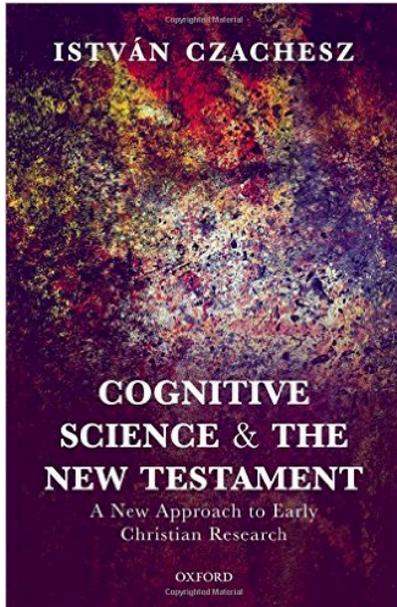


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István Czachesz

Cognitive Science and the New Testament: A New Approach to Early Christian Research

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This is a wonderful book, welcome to both New Testament scholars and to those with an interest in the cognitive sciences working in related fields. It is clear, comprehensive, and replete with examples to illustrate otherwise unfamiliar terminology or cognitive approaches.

The purpose of the book is quite clear and straightforward, as indicated by the author at the outset, though the implications indicated at the end (219) are quite monumental: Czachesz proposes to introduce to New Testament scholars a full-range of cognitive approaches that may shed light “on many, if not all, traditional questions of the methodology of biblical interpretation” (2). This book proposes, and to some extent succeeds, in providing “methodological tools and initial steps for ... applying the cognitive approach to the New Testament and related ancient literature” (2).

Given Czachesz’s long-standing and vast experience in the field, it is not surprising that he succeeds very well in providing a comprehensive overview of some of the most useful tools and steps. Helpfully, these are summarized by chapter in the introduction, and each chapter both begins and ends with a summary statement of what the contribution is and why it matters.

As one might expect, chapter 1 provides an overview for New Testament scholars who might not otherwise be familiar with the field of several cognitive approaches, including perhaps most significantly the cognitive science of religion. Here Czachesz provides a helpful understanding of what he means by *cognitive* as having to do with the “scientific interdisciplinary study of the mind” (8). It is Czachesz’s contention that there has been a “cognitive turn” in psychology, linguistics, and anthropology and that one is now due in New Testament studies. The chapter is devoted to showing why that is so and to begin to configure the outlines that might help show what such a turn would look like in New Testament studies.

Chapter 2 addresses the important conceptual role of evolution as the basis for many cognitive approaches and the implications of an evolutionary reading of the New Testament. At first blush, this chapter, which begins with a “very short” introduction to evolutionary theory might seem strange or even a red flag to some readers. However, treatment of this subject is important for establishing cognitive understandings of the brain, which is the subject of chapter 3. Furthermore, it introduces a theme that is germane to Czachesz’s understanding of the cognitive approach itself: the notion of “epigenetic” or nongenetic changes whose impact on something’s identity becomes a fundamental characteristic of it in subsequent iterations (40–41). Czachesz helpfully charts changes of this nature in religious practices but also as observable in some New Testament texts

As noted, chapter 3 provides us with Czachesz’s “guided tour” of the human brain and the significance of different understandings of the brain—and the mind—for understanding religious practices, including those found in the New Testament. The contention that, while brains of individuals are different the structure of the brain is the same and probably has been over time, allows Czachesz to move on to subsequent chapters in which he discusses the fact that we can talk factually about first- and twenty-first-century brains and the texts emanating from the former. (In the final pages of this chapter, Czachesz wisely avoids discussing whether there are gender differences among brains, basing himself on the scientific conclusion that any conclusion is as yet unknown.)

Chapter 4 helpfully summarizes the present state of cognitive approaches to memory, including corporate and transmitted memory. This area is well known and recognized as a significant area of concern in New Testament studies. As such, the material here will be of more obvious relevance to New Testament studies than that of the previous chapters; however, the overview and examples of application will also open new insights for New Testament scholars interested in this subject area. Helpfully, here again Czachesz begins with an overview of the present state of memory in cognitive studies and then proceeds to

show the relevance to New Testament studies by addressing the evidence for how information is remembered (e.g., lists), common narratives, scripts, and so on. However, Czachesz also brilliantly shows the way in which memory is adapted and reconfigured, sometimes without any apparent intention to do so, as well as ways in which a better understanding of memory can explain differences in the same episode as narrated, whether orally or literarily.

The longest chapter of the book, chapter 5 (twice as long as the other chapters) addresses cognitive approaches to ritual, especially highlighting examples of New Testament ritual in the so-called eucharistic practices addressed in 1 Cor 11 and the prayer practices spoken of by the Matthean Jesus in Matt 5–6. Czachesz interweaves cognitive approaches into his somewhat free reading of Catherine Bell’s taxonomy of five ways of understanding ritual using especially the 1 Corinthians text. One can see in this chapter the importance that Czachesz gives to the impact that the cognitive turn is having on other disciplines—especially psychology and religious studies—and how significant such an impact is for our study of the New Testament.

Similarly, chapter 6 concerns an area that is of well-known and recognized importance to New Testament scholars: magic and miracle. Under Czachesz’s careful guidance, we are shown how these can helpfully be understood from a cognitive perspective. In spite of some contemporary tendencies to reject a notion of magic, or miracle, Czachesz shows how “magic is based on the elementary learning mechanism of superstitious conditioning, gains support from implicit and explicit ... cognitive processes, and interacts with miracle traditions” (140). This broad analysis (which includes attention to the narrative of Acts 19) suggests a real and mature advance over less-sophisticated approaches to miracle texts and traditions in many present New Testament studies.

Chapter 7 is perhaps the most difficult chapter in the book but also the most interesting in that it attempts to engage in an enterprise fraught with danger, namely, an exploration of subjective experience in texts. In doing so Czachesz seeks to bridge the gap between New Testament texts and interpretation by discussing religious experience from a cognitive vantage point and applying insights from the study of contemporary religious experience to what we find in the New Testament texts (e.g., 1 Cor 12–14) or the “tour of heaven” to which Paul alludes in 2 Cor 12 or that found in the Ascension of Isaiah. Czachesz concludes by suggesting that it is precisely the cognitive turn in this area that can yield most fruit when it comes to these texts by showing the complexity and richness of “the diverse phenomenology and structural complexity of religious experience” (165).

Chapter 8 tackles the difficult question of what cognitive sciences can tell us about questions of morality by looking at questions of morality in New Testament texts. It

begins with the notion that the cognitive approach to morality will seek to understand “socially accepted codes of behavior” (186), some of which may have evolutionary explanations but others may not. The conclusions here are primarily negative or tentative and especially underscore yet again Czachesz’s notion of epigenetic causes for what we find in practice and in texts.

Chapter 9 seeks to bring together cognitive approaches with existing social analysis to talk about the spread of Christianity. Here Czachesz delves into the world of computer projections regarding social growth patterns. My only objection here—and it is a relatively minor one—is to the notion that “the resources of computer modeling provid[ing] scholars of the New Testament” is new and provides us “with hitherto unexplored opportunities to analyze texts” (202–3 and even more clearly on 206). This assertion seems to me to overlook some of the early work done in computer modeling in the New Testament by pioneers who are today often forgotten (e.g., John Hurd of Trinity College in Toronto and students working with him in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Still, Czachesz makes an important point about the potential value from more recent advances in computer modeling for a better and more refined approach to some of these long-standing questions and hopes.

Finally, in chapter 10 Czachesz draws some “hermeneutical reflections” from the variety of cognitive tools and approaches presented in his text. These are gathered into three categories: text as window, text as mirror, and text as image. Here Czachesz shows how the cognitive turn can build on and advance work in, respectively, social theory, reader-response theory, and narratology or rhetorical analysis. I was surprised that in this final chapter Czachesz did not draw more on some of the important conclusions that he had earlier alluded to in discussing the cognitive turn in New Testament texts. For example, in text as mirror, Czachesz could helpfully have shown how cognitive approaches advance the reader-response notion of readers “filling in blanks” in texts as they draw on memory, especially corporate, cultural memory, rather than individual imagination. In a work that Czachesz does not cite, Benjamin Bergen provides an example of how memory recall functions physiologically by discussing how the brain fills in the blanks during periods of silence when one would otherwise expect external stimuli, be they visual or auditory. Bergen writes:

If you’ve ever driven through a tunnel while listening to the radio, you know that when you’re listening to a song you know, as soon as the music cuts out, you spontaneously “hear” the music in your mind’s ear over the crackling of your radio. The brain activity measurements that the experiments took from the periods of silence showed ... activation in the brain areas responsible for audition The exact parts of the auditory system that were active during the periods of

silence depended upon how familiar the music was to the participant and whether it had lyrics—just as you use different but closely related brain regions to hear different types of sound, so you use different brain regions to imagine sound.¹

Perhaps this minor correction suggests yet one more example of how much more the cognitive turn will apply when it comes to its wider application in New Testament studies.

The book concludes with a very helpful bibliography that is quite complete (though see below), as well as subject and author indexes, both of which are very much appreciated in a book that can easily serve as a reference work for specific topics. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is no actual conclusion to the book, though, as noted, each chapter helpfully begins with a brief overview of the author's intended goal in that chapter and normally concludes with a summary of at least some of the material in the chapter.

As noted, the bibliography is quite complete. Not surprisingly, in a burgeoning field such as this in which new texts are appearing daily, the bibliography cannot include everything, and it seems clear that it does reflect Czachesz's preferred approaches and tools within cognitive approaches. Nevertheless, and only to illustrate my point, there is only one text reflective of the work of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, and there is no text by Steven Pinker, an author who is not only accessible to a wide readership but also highly significant for showing the cognitive turn in cognate disciplines. Other readers, either New Testament scholars or cognitive science specialists, may also find lacunae in the bibliography (as I have already noted above).

The English text is clear and the language easy to follow; grammatical and typographical errors are few, though surprisingly for an Oxford publication some errors have clearly escaped the editorial eye. In no way do these minor errors undermine the overall value of this important work. I can state unequivocally that this valuable text should obviously be in every library housing New Testament studies collections and that it should be consulted not only by those who are already convinced by the cognitive turn but also by those who may wonder why all the bother. For the latter, I suggest that they choose a chapter, read it, and think about the implications, for, in fact, that is how the mind works.

1. Benjamin K. Bergen, *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (New York: Basic, 2012), 35. I used Bergen's work, along with several of the authors cited by the author, in my "Methodology Underlying the Presentation of Visual Texture in the Gospel of John," in *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal, ESEC 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 89–120.