

Bas Van Os, *Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus*. New Ways to Explore Christian Origins (Library of New Testament Studies 432; London – New York: T&T Clark, 2012). Pp. 222 + XII. \$46.95 (Paperback). ISBN 9780567269515.

MARCIN KOWALSKI

Institute of Biblical Studies, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
address: Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: xmkowal@gmail.com

The book *Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus* by Bas Van Os is an attempt to reintegrate psychology in the search for the historical Jesus and his earliest followers. The study presents interdisciplinary character as it integrates a historical-critical reading of the New Testament with demography, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. It is contained of twelve chapters divided into three parts with Preface by J. Harold Ellens and Foreword of the author. The book is also supplied with Bibliography, Index of Biblical References, and Index of Authors.

Part One entitled “The Limits and Potential of Psychology”, proposes a theoretical framework in which psychology can make a positive contribution to the research on the historical Jesus. In Chapter 1, “The Exile of the Psychological Jesus”, the problematic relationship between Jesus research and psychology of the past hundred years is explored. The author reviews a number of early psychological analyses of Jesus (Adamson, Holtzman, Baldensperger, Bousset, Wrede, Hitchcock) paying more attention to the works by Schweitzer and Hall who in their researches applied the historical-critical method. Then, having briefly described the Second and the Third Quest for the historical Jesus, Van Os points at a renewed interest of the biblical scholars in psychology of religion and psychobiography. These two, according to the author, could help to develop a plausible scenario for the crucifixion (how Jesus embraced his death) and the early veneration of Jesus (why so many followers identified the crucified Jesus with the promised Messiah).

In Chapter 2, “The Problem of Writing a Psychobiography of Jesus”, Van Os introduces the readers to the genre of psychobiography and sketches its unfortunate beginnings. Subsequently, he presents three psychological portraits of the historical Jesus by John Miller, Donald Capps, and Andries van Aarde. Millers’ Jesus suffered after Joseph’s death, which prevented

him from having his own family (economic reasons) and forced to abandon himself to God. Capps' Jesus was ostracized as illegitimate child and rejected by Joseph, which caused him to direct his anger with the father toward daemons. A similar fate of Jesus as *mamzer*, according to van Aarde, resulted in his role of the protector of other fatherless children and woman without husband. All the mentioned psychobiographies, which emphasize the family background and childhood of Jesus, are assessed as faulty, based on meager evidence, caught up in circular arguments and contradictory. In conclusion, there is not enough data to write a definite psychobiography of Jesus from the perspective of his childhood experience. The chapter finishes with the annex on the concept of *mamzer*.

In Chapter 3, "A Theoretical Jesus and Early Christianity", the author proposes a methodological framework for the psychological studies on the historical Jesus. It has to combine the socio-psychological and historical elements with an appreciation for the changing composition of early Christian movement. The chapter concludes with the annex on the comparison between the author's concept of Jesus and the historical Jesus as understood by J.P. Meier.

Part Two: "Followers of Jesus and Their Memories of Him" is a necessary step to proceed to the analyses of Jesus' impact in Part Three. It uses ancient demographics and modern research in conversion patterns to assess whether there is a sufficient continuity between Jesus and his followers, what sort of knowledge of him they really had, and what is the value of the Gospel traditions.

Chapter 4, "Demographic and First-Generation Followers of Jesus", starts with general data regarding life expectancy, birth and death rates, weddings, and Jewish population in the Roman Empire. Consequently, the author applies the demographical statistics to the list of 'resurrection witnesses' in 1 Cor 15:3-12, specifically to the group of five hundred, to the Twelve, and to all the apostles mentioned there. Fifty or sixty per cent of them should be still alive when Paul writes his 1 Corinthians. The women at the grave are not mentioned because at that time they are probably dead. Subsequently, Van Os gives a look at the first generations of Jesus's believers and at the family of Jesus. Drawing on 1 Cor 9:5, 15:7, Mk 6:1-6 and on the statistically more likely scenario, the author assumes Jesus to be the oldest of several children of Mary. Jesus would lose his father at the age of 20/30, which was a norm at his time. In conclusion, one can speak of a significant level of continuity between the historical Jesus and his followers whose presence in the Christian communities lasted well into the second century (including their children and grandchildren). The chapter finishes with the appendix on the age and marital status of Jesus.

In Chapter 5, “Modelling a New Religious Movement”, the growth dynamics of the Christian movement are explored. First, the author presents the insights coming from the analysis of conversions in new religion movements and cautiously applies some of them to the Gospels. Subsequently, Van Os discusses the most important insights from Rodney Stark’s work on the rise of Christianity and combines them with spreadsheet modelling. As a result, he receives the image of early Christianity which started as a missionary movement growing both by birth and conversion surplus, with the Gentiles more readily embracing the Gospel than Jews. The first-generation believers and their descendants had a significant representation in the major Diaspora centers; they dominated until the Jewish War, eventually ceding place to the Gentiles who took control only from the end of the first century.

Chapter 6, “The Memory of Jesus in Paul’s Letters and the Gospels”, is an attempt to design a strategy to extract the most reliable information about Jesus from the letters of Paul and from the Gospels. The author analyzes ancient orality and literacy and gives a look at Jesus’s traditions in Pauline letters illustrating their context, sources of Paul’s information, and the debated issue of relationship between Jesus’ tradition and social memory.

Chapter 6 paves the way for the most important, third part of the book entitled “Psychological Analyses of Jesus and His Impact”, where Van Os uses various psychological theories to explore the impact Jesus may have had on his followers.

In Chapter 7, “Attachment to the Father”, the author employs Lee Kickpatrick’s research on Attachment Theory and Religion to assess to what extent Jesus’ image of God the Father is related to his family experience and how it influenced his followers. Van Os starts with a brief topic of the veneration of God as Father among early Jesus’ followers and gives basic information about Jesus’ family. Subsequently, exposing elements of Attachment Theory and applying them to Jesus, he states that Jesus often compared God to a loving and caring father, turned to him in times of distress, and experienced his love. He came from a religious family and he was securely attached to his prime caregivers. Concluding, the author argues that the family background may have contributed to Jesus’ relation with God, strengthened probably by the loss of Joseph and by the turbulent periods of his mission. Jesus was able to share his experience of trust in Father with his followers, because great part of them was fatherless.

In Chapter 8, “The Rational Choice of Jesus’ Friends and Family”, Rational Choice Theory is applied to look at the relationship between Jesus’ family and his followers, as well as with the movement of John the Baptist. The theory assumes that most people are religious and they perceive their religion

as bringing them some benefits. The author starts with the exposition of the theory, to apply it then to John and Jesus. In the course of his analyses, he puts forward a hypotheses that the most important members of the Twelve were brother and cousins well known to Jesus and his family. That encouraged Jesus to join them as a disciple of John the Baptist and subsequently to call upon them to continue John's mission. Because of his upbringing and affiliation with John, according to the author, Jesus must have shared his religious beliefs. At the end, the movement of Jesus proved to be more successful, because it was solidly organized as a family of God's children with a clear leadership – the Twelve and Jesus' brothers.

In Chapter 9, "The Spirit of Jesus' Healings", Anthropological Psychology is employed to explore Jesus' mission of exorcist and healer. One of the important questions asked by the author in this section is how the Holy Spirit became the Spirit of Christ. Before answering it, Van Os turns to the phenomena such as altered states of consciousness (ASC) and shamanism. The shamanism does not seem to be useful as a social type in the first-century Palestine, but spirit possession and ASCs are somehow relatable to the Christian experience of the Spirit. Next, the author investigates on the experience of Jesus' followers with the Holy Spirit indwelling within them. Life in the Spirit in Paul and in his converts, infused with the Jewish Messianic hopes, can be compared to ASC or spirit possession, with the Holy Spirit leaving no room for unclean spirits. The origin and spread of the experience of the Spirit of God/Christ among the first Christians is explained by the author at least in part as a learnt behavior. The Jewish eschatological expectation of the outpouring of the Spirit shared by Jesus' disciples facilitated the process. Additionally, under the influence of the logia and miracles of Jesus, his followers associated the Spirit of God with the Spirit of Christ. The author explains this transfer combining the psychological, anthropological, and eschatological dimensions. The picture we receive at the end is that of Jesus who through his miraculous healings manifested the Spirit which after his death will be imparted on the disciples to continue his mission.

In Chapter 10, "Coping with Death", Van Os uses Kenneth Pargament's research to investigate on how Jesus may have coped with rejection and threats to his life. Violent death of Jesus, described as suffered "in accordance with the Scriptures" in 1 Cor 15:3, is a mark of the disciple's coping with the crucifixion of their Master. Such a coping may take different forms which the author consequently shows by making reference to the psychology of religion. Jesus' coping with his own death, according to Van Os, shows hesitation and uncertainty on what could happen to him in Jerusalem. Jesus had to cope with his own rejection, with the arrest of John, and with the

Baptist's death. He did it by putting those painful and stressing events in the frames of the story of Elijah. Subsequently, coping with his own imminent death, Jesus interpreted his mission in light of the story of Isaiah's suffering servant. At the end, the author indicates three ways in which Jesus' coping with his own death impacted his disciples. First, it caused their confusion. Jesus could not present his followers with a complete and unchanging eschatological scenario; he tried different ways and was open to the two scenarios: people in Jerusalem either accept him, or turn against him. Second, the coping of the leader through prayer and Scriptures taught the disciples how to cope with his death after Easter. Third, Jesus' self-identification with the Isaiah's suffering servant helped the group to reach the conclusion that his death had a sacrificial meaning.

In Chapter 11, "The Role of Christ the Lord", with the use of Hjalmar Sundén's Role Theory, the author explains how Jesus related his situation to that of suffering servant, royal Messiah, and the coming Lord. The basic premise of the theory states that, at the times of crisis, religious people can relate their own situation to that of biblical characters. The author starts with the observation that the titles of the Lord and of the coming Messiah are definitely pre-Pauline and go to the historical Jesus as concepts known by him and attributed to him by others. However, Jesus himself in the course of his mission did not proclaim himself to be the royal Messiah. It is during the last Pesach in Jerusalem that he took three various roles. During his entry to Jerusalem he realized to be the final envoy of the Lord, the image that was later expanded to include elements of the royal Messiah. In the episode of the cleansing of the temple he took the role of God himself, as he anticipated God's judgment. Finally, during the Last Supper he took the role of the Paschal lamb. Thus, Jesus made a significant contribution to his disciples beliefs that he was the coming Messiah and the Lord that would return on the last day.

Chapter 12, "Conclusions and Reflections", is in part a summary of the work, and in part a set of insights for further research. The author reflects on two more issues that did not receive the answer so far, that is, the origins of the concept of Jesus as the coming Lord and the provenience of the Spirit of Jesus. They may have originated in the context of the early church, specifically in its mission and expectation of Parousia. The acceptance of Jesus as the Lord also entailed his pre-existence, elaborated later by the early church. The book finishes with the author's hint that the psycho-historical approach employed by him may still prove useful for theorizing about such questions as baptism, Eucharist, Law, the emergence of Christianity, and the development of dogmas.

Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus by Bas Van Os is surely an interesting and provocative scholarly book. It is written with a good and understandable language. Introductions, where one can find the precisely stated problem and the exposition of methodology, and concise summaries, put not only at the end, but also at the crucial points of chapters, help the reader to orientate in the lecture. The author follows in a both rigorous and creative way the psychological theories he selects as a guideline for his work, and in the same manner he employs the elements of historical-critical approach. He shows awareness of the limitations of psychological reading and discloses them readily, like in the case of psychobiographies based on the childhood of Jesus. The bibliography which he presents is truly impressive and its range is amazingly large. Some of the conclusions presented by the author are extremely interesting and will be of much use for the scholars exploring the historical Jesus and the early Christianity, e.g. the demographic picture of early Christian communities and continuity between Jesus and his followers (Chapters 4 and 5).

The book also opens itself to criticism at many points. Starting from the minor technical shortcomings, one should point at the small font size which makes the reading really excruciating. Next, the headings of chapters lack punctuation which sometimes causes the reader to lose himself in the ramifications of the psychological theories piled by the author, or in his own reasoning. Finally, there is a mistake in numbering the chapters on p.101.

Getting to the more serious issues, already at the beginning of the book, the author apologizes for the omissions and mistakes that will occur because of the scope of the present study (Foreword, xi). Indeed, it definitely should have been narrowed. The reader can rightly feel irritated with so many themes popping up and disappearing quickly without a deeper treatment. Remaining at the methodological issues, the author employs the elements of historical-critical approach giving "priority to earlier layers over later, to general information over specific words and deeds" (p. 95). The second premise is debatable (why general should be more original than specific?), while the first one is pretty ambitious and demands a good deal of research. Instead, the author simply chooses the texts that fit him and to support his choices he often refers to the scholars representing the Jesus Seminar (cf. pp. 108, 109, 112, 117, 119, 121, 181). The criteria on the basis of which they establish the credibility of biblical texts are at least controversial. Anyway, such a practice from the part of Van Os is a methodological shortcut and it is not without a bearing on the interpretation of the analyzed biblical passages. The best example can be found on the page 181 where the author rules out the possibility of Jesus perceiving himself as the royal Messiah. The reason

is the Jesus Seminar which claimed that Zech 9:9 was only retrospectively applied by disciples to Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem (cf. John 12:12-16).

Another methodological issue that can be raised here is the applicability of the contemporary socio-psychological categories to the context of the first century. One can wonder to what extent the Attachment Theory is a tool to assess Jesus' family relations. Should it not be modified to embrace the model of family and social life in antiquity? Did the ancients coping so often with the fragility of human life and having much richer net of relationships really live the same traumas as we live? What to say about the employment of the Rational Choice Theory (Chapter 8) which, as the author stated, "can account of general tendencies in North American situation" (p. 125)? The application of such theories to the context of Jesus and his followers calls for elaborate cross-cultural models which the author cannot present us with.

Serious doubts are also generated by Van Os' exegesis. As the first example let us take the author's argument that Jesus was the eldest of his brothers and his mother, Mary, had several children (p. 53-55). The conclusion is drawn from demographics according to which if James had been 20-30 years older than Jesus he should have been dead at the time of his ministry, and it's hardly likely that other Jesus' brothers could travel at the age of 70-80 with their wives (cf. 1 Cor 9:5). First, the author himself calls his version "more likely" (p. 105), and builds upon it his whole hypotheses, but it does not rule out the traditional interpretation. Second, the gap between Jesus and his brother did not have to be that big. And third, Van Os' interpretation follows more demographical model than biblical text and tradition. It plainly contradicts what we find in Matt 1:25 and what comes to us from the ancient Christian historians and commentators (on the historical research on the family of Jesus, see e.g. Armand Puig i Tàrrach, *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey*. Studies on the Historical Jesus [WUNT II/288; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010]).

The same can be said about Jesus portrayed by the author as a disciple of John the Baptist (p. 132). The rational Choice Theory, according to which Jesus is following his family in joining John, makes the author neglect the biblical testimony that presents the Baptist as inferior to Jesus (Matt 3:11-17; Mark 1,4-11; John 1:6.15-16.19-34). Van Os additionally bases his view on the unprovable assumption that all of Jesus' disciples were baptized by John (cf. Acts 1:22-23). At this occasion the author also presents us with the innovative and estranged interpretation of the baptism of John as the moment, at which Jesus receives forgiveness from John and comes to term with Joseph's death (p. 120). It goes far beyond what we find in the biblical text and neglects the primary meaning of the scene which is the revelation

of Jesus' identity and special status as the son of God (see the reference to J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*. Christianity in the Making [2003] I, on the same page 120). For the author, however, it seems to be an insufficient explanation.

More examples of Van Os' clear neglect of biblical material can be given. According to him, in Mk 3:35 Jesus is struggling with disapproval and condemnation by his mother (p. 117). How does it relate the image of Mary in Luke 2:51 or John 2:5? Next, in the author's opinion Jesus did not perceive himself as the "son of man" from Dan 7:13-14 (pp. 179, 185). He expected God or some other being to descend from heaven. However, there is a number of texts where Jesus attributes the title of "son of man" to himself (e.g. Matt 8:20; 9:6; 11:19; 12:8; 12:40; 13:37; 17:9), why then should he not apply it to himself also in the eschatological context? (cf. Matt 10:23; 13:42; 16:27; 19:28; 25:31). The expression itself is regarded by scholars as the self-referential description of messianic identity coming from the historical Jesus (cf. Larry W. Hurtado – Paul L. Owen, *"Who Is This Son of Man?"*. The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus [Library of New Testament Studies 390; London – New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012]). Finally, if Jesus did not understand himself as the royal Messiah, why would he allow others to address him as "son of David" (Matt 9:27; 15:22; 21:9; 29:30.31), and why would he arrange so carefully the entrance to Jerusalem (Matt 21:1-7; Mark 11:1-4)? The reading of Jesus tradition proposed by Van Os is very selective and follows more psychological theories than biblical context.

Obviously, Van Os' approach excludes theology as a *locus* from which the historical knowledge of Jesus can be drawn. The portrait of Jesus presented by the scholar is only human, stripped of every theological notion of divinity. Jesus is always in search for the purpose of his life and mission, unsure of his identity to the very end. That is also contradictory to the firmness and resolution with which he speaks of his end in Matt 17:22; 20:18; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33. At the end, the author depicts Jesus as playing different roles to come to grip with his fate (Chapter 11). One can legitimately wonder how such a fragile and disoriented leader would be able to gather around him disciples that would then continue his mission. The psychological portrait of Jesus which Van Os depicts before our eyes is strikingly similar to what we find in *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese and in so many contemporary biographies on him. Many, after having read this book, can be rightly inclined to questioning the value of psychology in the researches on the historical Jesus. The book, nevertheless, due to its provocative potential, is worth reading.