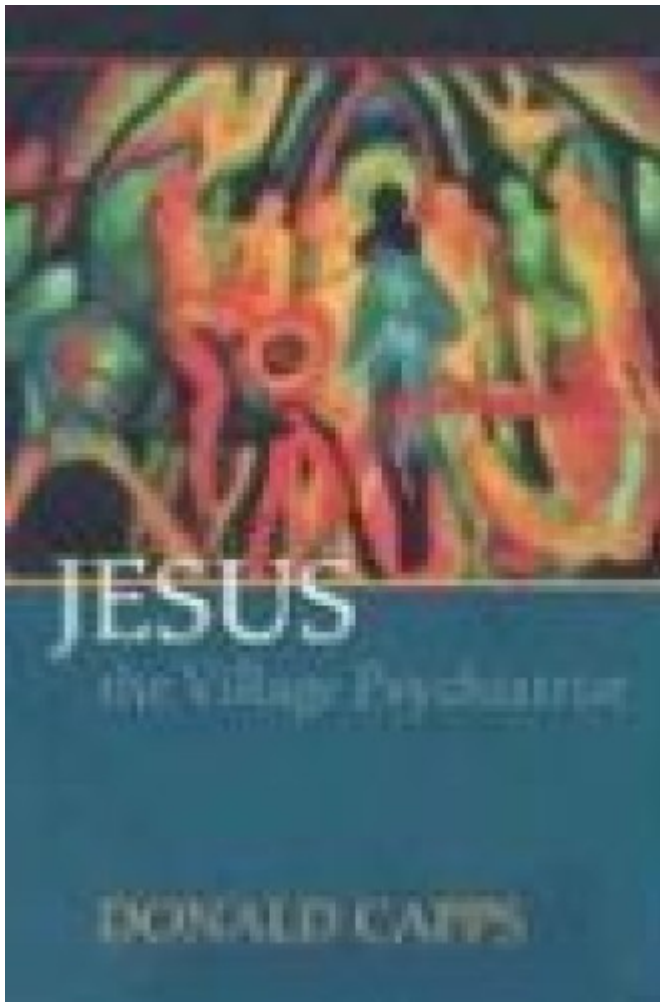


Jesus the Village Psychiatrist

reviewed by [Mark E. DeVries](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Jesus the Village Psychiatrist

Donald Capps

Westminster John Knox

What exactly took place when Jesus healed people? According to Donald Capps, who teaches pastoral theology at Princeton Seminary, Jesus did not heal with

supernatural power but worked within the laws of nature and used techniques available to anyone with an understanding of psychosomatic illness. The fact that Jesus worked this way, says Capps, does not detract one bit from his curative powers. And I would add that it implies that these powers remain available today.

The compiler of a recent anthology of memoirs of mental illness called *Fragile Connections* (2005), Capps presents a convincing case that the healing powers of Jesus came from a finely tuned understanding of the unconscious conflicts underlying the illnesses he confronted. In making this admittedly speculative argument, Capps brings together extensive knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, a strong grasp of biblical criticism and a deep understanding of the political climate of Jesus' time and place. He explains the dynamics of various disorders and points out subtle differences between several types of psychosomatic illness, emphasizing that *psychosomatic* does not mean "merely imagined." Psychosomatic symptoms are real but are driven primarily by unresolved unconscious conflicts.

After drawing the reader in with his provocative thesis, Capps presents layer upon layer of well-argued evidence, leaving the reader with the feeling that he must be on to something despite the many remaining uncertainties. He sets the stage for the healing stories by offering a cogent summary of psychoanalytic theory regarding psychosomatic disorders and argues that the healing power of Jesus came from his addressing the primary gain that these illnesses represented as opposed to the secondary gain. The primary gain involves quelling anxiety and keeping out of conscious awareness the psychological conflict that is responsible for the anxiety; the secondary gain involves the attention one would gain from the illness or the avoidance of some unwanted responsibility. Secondary gain suggests a purposeful effort to take on a dysfunctional identity or to avoid responsibility. The focus on primary gain implies deeper respect and empathy for the ailing person than would an emphasis on secondary gain.

Jesus' healings involve this deeper understanding, according to Capps. As a clinician I find the distinction between primary and secondary gain very helpful in dissipating my own negative reaction to therapy clients with apparent psychosomatic tendencies because it deflects the judgments I might harbor regarding their motives for remaining ill.

Drawing heavily from John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* and from John Meier's *A Marginal Jew*, Capps pays special

attention to the Gospel stories involving paralysis and blindness. Take, for instance, the stories in Mark 2 and John 5. If one regards these merely as stories of miraculous healing of paralysis, then one is left with the idea that the healing power of Jesus is primarily about healing individuals of their physical ailments. The theology that emerges is one in which God is primarily a cosmic wish-granter. If, by contrast, we read more deeply and see the stories as embedded in a social and political context, we can see that they're not at all stories about individual healing but are parables about confronting the powers that be. Capps points out that the stories take place in the context of the Roman occupation. He asks what paralysis might mean for an otherwise able-bodied adult male in that situation. Might it make psychological and sociopolitical sense to resist the occupying empire and thereby neutralize one's anxiety by becoming immobilized and therefore unable to serve the oppressive political entity?

And herein lies the most compelling and relevant idea in this powerful book. Not only did Jesus work within the laws of nature, but he also confronted the reigning powers. His message to those of us who resort (albeit unconsciously) to incapacitation as a way of resisting the occupying powers is, "Get up and stand against the powers. Your faith demonstrates that you are now able."

A minor criticism I would offer is that in presenting his assessment of the Gospel stories as psychiatric case histories, Capps remains very closely tethered to the diagnostic system currently in use by the professions of psychiatry and psychology, which does not translate naturally to a first-century context. Otherwise, this is a thought-provoking and politically relevant work that is well worth reading.