

Psychological method and the historical Jesus: The contribution of psychobiography

Bas van Os (Groningen, the Netherlands)¹

Research Associate: Department of New Testament Studies
University of Pretoria

Abstract

This article reviews a number of psychologically informed studies of Jesus in view of the criteria pertaining to psychobiography. It argues that the studies have produced divergent interpretations of Jesus because of a lack of data and the nature of the sources. This is especially true of these studies as they used psychological approaches based on childhood experiences. The framework for psychobiography also allows for the use of other methods that are more concerned with religious adults in coping situations. These may be applied to explore theories about the psychological development of the adult Jesus. The article shows also that the use of the New Testament sources also implies assumptions with regard to the nature of these sources and the people who had produced those sources.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years, I have been fascinated by the potential of psychobiography in the search for the historical Jesus. I have read several authors arguing pro or against psychobiography and psychohistory. I also collected some of the best and worst examples, with a special interest in psychobiography of religious people. I was especially impressed by the work of William McKinley Runyan (1982), but he left me with the strong impression that in Jesus' case there is probably not enough material for a good psychobiography, especially if one takes a Freudian perspective. Nevertheless, John Miller (1997), Donald Capps (2000), Andries van Aarde (2001), and others have given us psychologically informed studies of Jesus,

¹ Dr Bas van Os finished his PhD at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands (8 March 2007), entitled "Baptism in the Bridal Chamber: The Gospel of Philip as a Valentinian Baptismal Instruction". Dr Van Os participates in the research project "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics", directed by Prof Dr Andries G van Aarde, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

or of certain aspects of his life story, such as the effects he had on others. Recently, Harold Ellens and Wayne Rollins (2004) gave us four volumes packed with essays on psychology and biblical studies. The fourth volume contains fourteen contributions related to the psychological study of the historical Jesus.

In this article,² I want to assess where we stand from a methodological perspective: Can we write a good psychobiography of Jesus? And how can psychological methods make a contribution to the study of the historical Jesus and the movement he gave rise to?

2. WHAT IS A GOOD PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY ACCORDING TO WILLIAM MCKINLEY RUNYAN?

Runyan (1982:6-9) distinguishes between life histories as, on the one hand, a method for interaction with a respondent, and, on the other hand, as a subject matter itself: the “sequence of events and experiences in a life from birth until death”. According to Runyan, “the field of psychology is concerned with making true descriptive, explanatory, and predictive statements” on three levels:

- 1) What is true of all human beings; here he is thinking of psychodynamic theories, social learning principles, phenomenological processes and cognitive development stages.
- 2) What is true of groups, for example people of a certain sex, race, social class, culture, or historical period.
- 3) What is true of particular individuals, such a clinical patient or a historical figure.

In the study of an individual life history, psychology is an important aspect as it can help us understand how history impacted the person, how he or she processed these experiences and responded to them. General psychological theories and specific insights in certain groups inform the biographer in the interpretation of his subject. In turn, the study of lives can help the psychologist to develop more general psychological theories. According to Runyan, more general methodological development can take place in two ways. First, the life course of the subject can be described as a series of interactions between the person, the situation and his or her behavior (Runyan 1982:84-86, 97-99). Depending on the context, one can apply

² This article was originally presented at the SBL International Meeting in Edinburgh, 3 July 2006.

behavioral, psychodynamic, and phenomenological or trait-factor approaches. Second, stage-state and state-sequential analyses can be used to analyze “aspects of the probabilistic and causal structure of groups of lives, and these analyses can in turn be of use in thinking about the course of individual life histories” (Runyan 1982:117-119). With regard to the case studies of individual lives themselves, Runyan describes criticisms leveled at them and the lack of good criteria to discern between good and bad psychobiography. Nevertheless, he came up with some observations and conclusions that I believe are relevant to our topic:

- In judicial cases (Runyan 1982:149-150) it was found that case studies on the basis of psychometrics, and psychopathology yield relatively poor results. There is some benefit in analyses of long-term patterns of behavior and typical anecdotes, whereas relatively good predictors of future behavior come from case studies on the basis of the *current* traits, attitudes and ambitions of the subject, and the community and family standards in which he or she *currently* lives.
- In the study of historical lives, a key issue is the availability and nature of the data (Runyan 1982:202-208). “In the absence of sufficient historical evidence, it is just not possible to develop credible psychological interpretations of the lives of historical figures. Also, in the absence of evidence about childhood experiences, some types of early developmental explanations are best avoided, as psychological theory is often not sufficiently determinate to permit accurate retrodictions or reconstructions.” Especially psycho-analytical approaches seem to suffer from lack of data, as the subject is, so to speak, “not on the couch”. In some cases, however, the psychobiographer has advantages over the therapist, for instance when he can observe the entire lifespan of the person, when there is a wealth of ego-documents, and when he can consult a variety of external testimonies and data about the subject. But even so, “biographical reconstruction is extremely risky and in most cases unjustified.”
- Runyan (1982:209-214) also observes that “too many psychobiographies have suffered from flaws such as overemphasizing the psychological, the pathological, or the influence of childhood conflicts. A number of contemporary psychobiographers (...) are, however, aware of such dangers, and are avoiding them by integrating the psychological with the social and historical, by analyzing not just pathology but also strengths and adaptive capacities, and by studying formative influences not just in childhood but throughout the life span.”

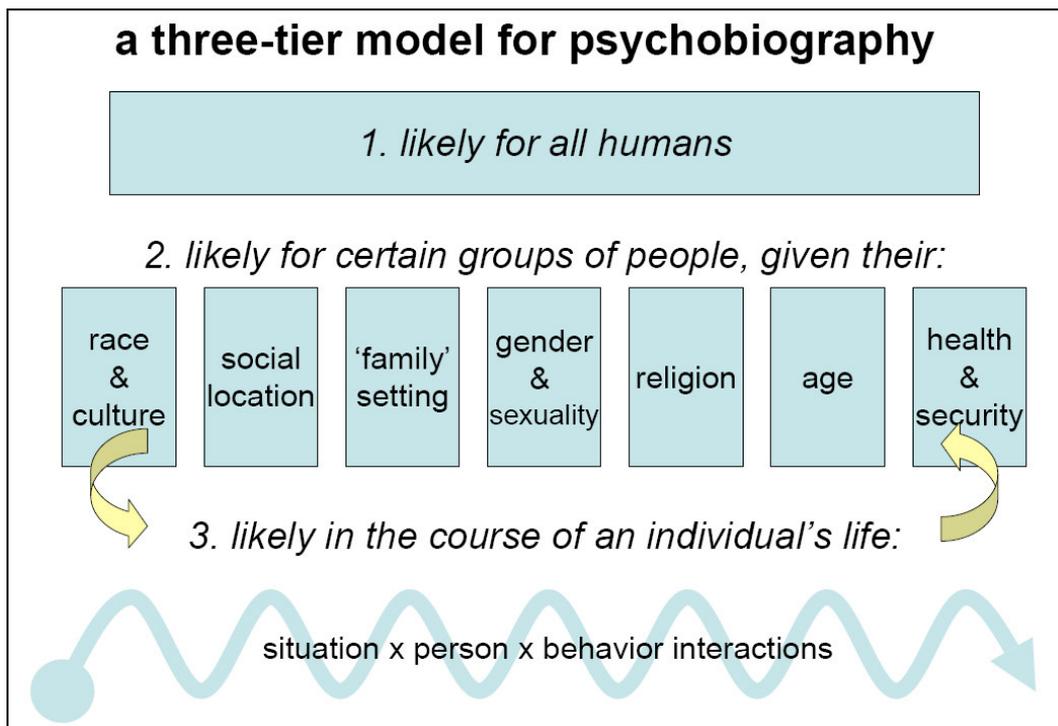
Psychological method and the historical Jesus

On the other hand, “understandings derived from similar groups to which the subject belongs”, socially, culturally, and historically, “are not likely to be sufficient either, because we are often most interested in those individuals who stand out significantly from other Renaissance painters, other nineteenth-century writers, or other twentieth-century American politicians.”

- Finally, Runyan sees that “errors have sometimes been made in naïvely assuming that psychoanalytic or other psychological theory could automatically be applied to individuals in any cultural or historical setting, but this does not at all mean that psychohistory does not work or cannot work. Rather, psychobiographical interpretation is a complex three tiered intellectual enterprise which needs to draw not just on those theories which hold universally, but also on group and context-specific generalizations and on idiographic studies of the particular individual.” He argues against Freudian psycho-analytical theory as the main theoretical basis: “a belief in the paramount importance of early psychosexual experience, should in my opinion probably be revised or abandoned, other aspects of the theory, such as the concept of unconscious motives and conflicts, the notion of identification, and the operation of defense mechanisms may prove of enduring utility for psychobiographers.” “The challenge is to use psychoanalytic theory ‘selectively’, and to also draw on personality psychology, social and cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology.”

I have combined Runyan’s observations in the diagram³ below. Note that the distinctions between the levels are important but not absolute. Over time someone can come to belong to a different social class or age group.

³ A modification of the scheme by Runyan (1982:9).



2. WHERE DO WE STAND WITH MILLER, CAPPS AND VAN AARDE?

In 1997, John Miller gave us his *Jesus at thirty: A psychological and historical portrait*. He approaches Jesus from two angles: His family background as his starting point, and his baptism when he was about 30 years old as his “turning point”. Miller reconstructs that Jesus grew up in a loving and deeply religious family. Miller believes Jesus had healthy sexual feelings towards women, but remained celibate because of his father’s premature death, in his early teenage years. As the eldest son, he assumed the role of surrogate-father towards his siblings and surrogate-husband towards Mary. Having no wife and children of his own, Jesus went through an identity crisis or age 30 transition, in the sense of the psychologies of Erikson and Levinson. His baptism gave him back a father in heaven, and helped him to overcome his pseudo life. Miller sees this transition as successful in the sense that Jesus emerged as a man capable of “generativity” – that is a fatherly role – to others, despite the fact that he had not fathered a family of his own.

In the terms of the group level of Runyan’s model, it seems that Miller’s focus is on Jesus’ family setting and age. On the individual level, his focus is on his teenage years and his baptism.

In 2000, Donald Capps published his *Jesus: A psychological biography*. Before presenting his biography, however, Capps discusses four major topics:

Psychological method and the historical Jesus

- 1) The critical study of the historical Jesus. In this section, he engages E P Sanders, J Meier, J D Crossan and M Borg.
- 2) The theory of psychobiography. Here, Capps presents the work of Runyan, which I discussed above.
- 3) The psychohistory of groups, or to be more precise: the case of the Puritan Plymouth Colony in New England, which he uses as a proxy for “the emotional ethos of first-century Palestinian family and village life.”
- 4) The social world of Jesus, which can be summarized in the key-words “mediterranean”, “peasant” and “Galilean”.

In his biographical part, Capps discusses the question of Jesus' relationship his father, his role as a village healer and his disturbance of the temple. Capps shows that Miller's reconstruction of a loving relationship between Joseph and Jesus is an example of retrodiction, something that Runyan does not favor in psychobiography. The question is, however, to what extent Capps can escape the same charge. Capps believes that Jesus was illegitimate, that his father was unknown, and that he and his mother were victims of social ostracism. That is the reason why he could not marry. Capps also believes that Joseph did not accept Jesus as his son, and that Jesus' legitimate brothers and sisters looked down on him. This created in Jesus a longing for adoption, which he found with his heavenly father.

Capps discusses the healing of psychosomatic illnesses from a Freudian perspective. Jesus directed his anger with his biological father and with Joseph who would not adopt him as a father, towards the demons of his age. But to other people, living in a society plagued by “disabling anxiety”, Jesus touched, looked upon, and spoke to with trust. He transferred unto them his experience of a trustworthy heavenly “Abba” and thus effected their healing.

Finally, Capps diagnoses Jesus as a peasant with a utopian-melancholic personality. Jesus' utopia is the coming kingdom of God. Jesus' melancholy, on a deeper level, contains reproach and rage for his illegitimacy and Joseph's failure to adopt him. In a melancholic personality, this rage is self-directed, and can lead to suicide. But Jesus could overcome his melancholy through two symbolic actions: his baptism cleansed him of the sexual pollution in which he was conceived, and his “impulsive” (as Capps argues) disruption of the temple stands for a cleansing of his mother's body.

In terms of the group level of the model, Capps' focus is on Jesus' culture, his social location and his family setting. On the individual level, his focus is on Jesus' childhood, his work as a healer and his disturbance of the temple.

Around the same time, in 2001, Andries van Aarde came with his *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as a child of God*. Van Aarde notes that there is insufficient evidence to support Miller's psychobiography, because he uses his sources uncritically and is unconvincing in his psychological reconstruction. According to Van Aarde, Joseph is a legendary figure; he believes that Jesus grew up without a father. Given the lack of data, Van Aarde uses a different method to test his hypothesis. He first develops the ideal type of a fatherless child in a Mediterranean and Palestinian setting, and then tests whether Jesus fits the image.

In terms of the model, Van Aarde's focus is on Jesus' culture and family setting. But Van Aarde does not work from the group level to the individual level, but discusses the individual level to test whether Jesus fits the group level.

So where do we stand? Here we have three highly skilled scholars who are knowledgeable about psychological method in general and psychobiography in particular, who are familiar with the historical critical analysis of the gospels, and sensitive towards the culture and time of their subject. All three psychological portraits emphasize the family background of Jesus as an important element for analysis. Knowing his family background should help us to understand Jesus. But Miller says that Jesus had a good relationship with his father, whereas Capps says that they had a bad relationship, and Van Aarde argues that there was no relationship at all. These are not complementary portraits, but mutually exclusive portraits.

If good science means that competent practitioners should be able to come up with similar or at least compatible results when confronted with the same evidence, we must ask the question whether there is enough evidence for a good psychobiography of Jesus. It seems that this is certainly not the case for psychobiographies that focus on psychodynamics of childhood experiences. Runyan already noted that this is the case for many historical figures. In such cases we have to check whether there are other perspectives that can enhance our understanding of the subject, before speculating about the subject's childhood. If not, we risk to read too much of our own thinking into the data.

2.1 The influence of the psychobiographer

Hal Childs' *The myth of the historical Jesus* has made us aware of the considerable influence of the scholar himself on his reconstruction. Many of us are influenced by our attitude towards Jesus and/or contemporary Christianity. Schweitzer has clearly shown this in his review of the so-called "liberal lives of Jesus" (1906); these resembled more the enlightened form of Christianity at

the European universities of his time than the Jesus of history. He was so successful in portraying Jesus as an eschatological prophet that a series of anti-Christian psycho-pathological portraits followed in his own footsteps. Schweitzer (1913) then needed to show that from a first century religious perspective, Jesus was not insane.

Runyan argues that one needs to be familiar with the trade or expertise of one's subject. Jesus' specialty was that of religious charismatic healer and preacher, who believed in a personal relationship with God who answered on his prayers and would intervene in the course of history. In order to understand Jesus, a psychobiographer must be intimately familiar with the thought processes of such people. Second, Runyan argues that the psychobiographer needs to sympathize with the subject, in the sense of putting oneself in his or her position.

This is a delicate balance, especially when a lack of data allows the psychobiographer more imagination. He may on the one hand be tempted to create an image of his subject with whom he can identify and that he believes is meaningful today, or on the other hand he can lose his sympathy because of Jesus' otherness. The second risk is perhaps best illustrated by a quote from Gerd Lüdemann (2000:886): "Jesus is an example of a person who is serious about going all the way down a road once chosen. But in his exegesis of the law, which at the same time sharpens and empties the Thora, I find him at times too serious; and in his idolizing fantasies (*Schwärmertum*), which oppose all rationality, I can no longer take him serious, for the kingdom of God that he announced did not come. Finally: In his intimate relationship with God, Jesus becomes something of a joke to me (*wirkt auf mich geradezu lächerlich*), for therein he shares a mistake of many religious people: that they see themselves as the centre of the universe." Lüdemann characterization of Jesus is probably correct, but the question is whether a psychobiographer with a similar antipathy would be able to reconstruct the inner world and thought processes of a subject. The first risk, that the psychobiographer would to some extent create a Jesus that he can somehow identify with, is perhaps not fully avoided by Miller, Capps and Van Aarde. This is perhaps best illustrated by a quote from Van Aarde: "I did ... become existentially impelled by Jesus' fatherlessness because it addressed my own situation." All three stress the importance of their Jesus for the lives of people today.

3. WHERE CAN WE START?

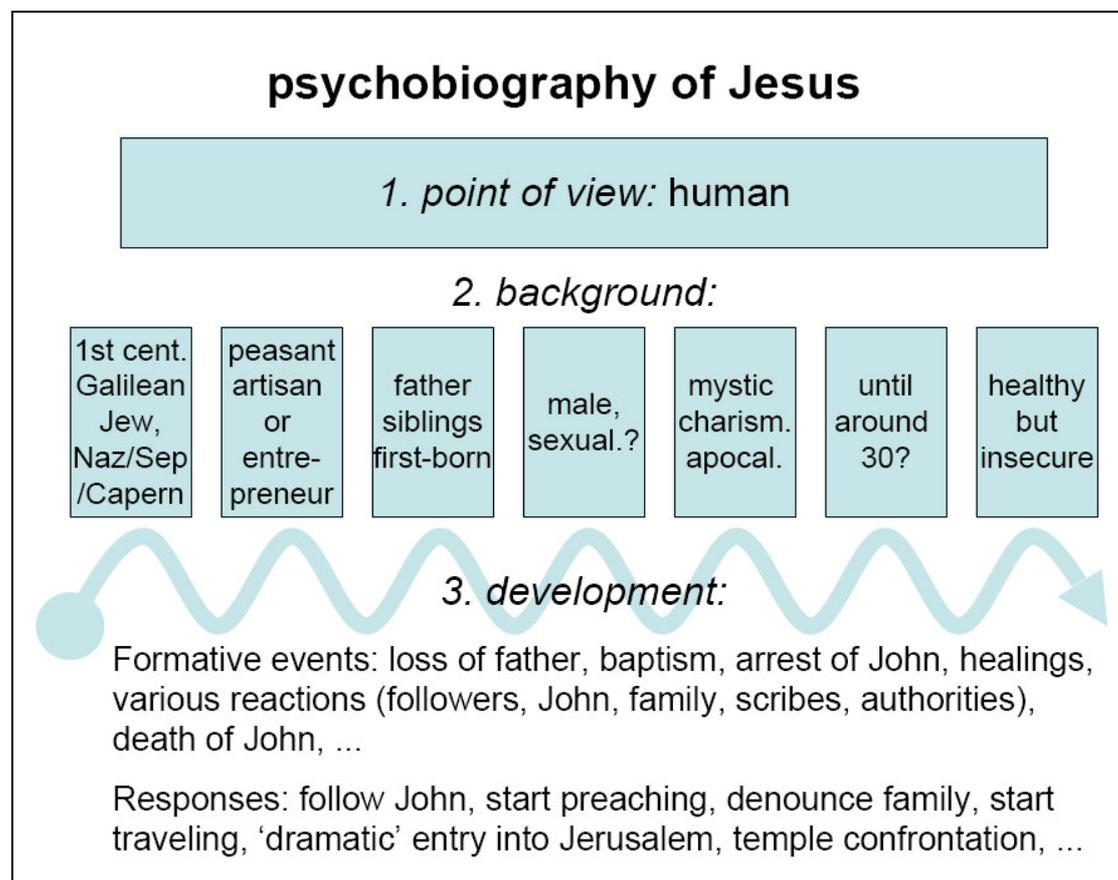
We can use Runyan's three-tier model to check which questions can be asked. For each question, we can then decide what the available evidence is,

and what kind of strategy helps us to make maximum use of the available evidence.

The first question to answer is whether things that are true for all humans are also true for Jesus. This is a problem of theology and philosophy.⁴ I note that it would be impossible to apply psychological methods, if one does not approach Jesus as fully human.

On the second level, we need to discuss which groups or categories give us a meaningful perspective on Jesus. We must, on the one hand, categorize Jesus correctly, and, on the other hand, acquire a good understanding of each category. On the individual level, we need to reconstruct Jesus' history and psychological development.

In the second diagram, I indicate some of the points of consensus and contention regarding Jesus' background and development (levels 2 and 3).



3.1 Background

With regard to Jesus' culture, there is a high degree of consensus. For some decades now, scholars have approached Jesus as a first century Galilean

⁴ For a discussion from a religious perspective, see Moreland and Craig (2003:597-614).

Jew. Social scientists have written perceptive commentaries from the perspective of late antique Mediterranean thinking. Our knowledge of the Galilee in the first half of the first century and its inhabitants is increasing, although there are still debates as to the degree of Hellenization and Judaization of Galilee. Archeologists and other specialists are piecing together the life and interaction of people and workers in villages and cities such as Nazareth, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Capernaum, and nearby Bethsaida. But the extent to which Jesus has participated in these places is unknown.

There is a debate regarding his social location. Was Jesus raised as a peasant from Nazareth without education or adequate income, as John Dominique Crossan believes? Or was he a skilled worker, earning his money in construction, perhaps on building projects in Sepphoris and Tiberias, which attracted many workers in his youth and early adult years. One could even argue that his family belonged to the entrepreneurial class, with a workshop and employees; like his followers Peter, Andrew, John and James, whose families owned fishing boats, and employed workers.

With regard to his family, opinions vary widely as well. Was he the oldest son among brothers and sisters, or the youngest son of Joseph by his second wife Mary? Did people believe he was the legitimate son of Joseph, or an illegitimate *mamzer* as Chilton has it? Did he have a loving relationship with his father, a resentful relationship or was he raised fatherless? If Joseph was his father, when did he die?⁵

Whereas Jesus' gender is beyond discussion, his sexuality and sexual status are not. Was he sexually active? It has been claimed that he was a homosexual, and Morton Smith "discovered" a gospel fragment that could support this idea.⁶ Others claim he was married or had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene.⁷ Traditionally he has been viewed as celibate. And even if we could answer such questions, it is difficult to reliably reconstruct what this meant psychologically in Jesus' time and culture.

⁵ Miller believes that Jesus was the eldest son and had at least six surviving natural brothers and sisters (Mk 6:3) from the same father Joseph. On this basis, he estimates that Jesus lost his father in his early teens (p 35). But, as infant and child mortality in pre-industrial societies require on average twice as many births than the number of surviving children beyond the age of five, Miller should also consider the possibility that Jesus lost his father in his late teens or early twenties.

⁶ *Secret Mark*. Note that Carson (2005) argues that the work is a "hoax", fabricated by Morton Smith himself.

⁷ I note that the text in the *Gospel of Philip* that supposedly supports this idea, is better understood as a piece of gnostic Christian allegorical exegesis of the canonical gospels, than as a fragment from an apocryphal gospel. See Bas van Os, *Josephs and Maries in the Gospel of Philip* (SBL paper 2005).

In terms of religion, we come on firmer ground. Jesus was a Jew, closer to Pharisaic or Chassidic beliefs than to Sadducee thinking. He seems to have combined a close mystical relationship with God (his “Abba”), with some sort of an apocalyptic awareness. Fortunately we have some ego-documents of other Jews, or Jewish Christians like Paul, which help us to understand what these concepts may have meant in the first century.

As to his age, it is often stated that Jesus was born in 6BCE and died around 30 CE. But the year of birth is derived from Matthew, whereas Luke suggests it happened 12 years later, in 6 CE. No gospel informs us about the year of his death, and only Luke dates the year when he became active: 28/29 CE. So how old was he during his ministry: In his late twenties (Luke), in his mid-thirties (if we combine Matthew with Luke’s date for the start of John’s ministry) or even in his forties, as the gospel according to John seems to suggest?

Physical discomfort and insecurity can have a profound influence on people’s minds, even if their psychological impact is dependent on other factors as well. Whereas Jesus seems to have been a healthy man who could walk long distances, it also seems that after John’s arrest and execution, he experienced an increased level of insecurity.

To conclude: Yes, there are group perspectives that can illuminate parts of Jesus’ life. But it is not always clear to which group Jesus belonged and what affects such groups had on the psychology of people in his time and place. If we try to explain Jesus from his family background, we are trying to illuminate the darkness with obscurity. The three least disputed group perspectives seem to be those of his culture, religion, and security. It seems that it would be a good strategy to rely more on these aspects for a psychological analysis, than on his potential age, social location, family background, or sexuality. In other words, in order to restrain his personal recreation, the psycho-biographer should first analyze the undisputed categories, before exploring the disputed categories.

3.2 Development

Virtually all the preserved evidence about Jesus relates to the period between his baptism and his death. It is, however, unclear how long this period, and more specifically the period of his public ministry lasted. The only point in time is Luke’s dating of the start of John the Baptist, which we cannot verify from another source.⁸ None of the gospel narratives sets out how long the period was between Jesus’ baptism and the start of his ministry, nor the length of his ministry.

⁸ Even if Luke’s dating goes back to an early *tradition*, which is possible (see Ac 1:22), this still does not tell us when Jesus was baptized, when John was arrested, nor when Jesus started his ministry.

Psychological method and the historical Jesus

Furthermore, there is agreement only about a limited number of events, actions, and sayings of Jesus. In the table below, I have listed those events and actions that are supported by a large degree of scholarly consensus. These should be our starting point before we include other events in Jesus' life that are less certain.

	Situation	Person	Behavior
1	Absence or death of father	?	Seeks God as his father
2	John preaches	?	Becomes a pupil and is baptized
3	John is arrested	?	Starts ministry with some of John's former pupils
4	People are healed	?	Seeks loneliness
5	John, family, and authorities react negatively	?	Creates fictive kinship with disciples
6	John is killed	?	Avoids cities
7	?	?	Goes to Jerusalem: - He enters the city on a donkey - He creates an incident in the temple - He celebrates a last meal

I have three key questions that I would ask of a psychobiography that concerns itself with the *person* of Jesus:

- What kind of person would behave in such situations as Jesus did?
- What kind of effects can such situations and behavior have had on his personality?
- In the absence of a clear "situation": What kind of psychological processes, possibly related to interactions 1 through 6, led Jesus to behave as he did in his last weeks?

Unfortunately here are no ego-documents available to study Jesus' own reading of the above situations or his reasons for his behavior. The best we can do is work with the preserved sayings of Jesus. But with respect to these, it is debated which sayings go back to Jesus, when they were actually spoken and what his exact words may have been. Another point of consideration is how to read ancient words and descriptions from a psychological point of view. This requires a high degree of sensitivity and restraint with respect to the preserved sources, as is argued by Klaus Berger (1995), and Malina and Neyrey (1996).

3.3 Psychological methods

There is also a positive element in my analysis so far: the key aspects of Jesus' development in his last years coincides with the categories that are

least disputed: Jesus as a religious Jew in 1st century Palestine who had to cope with loss and insecurity. The most secure and promising approach is therefore to start psychobiographical research from these perspectives.

Without trying to be exhaustive, I would suggest a number of theories that can help us to investigate the above interactions of situation, person and behavior, and can generate hypotheses regarding the inner development of Jesus:

- Lee Kirkpatrick (1999) argues for the use Bowlby's attachment theory in the psychology of religion. In the case of Jesus, it might help us to understand his relationship with God as his "Abba". It also provides a basis to see how both positive and negative experiences can intensify the relationship between the subject and the father.
- A number of psychological and sociological studies with respect to conversion or joining religious groups can help us to understand the attraction of John the Baptist on Jesus and other disciples. Rodney Stark (1996 and 2000), for example, argues that micro-economic theory can help to understand the adjustment of an individual's ideas to the ideas of a religious group, in Jesus' case the ethical and eschatological views of the group around John the Baptist.
- Kenneth Pargament (1997) shows how religion and coping can interact in situations of grief. A key element is the significance that the subject attributes to a certain situation, such as the arrest and execution of John, or the negative reactions that Jesus received. In Jesus' case, the nature of his prayer life and relation to scripture will have influenced the way that he coped with various situations of grief.
- Another useful theory seems to be Sundén's role theory (see Holm, 1995). Sundén observes how religious people can position themselves within a religious narrative, and take the role of one of the actors, even of God. This role-taking can, over time, become hard-wired in their brain. Donald Capps (2001) uses this theory in a biographical study of John Henry Newman. It could be worthwhile to see how Jesus may have applied the roles of the prophet (e.g. Elisha/Elijah or Malachi) to John the Baptist. It may be that the healings that occurred forced him to rethink his own role in the light of Isaiah, and this may explain why he departed from earlier opinions that he likely had shared with John the Baptist. Finally, it seems that Jesus' final actions have a highly

symbolic value. The fact that there were several of them is an argument against Donald Capps' position that the cleansing of the temple was an impulsive action. It could be that Jesus played out the composite role of Isaiah's suffering servant and Daniel's son of man, when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey as the royal messiah in Zachariah 9:9, the messenger of the covenant who cleanses the temple in Malachi 3:1, and the sacrificial lamb in the pesach narrative (Is 53:7).

4. A THEORETICAL JESUS

If we ask the right questions and apply the appropriate methods we will come up with sensible hypotheses. The next question is whether there is enough evidence to evaluate these hypotheses. If not, are all hypotheses of equal worth, or are there criteria to decide that one hypothesis is more useful than another?

4.1 Lack of data

A comparison with psychobiographical studies of people like Augustine, Luther, Ignatius of Loyola, Joseph Smith, Darwin and Ghandi, shows that the data available for a study of Jesus is extremely limited. All we have are the canonical gospels and some fragments of information from other sources. The synoptic gospels can be further reduced to Mark and Q (if that is a single source). All information comes from a group of people who worshiped Jesus as a divine being. There is no information written in the time of Jesus himself. Although I personally am inclined to ascribe to the gospels quite a bit of historical value, the truth is that there is little consensus as to what the writers could know about Jesus of Nazareth, and to what extent they intended to convey a historical message.

Given the lack of evidence and ego-documents, a psychobiography of Jesus cannot be about Jesus of Nazareth; it is a psychobiography of a historical Jesus, a scholarly construct, which itself is the product of assumptions regarding early Christianity and the literary character of our sources.

4.2 What the theory can test, and what it should explain

If we acknowledge that our historical Jesus is a theoretical construct, we may actually come to terms with the lack of evidence. A theory is subjected to further tests and observations, and then confirmed, adapted or rejected. I suggest that psychological method can be used on two levels: it can be used as a test and as part of the theory itself.

A theory is used to explain what can be observed. In our case, Jesus of Nazareth can no longer be observed. But scholarly constructs, or literary products can be observed. Psychological method can be used as one of the tests to assess the likelihood of the scholarly or literary construct. The question then simply is: is it likely that a person as reconstructed by, say, John Dominic Crossan (1992, 1998), behaved as he did, and that other actors in the reconstruction behaved as they did? Are there alternative explanations that have not been considered?

If psychological method is to be integrated with the theory itself, the first question that must be asked is what observable facts this interdisciplinary theory needs to explain. Jesus has not meaningfully entered the historical record, other than through the writings of his followers. There are non-Christian sources about Jesus, but Josephus, Tacitus, Celsus and the Talmud primarily react to the claims made by his followers.

The theory, therefore, should explain the earliest recorded ideas about Jesus that his followers had. It seems that a number of Christians, a group of only a few thousand people, believed Jesus was the messiah who would come back to rule the world, someone who was crucified and died, but now lived and was seen by his disciples, who felt they were sent by him to make other people his disciples. Some of his disciples were prepared to die for this testimony. They developed the idea that all nations were to be reached and that God was a unity of father and son. They came to understand Jesus as being born of a virgin and even pre-existent. There may have been other opinions among the Christians in the first century as well, but the opinions set out here are those that have been preserved and can be the object of research.

What life history of Jesus and group history of his first followers, can help to explain economically and plausibly such beliefs? I should point out that this type of theory is quite different from historical criticism of the gospels. Historical criticism seeks to establish which of the described sayings and actions of Jesus can with confidence be attributed to Jesus of Nazareth. It is reductive in its approach and may also be somewhat biased: passages that fit with the beliefs of the authors cannot easily be verified, whereas passages that were included despite their beliefs can be trusted more by the historian. Any theory of the historical Jesus will at least include the sayings and events that passed the tests of historical criticism. But it will also try to supplement these with hypotheses that help us to understand Jesus, his contemporaries and his followers.

The overall theory will therefore not only concern a portrait of Jesus, but also of his followers, first century Christians and their writings. This requires an interdisciplinary approach, which combines historical, psychological, sociological and literary approaches.

4.3 Can we decide which theory is better?

A good psychological theory explains personality in such a way, that it predicts the behavior of a subject and thus allows for falsification. Such a theory should be as economic as possible. When competing theories have equal predictive powers, the theory that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulate the fewest hypothetical entities should be preferred (Occam's razor).

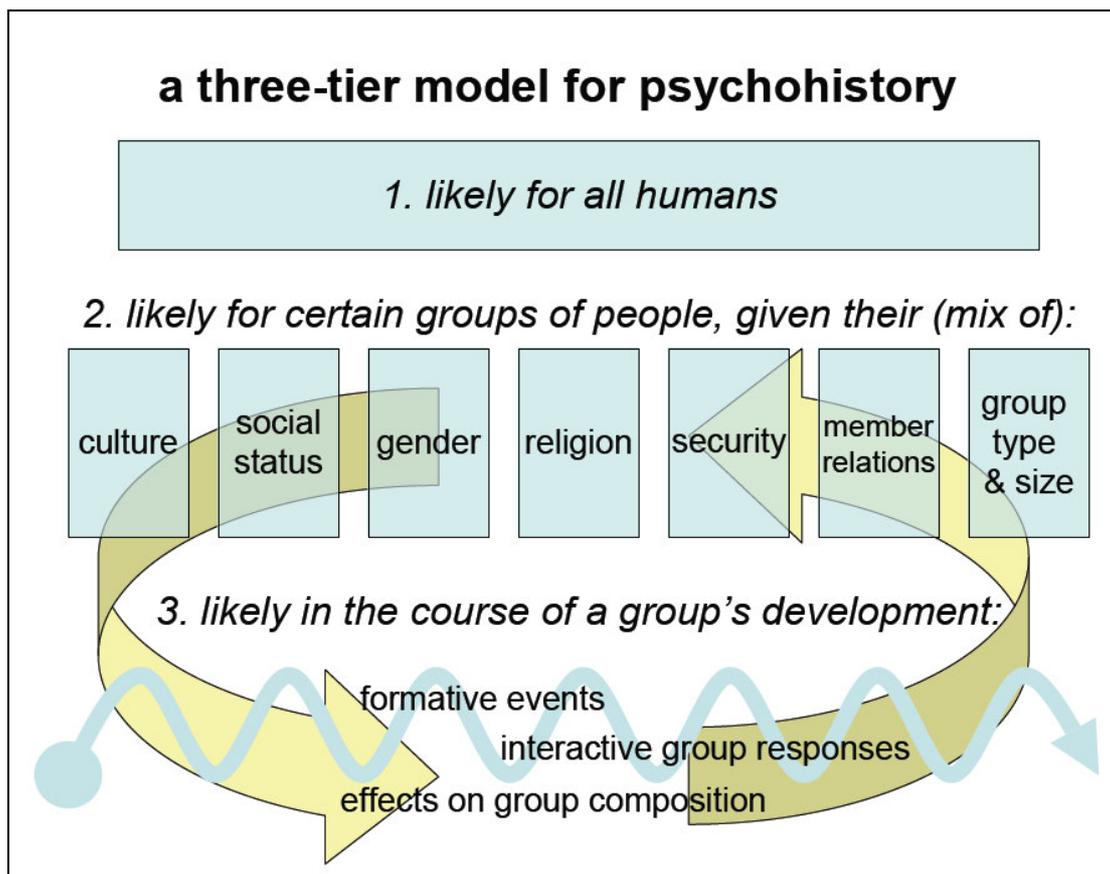
In psychobiography and other historical research, the element of prediction is not present. In stead, we have to balance the concepts of explanatory power and plausibility. If a theory does not explain the behavior of Jesus or that of his followers, it is not a good theory, however plausible it may be. If there are several good explanations then the most plausible is to be preferred. Here of course we cannot escape our subjectivity, what a religious person believes to be possible: the concept of resurrection for example has no plausibility to secular scholars, however well it may explain the data. Historical research since Lucian⁹ accepts the belief in divine intervention as an object of study, not as an explanation of historical events.

The criterion of economy implies that when several theories provide equally good and plausible explanations, we should favor the theory that introduces the fewest assumptions or entities. The more we are able to explain the preserved records on the basis of the actors and events already known and present in these records, the more economic our theory will be. This gives an order of the data that we should use: all of the undisputed data, explaining efficiently as much as possible of the data that cannot be proven to go back to Jesus, and avoiding as much as possible the use of "missing data".

5. TOWARDS A PSYCHOHISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

I would like to suggest the use of the model for psychobiography also for the study of the group history of Jesus followers.

⁹ *How to write history*, 60: "Again, if a myth comes along you must tell it but not believe it entirely; no, make it known for your audience to make of it what they will – you run no risk and lean to neither side" (tr by K Kilburn).



The model is nearly identical to that of psychobiography. A significant difference, however, is the fact that a group's composition changes over time. In our case a marginal Jewish movement of Jesus followers spread across the Mediterranean and became a gentile church.¹⁰

Informed by an understanding of the changing composition of the group, we can apply social scientific data. A lot of work has been done into the background of the New Testament writings and early Christianity, including alternative groups. The use of the social sciences has increased steadily over the past years.¹¹

Furthermore, we can identify a number of formative events that help us to understand the development of doctrines within the group, especially since

¹⁰ At the forthcoming Annual Meeting of SBL in Washington, I have presented a mathematical model that allows scholars to translate their assumptions in numbers. The model shows how, in various scenarios, the group grew through birth surplus and new converts, what the division is over various age groups, how the division between Jews and gentiles changed over time, and how the movement spread geographically. The advantage of a mathematical model is that it allows scholars to enter their own assumptions and check how they effect the composition of early Christianity. See Bas van Os, *Taking the numbers into account: a demographical model of early Christianity* (SBL paper 2006).

¹¹ Cf the social science commentaries of Malina and Rohrbach (1992; 1998), Stegemann and Stegemann (1995), Malina (2001), Theissen (2000), Stegemann, Malina and Theissen (2002), and Blasi, Duhaine, and Turcotte (2002).

Psychological method and the historical Jesus

there is a considerable corpus of writings by these followers themselves. Some of these events concern all Jews (including first century Christians), whereas others regard early Christianity in particular. Fortunately, several writings from a significant part of the group, albeit not from all subgroups, have been preserved to work with.

Looking at the model and the available methods and data, it seems to me that a psychohistory of this group could make a significant contribution to our understanding of the New Testament. Such a psychohistory should start with the perspective of a religious group, coping with formative events and strong growth, in interaction with the Hebrew Scriptures and their memories of Jesus.

1. 30s CE
 - a. The crucifixion and the resurrection experiences
 - b. Hellenistic Jews and proselytes join the movement
 - c. The lynching of Stephen and dispersion of the Hellenists
 - d. The pogrom in Alexandria and the statue of Caligula in Palestine
2. 40s CE
 - a. The admission of gentile converts
 - b. The persecution by Herod Agrippa and the absence of Peter
 - c. The rise of James
 - d. The missionary success among the god-fearing gentiles
 - e. The "chrestus" incident in Rome
3. 50s CE
 - a. The conflict between Paul and James (and the Antioch incident)
 - b. The conflict about the resurrection
 - c. The gentile collect for Jerusalem
 - d. Paul's arrest
4. 60s CE
 - a. The lynching of James
 - b. The Neronian persecution (first distinction between Jews and Christians) in which Paul and Peter died
 - c. The Jewish War and the dispersion of Palestinian Jews
5. 70s CE
 - a. The destruction of Jerusalem without the return of Jesus
 - b. The loss of Jerusalem as the centre of authority
 - c. The reorganisation of Judaism
6. 80s CE
 - a. The Domitian pressure on Jews
 - b. The Domitian pressure on Christians
 - c. Jewish – Christian tensions
7. 90s/100s CE
 - a. The emergence of a non-Jewish majority in Christianity
 - b. The split of Palestinian Jewish Christians (Ebionites / Nazarenes)
 - c. The rise of docetism

Table: some possible formative events and developments in early Christianity

5. CONCLUSION

Given the scarcity and nature of the data, a good psychobiography of Jesus cannot be written. As the Jesus of history, his words, or contemporary reports about him, can no longer be observed, the theoretical Jesus is methodologically best regarded as part of a larger theoretical framework, which aims to explain the observable facts of what is often called early Christianity and its earliest preserved statements about Jesus. The proper order of research is to start with the observable facts, then to develop an understanding of the group that produced these facts, and then to a reconstruction of the Jesus that gave rise to the group. The best theoretical framework is the one that explains as much as possible of the observable data of early Christianity, with as little as possible recourse to purely hypothetical “data” about early Christianity or the Jesus of history.

Psychohistory and psychobiography can make a significant contribution to test and develop scholarly theories about early Christianity and the historical Jesus. Given the lack of data, approaches that focus on Jesus’ family background or early childhood development do not deliver scientifically acceptable results, despite the qualities of the psychobiographers I discussed. A more promising approach would be to start with some of the least disputed events, sayings and actions, all of them set between his baptism and passion, and to try to understand their psychological motivation and impact from the perspectives of Jesus’ first century Galilean background, and his relationship to his divine “Abba” and the Hebrew scriptures.

Works consulted

- Berger, K 1991. *Historische Psychologie des Neuen Testaments*. Stuttgart: KBW.
- Capps, D 2000. *Jesus: A psychological biography*. St Louis, MO: Chalice.
- Capps, D 2001. “Sundén’s role-taking theory: The case of John Henry Newman and his mentors”, in Belzen, J A (ed), *Psychohistory in psychology of religion: Interdisciplinary studies*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Capps, D 2002. Response to Ellens, Miller, and Anderson. *Pastoral Psychology*, 50(6), 425-440.
- Ellens, J H 2002. A psychological biography for *Jesus*: Responding to Donald Capps. *Pastoral Psychology*, 50(6), 401-407.
- Ellens, J H & Rollins, W G (eds) 2004. *From Christ to Jesus*, Volume 4 of the series *Psychology and the Bible: A new way to read the scriptures*. Westport: Praeger.
- Holm, N G 1995. *Role theory and religious experience*, in Hood (ed), *Handbook of religious experience*. Birmingham: REP.
- Kirkpatrick, L A 1999. *Attachment and religious representations and behavior*, in Cassidy & Shaver, *Handbook of attachment*. New York: Guilford.
- Malina, B J & Neyrey, J H 1996. *Portraits of Paul: An archeology of ancient personality*. Louisville, KY: WJK.

Psychological method and the historical Jesus

- Miller, J W 1997. *Jesus at thirty: A psychological and historical portrait*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.
- Moreland, J P & Craig, W L 2003. *Philosophical foundations for a Christian worldview*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Pargament, K I 1997. *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Guilford.
- Runyan, W McK 1984. *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schweitzer, A 1913. *The psychiatric study of Jesus: Exposition and criticism*. (English translation 1948.) Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Stark, R & Finke, R 2000. *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Van Aarde, A G 2001. *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as a child of God*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity.