

# Soul and psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective

Willem J Smith (Benoni)<sup>1</sup>

Department of Practical Theology

University of Pretoria

## Abstract

*During the last third of the twentieth century a discipline that applies psychological and psychoanalytic insight to the study of the Bible, has resurfaced within biblical studies. In his book, Soul and Psyche, Wayne Rollins offers a psychological biblical approach as one of the new approaches to Scripture since the 1960's. This approach tends to bring a renewed appreciation for the role of the human psyche or soul in the history of the Bible and its interpretation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wayne R Rollins, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts and Adjunct Professor of Scripture at Hartford Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut, in his latest book *Soul and psyche* (1999), presents a perspective on what is termed *psychological biblical criticism*.

In this ground-breaking work, Rollins first surveys *past research* (Part One: Retrospect – Chapters 1-3) and then plots a *recommended course* (Part two: Prospect – Chapters 4-6) for the discipline. Chapter 1 traces the history of biblical psychologies. Chapter 2 documents the early twentieth century shift within psychological biblical studies. Chapter 3 traces psychological criticism through the twentieth century, from the negative reaction to psychology within mainline biblical scholarship to change in attitude that has been referred to as “Psychological Study of the Bible.” Chapter 4 proposes a definition and research agenda for the field. Chapter 5 proposes the exegetical agenda, while chapter 6 discusses the hermeneutical agenda.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Willem J Smith (MA, PhD) is a research associate for the project “Theories of Practical Theology and Philosophical Hermeneutics”, directed by Prof Dr Yolanda Dreyer, Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria. This essay is a review article of the book of Prof Dr W G Rollins (1999), *Soul and psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Rollins' purpose with this volume is to present a history of *psychological biblical criticism*, as well as a definition of the field and an agenda for its application to biblical exegesis and hermeneutics (the analysis and interpretation of the Bible). He undertakes this study from Dittes' viewpoint (1990:30) in terms of which the Bible and the interpretation thereof are viewed from a perspective known as the "habits of the soul". These habits can be identified as the ways in which the human soul experiences lostness and sickness; the ways in which the soul finds healing and revelation of meaning; the words, images, symbols and literary genres it devises to convey that meaning; the richly different forms of expression it finds to celebrate that meaning; and the ways meaning is applied to the individual's life and that of others. According to Dittes, these "habits" include the psychic baggage the soul brings to all its tasks and situations, drawn from its own experience, but also from a larger reservoir of revelation and insight that can lift the soul beyond the ordinary. From this perspective, Rollins (1999:vii) thinks of the Bible as a demonstration of the "habits of the soul", which merits being studied from the psychological biblical-critical perspective, because "it is a book of the soul, written to the soul, about the soul, for the soul's care and cure". By this he means that it is time for biblical scholarship to take the psychological aspects of biblical studies seriously. Rollins admits that the historical approach protects students from a mindless reading of the Bible, but in order to protect against a Biblical reading that is soulless, he advocates a psychological approach as well. To emphasize his point, Rollins (1990:vii) quotes Carl Jung who stated- that everything that refers to religion, everything it is and asserts, touches the human soul so closely that psychology least of all can afford to overlook it".

## **2. BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN RETROSPECT**

According to Rollins (1990:4) biblical psychology, can be defined as the study of the biblical perspective on the origin, nature, pathology, health and destiny of the human psyche or soul. He believes that psychology was studied and practiced long before it was given a name. The term was first used during the sixteenth century to designate the venerable discipline of research and reflection by philosophers and biblical scholars on the nature, habits and powers of the human psyche. Biblical psychology, as the first and longest phase of psychological biblical criticism, has four objectives, namely the *descriptive* (identifies the biblical understanding of the nature, origin, powers and destiny of the psyche), the *analytic* (identifies the underlying psychodynamic factors in biblical personalities, in biblical phenomena and in biblical effects), the *diagnostic* (examines the human condition and identifies what from a biblical point of view) has gone wrong and the *prescriptive* objective (deals with what the bible teaches about the highest reaches of the

human personality and what methods of nurturing, care and healing it (the Bible) prescribes for the attainment of that higher nature).

In his psychological critical approach, Rollins first recounts the history of psychology by focusing on three dimensions:

- the sixteenth century origins of the use of the term psychology by theologians and the gradual metamorphosis in meaning it has undergone during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- the emergence of biblical psychological reflection during the second century, with its roots in the psychology of Aristotle, Plato and the Stoic school of philosophy and the development in dialogue with the Greek tradition during the patristic, medieval, Reformation and Enlightenment periods;
- the content and significance of Delitzsch's *A System of Biblical Psychology* (1855), along with M Scott Fletcher's, *The Psychology of the New Testament* (1912), as two prime examples of biblical psychology.

Rollins continues his chronicle of psychological biblical criticism by adding to it the monumental work of Freud and Jung, as well as by including the increasingly diverse contributions by biblical scholars and biblically orientated psychologists since the 1960's.

### **3. THE PROSPECTS FOR BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The psychological study of the Bible undertaken by *Psychological Criticism*, opens up totally new, vast and far-reaching prospects. However, it never offered a definition of the discipline, nor a program of study (Rollins 1999:91). At least *Psychological Criticism* suggests three topics for research on this matter, namely the *psychology of symbols as the first*, the *psychological truth* as the second topic and the third being the *effect biblical texts have on readers*.

As part of recent attempts to formulate a definition of the field of Psychological Criticism, Rollins (1999:92-95) identifies three fundamental elements for research:

#### **3.1 A fundamental premise**

As premise for psychological criticism, Rollins states that the Bible should be treated as being a part and a product of not only a historical, literary and socio-anthropological process, but also of a psychological process. In this process, the biblical authors and their communities and the texts they have produced, as well as the readers and interpreters of these texts and their

communities, and also the individual, communal and cultural effects of those interpretations, all are influenced by conscious and unconscious factors.

### **3.2 A twofold objective**

#### **3.2.1 Psychological context**

From the preceding fundamental premise, the aim of the psychological context is to develop a critical eye for what James Dittes has called the *habits of the soul*. This context includes the ways the human soul (psyche) finds itself touched by meaning, the forms in which it expresses such meaning, the purposes it chooses that meaning to serve, the words it finds congenial for translating that meaning into other languages and forms, the choice of media it makes to celebrate that meaning within the life of the soul.

#### **3.2.2 Psychological content**

The second purpose of a psychological-critical approach is to study the implicit and explicit understanding of the soul (psyche) in the Bible, which includes biblical concepts of illness and health of the soul, and biblical prescriptions for the care or cure of souls.

### **3.3 Criteria of interpretive adequacy**

In determining a more valid interpretation of a text, Kille (1997:70-74) proposes the following three criteria for adequacy:

- It has to deal with the text as a whole;
- It has to deal with the text as an individual and unique text in terms of authorship, genre and linguistic habits and structures;
- It has to account for the greatest number of factors found in the text and has to demonstrate greater convergence between the aspects considered.

## **4. ROLLINS' DEFINITION OF THE TERMS: PSYCHE, SOUL AND SELF**

Given the basic premise that the Bible is to be seen as a part and a product of a psychic process, it behoves psychological criticism to define terms, especially the word *psyche*, and its common translation, *soul*.

### **4.1 *Psyche* in a historical and contemporary usage**

According to Rollins (1999:96), Aristotle's *Peri Psyches (Concerning the Psyche)* defines *psyche* as the animating principle that catalyzes life in the

body and is the source of all the animating functions we associate with being human. His successors in Greco-Roman philosophy and in Patristic, medieval, and scholastic theology add little to Aristotle's observations. This same comprehensive understanding of psyche informed the first appearance of the term *psychology* in the thought of Marco Marulic and Philipp Melanchton in the early 1500s.

It is this same term, *psyche*, that Wilhelm Wundt, the father of modern psychology, retained as the controlling concept of his *new psychology*. Freud and Jung also turned to *psyche* to express the idea of the unified psychic self, freely employing the German *Seele* (soul) as a fitting translation. Jung uses the term *psyche* in its classical, historical sense to refer to the "totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious" (Rollins 1999:99). He generally reserves *Seele* or *soul* to refer to the unconscious realm of the psyche, although *psyche* and *Seele* sometimes are interchangeable. For Jung the psyche is the matrix of all human culture. He sees it as the force that is primarily responsible for all the historical changes on the face of this planet wrought by the hand of man.

In the early 1900s, the terms *psyche* and *soul* become problematic. An environment that had become increasingly empirically oriented made it difficult to speak about realities that defy precise, scientific measurement.

Even though it is rather impossible to define the extent and ultimate character of psychic existence and even though the psyche is an *ineffable totality* which can only be formulated symbolically, it nevertheless is real.

#### **4.2 Soul in its historical and contemporary usage**

The term *soul* has a similar history. It was introduced as the English translation for *psyche* in its Greek context and *Seele* in its German psychoanalytic context. Its past is more complex and problematic than that of *psyche* though, because of the tendency, especially in English-speaking religious circles, to use it exclusively as a reference to the disembodied self before or after death. The result is that for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, *soul* was either absent from discourse among psychologists and theologians or dismissed by translating Freud's *Seele* as *mind* or *mental*.

I believe it has become important to account for the resurgence of *soul* that has occurred towards the end of the twentieth century. From the perspective of the history of ideas, the shift can be seen as a popular manifestation of postmodern consciousness with its negative suspicions of the positivist and scientific approach of behaviourism and a psychology which is radically empirical. From a psychodynamic perspective, the answer may be found in the Freudian concept of the "return of the repressed" (Rollins

### ***Soul and Psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective***

1999:103), in this instance demonstrated by the return of a long repressed cultural need for a term to designate the complex, but unified self that most people understand themselves to be, and that cannot simply be reduced to somatic and physical factors.

#### **4.3 Self in a historical and contemporary usage**

Surprisingly, in psychological circles the history of the term *self*, is comparable to that of *psyche* and soul. According to Rollins (1999:103) Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant and Hume conceived of the *self* as that conscious inner agent that observes oneself having experiences.

By the second half of the twentieth century, however, the term began to reappear under the sponsorship of clinical and developmental psychology, the arts, and the humanities. By the last decade of the twentieth century, *self* had made its return within the guild of academic psychologists.

By way of a single definition that encompasses all three terms, Rollins (1999:105) offers the following:

The common semantic content of the terms *psyche*, *soul* and *self* includes reference to the totality of the conscious and unconscious individual. This totality encompasses:

- The individual's powers and functions: emotional, cognitive, affective, intuitive, imaginative, perceptive, rational, sensate, moral, spiritual and aesthetic.
- The individual's development, behaviour, character and acts, as these are informed, shaped and motivated by instincts, aspirations, innate physical and psychodynamic proclivities and drives, as well as positive and negative external reinforcements.
- The individual's personal capacities: self awareness, free will, aesthetic appreciation, moral judgment, seeking and creating of meaning, creativity and spiritual sensitivity – all of which can be bent to constructive or destructive ends and, depending on the circumstance, be the expression of healthy or pathological states.

## **5. ROLLINS' PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF THE PSYCHE**

Rollins' working model is largely based on models developed in depth psychology, predominantly those by Jung and Freud, but with marked affinities for the biblical perspective. In developing this model, Rollins *first* looked at the nature of the unconscious. *Secondly* he examined *four other prominent features* of the self from a psychoanalytic and biblical perspective.

## **5.1 The unconscious**

Rollins (1999:106) is of the opinion that depth psychology's most telling contribution to an understanding of the psyche/soul/self is the "... postulate of the reality of the unconscious as an autonomous factor in the human personality."

Freud was the first to conceive of the unconscious as a *mental place*, an autonomous presence within the self. Jung expanded the notion of the unconscious to include the collective *unconscious* as the purveyor of motifs which typify human fantasy in general.

More than just a feature of the individual, it is a reality shared collectively by the entire human species. In some respects, the unconscious transcends the species. It is that place where the archetypal images, dreams and visions of the future that take humanity to places undreamt of, take shape.

## **5.2 Other aspects of the psyche/soul/self in psychological perspective**

In addition to the unconscious, four other aspects of the depth psychological model have a bearing on biblical criticism.

### **5.2.1 The dynamic as opposed to the static character of the psyche**

This aspect has a bearing on especially the analysis of biblical narratives, the depictions of biblical personalities and biblical counsel for the soul. The patterns of inner conflict and personal development that psychoanalytic theory finds in the structure and processes of the self are not foreign to patterns intuitively rehearsed in biblical stories and narratives.

### **5.2.2 The postulate of psychological types**

Developed largely in Jungian circles, this has a bearing on especially the analysis of biblical authors and interpretations. For the psychological biblical critic, this fourfold model of psychological types provides a tool for exploring the idiosyncratic psychological orientation of individual biblical authors, as well as the special angle of vision different readers bring to their reading of the text.

### **5.2.3 The stages of human psychological development**

This has a bearing on especially the analysis of biblical writers and readers, of personality portraits of biblical figures, and of models of comparative maturity in biblical psychology. Achieving this wholeness requires development of the

### ***Soul and Psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective***

capacity for reason (*logos*), for love (*eros*), for more consciousness, and for that degree of “legitimate” suffering that is inevitable in a psychically mature life – again, a pattern discerned in biblical narrative and articulated in biblical psychology.

#### **5.2.4 The psychology of the individual vis-à-vis the psychology of the masses**

This has a bearing in particular on the study of biblical ethics and biblical understanding of individual and group responsibility. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to Western civilization and democracy is its high regard for the individual

## **6. IMPLICATIONS OF THIS APPROACH FOR THE BIBLE AND ITS READERS**

In order to offer a psychological-critical perspective on the Bible, Rollins suggests that the text of the Bible should be re-visioned in *five respects*, namely:

### **6.1 Re-visioning biblical origins**

It is important to realize that, as stated by Rollins himself, a psychological-critical perspective on the Bible, “... draws the conversation away from dates, places and historical events, to the initial ‘psychic events’ ... that lie at the base of religious movements and texts ...” (Rollins 1999:111). The task then, would be to look for the character of those original events that gave rise to the text.

### **6.2 Re-visioning the text itself**

In re-visioning the text, it is important to ask how texts occasion meaning in the human mind. It will also focus on the genres of biblical language, taking note of the unconscious, as well as the conscious factors and it brings a fresh psychological insight into the psychodynamic of religious phenomena, from glossolalia, to dreams, to demon possession and prophetic inspiration. In such an approach there will also be an interest in applying canons of psychological health and illness to the Bible.

### **6.3 Re-visioning of biblical interpretation**

Turning to the reader, a re-visioning of biblical interpretation will consider the act of reading as a psychic event. These elaborative strategies include dance, sculpture, song, pageantry, liturgical celebration and acts of mercy.

#### **6.4 Re-visioning of biblical history**

Such survey will take note of the Bible's post-and pre-history, examining biblical effects, as well as reflecting on how the Bible came about, but also on what the Bible has created and produced.

#### **6.5 Re-visioning the fundamental purpose of the Bible**

Through its range of genres, such as law, history, myth, legend, psalm, proverb, prophecy, gospel, epistle, parable and apocalypse, the biblical text serves multiple purposes, but as canon it also serves a collective function. Psychological biblical criticism regards the intrinsic purpose of a canonical text as being fundamentally therapeutic.

### **7. THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF THIS PSYCHOLOGICAL-CRITICAL APPROACH: A PREDICTION**

The Bible provides enough evidence of its ability to transform the consciousness of people, change behavioural patterns and open up a new cognition of reality in ways that have affected individuals and shaped entire cultures for generations. The Bible, as a book of life, can change the life of people and it generates new models of behaviour. In this regard Rollins (1999:177) refers to Gadamer, who speaks of the fusion of horizons between text and reader that leads to expanded consciousness. This may have the effect of the text influencing, re-visioning and restructuring a person's world. As a result of the major research shift in biblical scholarship from the exclusive use of diachronic historical models to the inclusion of synchronic models in the 1970's, new voices have made themselves heard. Canonical criticism deals with the text within the context of a believing community, contextual criticism focuses on the ability of the Bible to address different types of communities, feminist criticism asserts the transformative, liberationist and egalitarian promise and power of the Bible. To these efforts, Rollins adds a fresh approach on psychological criticism, by focussing on two aspects of the text's therapeutic function: as a text that is innately therapeutic, dedicated to the healing task of curing and caring souls, and as a text that generates therapeutic effects.

It is Rollins' wish that the primary goal of psychological biblical criticism would be to come to understand in greater psychological and psychoanalytic detail the secret of the therapeutic and catalytic effect of the biblical text and the role it plays in the habits, strategies and agendas of the human psyche.

As stated earlier, Rollins is quite aware of the different approaches, for example the ideological, feminist, rhetorical, social-scientific, canonical, contextual, structuralist, narrative and reader-response approaches taken by

### ***Soul and Psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective***

Biblical scholars. While choosing to work on *psychological biblical criticism* as one of the new approaches to Scripture since the 1960's, this approach tends to bring a renewed appreciation of the role of the human psyche or soul in the history of the Bible and its interpretation. With this purpose in mind, there can be no doubt that this ground-breaking work of Rollins on psychological biblical criticism will be of great value for biblical researchers and is worth taking note of. His approach is fresh, stimulating and of good scientific value, especially for those researchers that follow an interdisciplinary approach.

### **Works consulted**

- Dittes, J E 1990. Analytical (Jungian) psychology and pastoral care, in Hunter, R (ed), *Dictionary of pastoral care and counselling*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.
- Kille, D A 1997. *Psychological biblical criticism: Genesis 3 as a test case*. New York, NY: Graduate Theological Union.
- Rollins, W G 1999. *Soul and psyche: The Bible in psychological perspective*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.