

Psychology and the Bible: What Hath Freud Wrought?

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Until recently, reading the Bible was thought to be a rather straightforward procedure. The goal was to respond “properly” by trying to “understand” the text and grasp the “meaning.” This changed once psychology became a more accepted form of biblical exegesis. Now shifts in the discipline of biblical studies, along with the increasing influence of psychological perspectives on the culture in general have made psychological approaches to the Bible more visible and as a result. No work is being done on the application of feminist theory to psychological approaches.

As I have argued elsewhere, the use of psychology in interpreting biblical texts is no more a conceptually unified critical position in biblical studies than in literary studies generally. The term is associated with scholars who examine the writer, the biblical characters, or the reader. Further, the approaches are neither monolithic nor mutually exclusive. But biblical scholars who use psychology seem to agree that “meaning” does not inhere completely and exclusively in the text and that the “effects” of reading Scripture, psychological and otherwise, are essential to its “meaning.” Ultimately, this type of literary criticism yields in biblical studies a way of looking at biblical narratives and readers which reorganizes both their interrelationships and the distinctions between them. As a result, recognizing the relationship of a reader to the biblical text leads to a more profound awareness that no one interpretation is intrinsically “true:” the “meaning” of biblical narratives is not waiting to be uncovered but evolves, actualized by readers,

Although this paper looks at various psychological approaches to biblical study I focus most heavily on psychoanalysis and the bible from the perspective of psychoanalytic literary theory.