a factor of Jesus' seeking to undo as a "reparative act" his inward anger over his illegitimacy? Rather than seeing the action as an uncontrolled outburst, there are clues in the text suggesting that it was a more deliberate and intentional demonstration. In Mark 11:11, Jesus is reported to have entered the Temple area and to have surveyed it, after which he departed because it was late. Does such a detail suggest that the Temple cleansing was a considered demonstration rather than an uncontrolled outburst? Upon his return, when there was a more bustling presence of traffickers and their merchandise, Jesus drove the

⁴John Riches' book (1980) offers one of the finest presentations of Jesus' "goal" in the light of religious anthropological studies by Mary Douglas and others. Interestingly, despite being one of the first in the "Third Quest" monographs, it has received very little treatment in surveys by Borg and others. James Dunn's (1998, pp. 57–111) works on the Messianic Secret in Mark, the impact of Messianic ideas upon the Jesus of history, and on Jesus and table-fellowship in Qumran are also significant along these lines.

money-changers and pigeon-sellers out of the Temple and overturned their tables (Mk. 11:15–17). Here the employment of religious anthropological tools seems preferable over psychological ones. Seeing Jesus as challenging the delimiting of God's presence and grace to cultic forms of ritual purification, combined with the fact that the poor of the land would be relegated to the category of "sinners" for their inability to afford the appropriate sacrificial animal, seems more realistic and also more adequate in terms of its theological implications. Similarly, Jesus' dining with "sinners," even before they repented, is better seen as a demonstration of God's inclusivity and love rather than a factor of male melancholia. Here the view of Jesus as a Galilean itinerant healer with a prophetic sense of calling and mission explains the Gospel portraits of Jesus better than projecting psychological motives and altered states.

This view is particularly significant as it relates to Jesus' sense of relationship with God as his heavenly father. According to Capps, Jesus' teaching about God's loving concern for humanity and reference to God as *Abba*-Father resulted from Jesus' sense of being abandoned by his own father as a child. In that sense, Capps conjectures that Jesus' references to a loving heavenly father reflect Jesus' own longing for adoption. If such a likelihood were known to be true that would be one thing, but given the total lack of evidence for such an inference, it must be left as a matter of conjecture, or even faith. Far more plausible is seeing Jesus as one who operated with a sense of mission, whose sense of agency from God⁵ resulted in expressing his mission in Father/Son typologies. The Son represents the Father as an expression of representative agency. Could it be that Jesus' emphasis upon the possibility of spiritual intimacy within the human/divine relationship resulted from his sense of emissary proximity to God versus emotive alienation from his earthly father? The former seems more plausible and thus is a more solid foundation upon which to construct one's interpretation of Jesus' identity and ministry.

The most problematic chapter in Capps' book, insofar as insights into the historical Jesus are concerned, is his chapter on "the hidden years" of Jesus. Aside from the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, there is no information about the childhood and development of Jesus before his public ministry began other than the Jerusalem visit to the Temple as a 12-year old that appears in Luke. The problem this fact introduces to historical reconstructions is that nothing can be said of this time of Jesus' life that is anything more than pure conjecture. The fallacy here is to infer that because Joseph is absent in the Gospels, this absence implies either that he had died or had abandoned the family by the time Jesus was a young adult. This may have been the case, but evidence for either inference is totally lacking. John 6:42 implies that Jesus' parents were currently known by the crowd, although Jesus indeed entrusts his mother to the Beloved Disciple at the cross (Jn. 19:26–7). The

⁵See especially the connections with Jesus as a Prophet-like-Moses (Deut. 18:15–22) as typified in all four Gospel accounts: Paul N. Anderson (1997, pp. 167–193). See also Paul Anderson (2000) pp. 5–39.

point is that with no solid information about any aspect of Jesus' father-history, inferring the particular character of a parental relationship is an impossible task at which to succeed.

Here, even an erudite project such as Capps' faces a challenge parallel to that of those who produced the Infancy Gospel of Thomas in the second century CE. While there is only a small amount of traditional evidence upon which to base one's reconstruction of what Jesus' childhood may have been like, other factors come into play. First, speculation about what Jesus as a boy may have been like lends itself to imagined scenarios as to his childhood and development, at times suggested by traditional information, but given its dearth, these scenarios become influenced by other factors. Second, mythic constructs and narratives from the culture and setting are drawn into the project, one drawing upon stories gathered from folkloric renderings of young Jesus' adventures, the other drawing upon scholarly portraits of Jesus and disciplinary discussions. Third, both of the projects play mythic roles for their respective audiences, one heightening the fantastic, the other heightening the mundane. In each case, however, the mythic function of the material functions to lend insight to Jesus' development in ways that inspire and challenge later readers. Jesus as a "wonder boy" fills out the hidden years of a divinized Jesus for miracle-loving audiences in the Greco-Roman world, and Jesus as an illegitimate and fatherless child fills out the hidden years of a naturalistic Jesus for modernistic audiences in a post Christian society. Huge contrasts exist, of course, between Capps' scholarly and erudite projections and the popularistic ones of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, but the same dearth of material cuts in both ways. Capps is aware of the tenuous character of his guesswork, but any "reconstruction" of Jesus' childhood and development faces the same challenge: something must be made out of very little solid building material. Nonetheless, Capps has done an admirable job at attempting such a construct.

Regarding historical aspects of the work, Capps' new psychobiography of Jesus makes interesting points and observations along the way, but it suffers from the difficulty of the historical task itself. Because Jesus studies have considered the best sources we have (the Gospels and other traditional material) as suspect and religiously biased, this makes the task of offering an alternative construct an impossible one. When one hammers hard upon the reconstructions with the same critical energy applied to traditional portraits of Jesus, unfortunately very little withstands the scrutiny.

Take, for instance, the belief that Jesus' body was eaten by dogs. Crossan infers that because such things tended to happen to crucifixion victims, it may have happened here. But there is absolutely no evidence that it did happen in this particular case. Did the dogs eat even the ankle bones, pulling the spikes loose from the wood with their teeth? Was there nothing at all left the next day for the Roman or Jewish authorities to point to as evidence countering the claims of Jesus' adherents? Likewise, do we really know Jesus was illegitimate or that

Joseph was absent? These guesses may be the best alternatives to the traditional narratives we have, but is there any solid evidence that such inferences were actual? Absolutely none. What this scenario reveals is the fact that our historical/critical tools are far more useful for tearing a portrait down than they are at constructing one worthy of credence. This tendency is even more extended when social and religious interpretations of Jesus' mission and actions are replaced by psychologizing ones. That being the case, the reconstructed Jesus may be interesting to us, but it must remain in the category of speculation rather than of historicity proper.

METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS AND THEIR FRUITFULNESS

A third interest is to consider Capps' application of methodological tools to his subject, and here one finds the greatest encouragement in this study. First, Capps is not afraid to work in interdisciplinary ways, and this approach is to be commended. The particular investigation needing to be performed at times requires a different set of tools, and Capps effectively integrates psychological studies with sociological, anthropological, history-of-religions, social-sciences, and literary-critical ones. Where some proponents of particular disciplines have narrowed their investigations to a singular approach or topic, Capps is willing to integrate various approaches with boldness and fruitfulness. In that sense, Capps has provided more of a bridge between historical/critical Jesus studies and social-science studies of the Mediterranean world than their proponents have been willing to conduct themselves. Drawing these and other approaches together and weighing them respectively provides benefits in multiple directions.

A second methodological attraction of Capps' work is his treatment of various aspects of "disabling anxiety," providing windows into understanding Jesus' exorcizing and healing ministries. Indeed, fuller appreciations of the psychosomatic etiologies of illness, depression, paralysis, and disease help one understand the sort of work Jesus and his disciples were doing. In furthering the Kingdom of God, believing God's power extended to inward and psychological sources of oppression as well as external and political ones probably represents an authentic set of insights into the ministry and intentionality of the historical Jesus. Capps' work here helps to transcend earlier naturalistic rejections of all "wondrous" aspects of Jesus' ministry as fabrications. Willing to allow some embellishments, Capps nonetheless contributes to the realism of Jesus' reported ministry in sketching possible psychodynamic roots of Jesus' exorcist-healer identity and work. Then again, Freudian projections strain credulity a bit, as do speculations that the etiology of a child's paralysis or convulsions may have the traumatizing beatings of a parent.

At this point methodological possibilities fly into conflict with historical plausibilities, and one wonders if the projected motives ascribed to Jesus enhance or detract from an adequate understanding of his mission and work. Such questions

thus emerge as: whether table fellowship for Jesus should be viewed as the recovery of “commensality” (reestablishing the mother/fetus relationship), or whether it represents a prophetic enactment of God’s inclusive love; whether Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God should be viewed as factors of a utopian-melancholic personality, or whether they were rooted in appreciations of God’s transcendent reign over its feigned pretensions; whether Jesus’ exorcisms should be viewed as Jesus’ rejection of “the father of lies” regarding his own social identity (Beelzebul) versus the embracing love of God (Abba-Father), or whether Jesus’ motives were oriented around compassion for those perceived to be suffering inner spiritual bondage and travail; and whether Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple should be viewed as an attempt to purge his mother from sexual violation as a “reparative” act, or whether it should be considered a prophetic demonstration in the interest of recovering authentic worship of God within Judaism. Capps views these and other parts of Jesus’ ministry through the lens of projecting the neediness of Jesus upon his actions and teachings rather than seeing Jesus as addressing social, political, and religious issues in the name of God’s redemptive love. Capps is aware of the risks of psychological reconstructionism (pp. 52–53), and yet these are risks he is willing to take.

A third methodological aspect of Capps’ work is his willingness to discuss the implications of his provocative study, especially in his epilogue. He helps us face the fact that Jesus must have had a human side to which we at times are blinded by our theological investments. Hermeneutically, Capps plies his theories towards an alternate foe: neither the hold of sin upon the world, nor the societal domination of Rome, nor the inadequacy of formal religiosity will do for Capps. Rather, he proposes that the single most important thing about Jesus’ identity was its capacity to transcend “his socially attributed identity” (p. 268). He still comes to us as one unknown (with Schweitzer), and yet this sketching of the “fictive personality” of Jesus as “son of Abba” bears within itself the capacity to catch the imagination of contemporary readers who might share in the alienation of socially attributed identities themselves. In praying that those who nailed him to the cross be forgiven, his work is indeed finished. Jesus, according to Capps, transcended the ultimate foe: his tortured and broken existence rooted in his ascribed social identity.

In conclusion, Donald Capps has done a provocative job of turning the tables on traditional understandings of Jesus, and he has done so in ways that are sure to attract attention. Many readers will feel he pushes particular arguments too far and will remain unconvinced on particular matters of theology, historicity, and psychobiography, but even viewing his assertions as probing questions will move discussions in directions Capps would advocate. Finally, because modern reconstructions of Jesus’ ministry function as antitheses to more traditional views in the Gospels, the reader is left with a perplexing dearth of evidence upon which to base his or her credence. In that sense, to accept Capps’ work becomes as much a matter of “faith” as its more traditional alternatives.

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