

## *Psychological Insight into the Bible: Texts and Readings*

ROLLINS Wayne G & D Andrew KILLE (eds.) 2007

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Some years ago I confessed to a trusted colleague my resolve to pursue formal theological studies at the local seminary. “Yes,” he responded wryly, “It seems nowadays the psychologists all want to become theologians, and the theologians are all trying to be psychologists!”

In this very welcome book, Rollins & Kille have demonstrated beautifully that psychologists have been fruitfully dabbling in theology, or at least in biblical studies, for a long time. Both Rollins and Kille, as respected theologians, derive from “the other” side of the (erstwhile) divide, and in this joint enterprise bring much credit to theology, particularly to the quest for new and fresh ways of understanding Scripture.

The book comprises a series of the seminal publications drawn from the developing discipline of psychology starting in 1867 with Delitzsch’s *A System of Biblical Theology*, and covering a hugely diverse field through 2004. The sample represents most of the “greats”, some of the “not so-greats”, and a surprising array of lesser-known, rarely quoted authors. Some regrettably are missing<sup>1</sup> – but then we all tend to cling to the “worthies” of our undergraduate generation.<sup>2</sup> Considering the inaccessibility of many of these publications, this in itself provides a valuable service to aspirant and seasoned biblical scholars alike.

Grouped thematically in twos or threes, these clusters of texts are interspersed by short introductory and commentary articles by one or the other of the compilers. But to refer to Rollins & Kille as compilers, or editors, or even authors, falls seriously short of accuracy, and would indeed do them injustice. For they have performed a delicate exercise of integrating all three activities with skill and circumspection, and have achieved a masterful balance which orientates the reader in what, if left to his own devices, could be experienced as a bewildering overgrowth of primeval jungle akin to that within which Albert Schweitzer lived and worked (vide p. 226).

The interstitial articles provide a continuity of supplements to the expert introduction presented as Preface, and complimented by Walter Wink’s insightful and succinct Foreword. The germinal articles are enriched by numerous pertinent short quotations which allow Walter Wink to suggest that, “Between the two of them, Wayne Rollins and Andrew Kille have read just about every book, article, citation, and fragment that deals with the subject of psychological approaches to the Bible”(p. xiii) ... in the broadest sense, I would wish to add.

The book is systematically structured in two parts. *Part One* lays out the theoretical bases for psychological biblical criticism in five chapters. “Past, Present, and Future” is an

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<sup>1</sup> Kluckholm C & HA Murray 1948. *Personality: in Nature, Society and Culture*, New York: Knopf.

<sup>2</sup> Lake, Frank 1966. *Clinical Theology: A Theological and Psychiatric Basis to Clinical Pastoral Care*, London: Darton Longman & Todd.

overarching concern. The rebirth of interest in psychology as a rightful contributor to the field of biblical studies since the 1960's is traced to reciprocal changes in both disciplines when viewed against the attitudes of mutual suspicion and antagonism up to that time. Concurrent change in the socio-political climate in the West added to the possibilities for academic change and the growth of tolerance and co-operation between biblical scholars and psychologists. Here also, the semantic domains of such awkward terms as "soul", "psyche", "self", "spirit", and "psychologising" are explored thoroughly across culture and history. Apart from a survey of six different theoretical approaches that have been used in biblical criticism, a significantly definitive contribution from Rollins poses (and answers) the question: "What then is the nature and agenda of a psychological-critical approach to Scripture?" This forward-looking article proposes a model which involves six specific research areas for psychologically based exploration of the biblical texts. These editor/compiler do not neglect other standard approaches to biblical studies: throughout the book they are careful to ensure that the reader is adequately informed of the development and trends in biblical scholarship at large. To achieve this, relevant essentials of the likes of Paul Ricoeur, Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas are introduced as and when appropriate.

In *Part Two* of the book the focus turns from theory to application. Nine chapters are concerned with the demonstration of how psychological analysis in one form or another can be applied to a range of biblical concepts and phenomena. Here attention is given not only to the positive, "syntonic" aspects of the Bible and its usage over the millennia, but also to some of the "dystonic", negative effects and phenomena it has given rise to or lent support to. For those who enjoy paradox, this chapter hints at the proverbial "one man's meat" being "another man's poison". The final chapter returns to the earliest foundations of biblical psychology, and beginning with Tertullian and Augustine, swoops through the Reformers and into the twenty-first century, where Rollins again addresses the pertinent question: "What is Biblical Psychology?" In answer he proposes a three-point agenda for a contemporary biblical psychology.

Whilst we're engaged in the business of crossing the "biblical"/"psychological" frontier, I should have liked Rollins and Kille to have exploited the opportunity more fully by making an assault also on the "psychological"/"socio-cultural-anthropological" boundary. That, for example, would have provided a larger and in my view well deserved space for Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey in this volume.<sup>3</sup> This kind of watertight compartmentalisation is rapidly shifting out of fashion in favour of interdisciplinary approaches. However, boundaries do still exist – some of them unnecessary and even counter-productive; hopefully this book will help to dissolve many of them.

An appealing aspect of this book is its presentation of its material in a diachronic / synchronic interaction and perspective. Isn't this in the end what interpretation is, that is, the aim of criticism of any text involves explication of the interaction of author and reader each situated in and interacting with their own respective worlds. In part, at least, biblical criticism is a systematic application of "psycho-technology". This book offers a useful selection of tools, having a direct relevance to the processes of generation, transmission, and reception of texts. Among other things, it also offers a valuable overview of *how* much of that technology has evolved – 1867 onwards – and often hints interestingly at *why*.

Not surprisingly, the last word is given to Walter Wink. If you like *inclusio*, it is here for you: "Wayne Rollins and Andrew Kille have not just brought about a thoroughgoing

<sup>3</sup> Malina, Bruce J & Jerome H Neyrey 1996. *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Personality*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.

historical synthesis of the literature ... they are developing a new kind of exegesis. At their most profound level they show us how to apply psychological insights *to ourselves* as a means of appropriating the text for the task of human transformation. The biblical text, clarified and illuminated by all the tools of critical analysis, can now probe *us*"(p.xiv, original italics). And: "Biblical psychology needs to be reclaimed as a legitimate and significant rubric within biblical scholarship... [I]t can shed new light on human self-understanding" (p.255).

If this book achieves no more than enable us to capture a more psychologically accurate, more biblically informed honest self-understanding, it will be worth more than its weight in gold! For me the book comes as a compelling invitation, and in answer to a long-felt need.