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Gary R. Habermas
Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

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John P. Meier and the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus

A Review Essay on *Companions and Competitors*

GARY R. HABERMAS
Department of Philosophy and Theology
Liberty University
Lynchburg, Virginia

Companions and Competitors. Volume 3 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. By John P. Meier. New York: Doubleday, 2001. 703 pages. $42.50.

The long awaited third volume of John P. Meier's set, *A Marginal Jew*, has finally appeared.[1] Meier explains that this text, entitled *Companions and Competitors*, was delayed for seven years, due to a number of serious illnesses and operations (xiii).

Meier opens his lengthy treatise by leveling a critique against researchers involved in the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus. This movement, characterized by many volumes published during the last few decades, is known chiefly for studying Jesus against the backgrounds of his own people. But Meier asks why, if this is the case, there has been such a "lack of focus on the Jewishness of Jesus and his relationships with other Jews" (3)? He continues his comments concerning the Third Quest: "But in most of these books, one searches in vain for detailed treatments of the various religious movements competing for influence in first-century Palestine" (3).

Meier informs his readers that his theme throughout is "the *relation* of the historical Jesus to various Jewish groups, be they followers or competitors" (489). His desire, then, is to study the person and groups in Jesus' life by their interaction with him, not as entities in themselves. Through these

[1] In-text citations refer to this volume.

associations, we can better determine Jesus' teachings, actions, and his other concerns, as well as his relations to others.

Accordingly, Meier attempts to remedy some of this lack in this present text. After his introduction, he devotes Part 1 to Jesus' relation to the crowds who heard him, his followers, and the twelve disciples. An additional chapter addresses what history tells us concerning each of the disciples, including the martyrdoms of a few of them.

In Part 2, Meier devotes rather lengthy treatments to Jesus' relationships with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and a few other groups. The material on the first two alone totals 200 pages of material. A conclusion ties together Jesus' relation to those around him, summarizing some of the major ideas throughout the volume, as well as mentioning the material that Meier intends to cover in his fourth and final volume in this set. Maps, charts, and three indices complete the present project.

Besides these topics, other key areas of interest include Jesus' teachings on the nature of discipleship (47-57, 64-8, 72-3, 80-2, 520-1, 627-8, 636), wealth (517-22, 636), his women followers (73-80, 630-1), and the centrality of God's Kingdom (248, 338, 438, 494, 624, 623, 633, 638). Each includes some thoughtful insights. For example, in none of the synoptic Gospels are Jesus' women followers ever referred to by the term "disciples," yet Meier concludes that they are still portrayed as such, especially by Luke (74-5, 631).

As carefully set forth in the first volume in this set, Meier's method here in reconstructing the historical Jesus is to apply five critical criteria to the appropriate Gospel texts: embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation, coherence, and what Meier calls rejection and execution (11-12). On an almost countless number of occasions, he pronounces his judgment that the Gospel texts have a greater or lesser probability of being historical, especially when they are confirmed by more than one of these criteria, or by more than one example of the same rule. Secondary criteria such as traces of Jesus' Aramaic sayings, hints of Jesus' first-century Palestinian environment, as well as other considerations, are also used as "confirmation for the primary criteria" (12).

One particularly valuable part of this book is the inclusion of an incredible array of endnotes. In fact, there are more than 250 pages of such notations, with three lengthy chapters (25, 26, 28) having almost an equal number of pages of text and endnotes. Many of these lengthy notations themselves suggest independent areas of research. Time and again, one muses over the command that Meier exhibits over an incredibly large body of data.

We have mentioned Meier's stated theme of treating first-century persons and groups not as entities in themselves, but chiefly to the extent that they relate to Jesus. However, it is still difficult to resist the observation that a fair portion of Meier's material consists of detailed descriptions of these

groups' various beliefs, customs, and backgrounds almost as ends in themselves. Unfortunately, it is therefore easy to get the impression that one is learning more about these groups than about Jesus himself. Another result is that one might read for dozens of pages before finding many ideas with which to interact critically. One major issue, in particular, will be pursued in some detail.

Meier repeatedly mentions that his method requires that we very carefully adhere to established historical research, building on a consensus of common conclusions (9-10, 625, 641, 646). This strategy is definitely a strength of his approach. But moving beyond this straightforward method, Meier is not shy about asserting that there is some (seldom detailed) separation of history from the conclusions of faith. In this volume, he continues this distinction, although only briefly. He thinks that we are only able to speak as historians, without appealing to theological matters (10). He repeats this admonition later with regard to Jesus' resurrection (625).

Meier provides an example of this division by separating Jesus' death, concerning which, as he says, "just about any quester . . . could agree," and the theological conclusion that Jesus died for our salvation (10). After all, the latter cannot be found as a component part of any historical fact. But is this sort of distinction always necessary in a strictly historical study?

If we were to agree with Meier and address only those matters pertaining to what historians can ascertain via their discipline, what would this require regarding, say, the Gospels' claims that Jesus performed miracles? Must we ignore the *historical* portion of these miracle claims? Obviously not, according to Meier, since he spends a good portion of his previous volume on this topic. He concludes that, while he cannot answer "on purely historical grounds" the attendant issue of whether Jesus actually did perform miracles, much can be said in favor of many Gospel miracle stories. In fact, Meier devotes hundreds of pages to the topic, concluding that in more than one-third of these accounts, we have "as much historical corroboration as almost any other statement we can make about the Jesus of history." So while the strict historical method, at least by itself, cannot determine that Jesus really performed miracles, we can conclude that many of these Gospel accounts themselves somehow describe or indicate "events that actually occurred in Jesus' lifetime."[2] In this volume, Meier continues to draw the same conclusion (643).

Similarly, certain early Christians *believed* that they saw the risen Jesus. Meier acknowledges that Paul (235), James the brother of Jesus (70), and certain other early disciples (232) all claimed to have seen Jesus after his

[2] See John P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994). The above quotes are from Meier's section "Summing Up the Gospel Miracles," 967-70.

death. He also postulates a few historical reconstructions regarding how these data were derived (139, 219-20, 235).

So, given that Meier hardly minds exploring the historical portion and grounding of the *claims* that certain miraculous events occurred, it is difficult to understand why he does not discuss other historically ascertainable aspects of the resurrection *belief and proclamation*. For example, virtually all contemporary scholars who comment on the matter agree with Meier that a number of early Christians thought they saw the risen Jesus.[3] And he is also correct that among the best reasons for believing this is a highly credible line of early historical reasoning based on the testimony of an eyewitness, the apostle Paul.[4]

But what is the best explanation for the early Christian belief that Jesus appeared? Minus any accompanying theological elements, just as Meier would have it, are there any *strictly historical* reasons to think that this really occurred? In its most simple form, this would involve two major historical questions: (1) Did Jesus die? (2) Was Jesus seen by his followers after his death?

Do any naturalistic theses explain these events? Interestingly enough, most critical scholars today reject these alternative hypotheses. So are there any reasons to believe that the disciples actually saw Jesus in the space-time world, after his death, without speculating any further concerning the *cause* of such occurrences, or what they might mean in theological terms? As with the miracle accounts in the Gospels, what can we conclude about the historical reliability of some of the better attested appearance traditions?

We can do no more than provide a few hints here, but applying Meier's criteria of multiple attestation, for example, both the appearance narratives and the early kerygmatic traditions fare quite well. That Jesus would rise from the dead is included in predictions in at least two sources: Mark (8:31-32; 9:31; 10:33-34) and John (2:18-22).[5] The appearances are reported in the sources reflected in Matthew 28:8-20, Luke 24:13-53, and John 20:10-29; 21:1-23. Early traditions in Acts provide additional testimony for the resurrection, since critical scholars often conclude that they may at least reflect primitive preaching.[6] But by far the most crucial text is Paul's kerygmatic list

[3] For a sampling see Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 162-3.

[4] In "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Actions in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 265-70, I provide nine lines of confirmation for Paul's testimony, the majority of which are based on the common consent of contemporary scholars.

[5] The sayings in Matthew 12:38-40 and 16:1-4 would also need to be addressed.

[6] Critical scholars include texts such as Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-24, 31; 3:13-15; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-41; 13:29-41; 17:31.

of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, acclaimed as such by virtually all scholars who study this topic. Jewish New Testament specialist Pinchas Lapide speaks for many critical scholars when he points out that Paul's formula "may be considered as a statement of eyewitnesses for whom the resurrection became the turning point of their lives."[7] This variety of textual attestation for Jesus' appearances is remarkable.

And what about the empty tomb? There is a widespread conviction among contemporary scholars that the empty tomb can be established as an ordinary historical fact. Are there any strictly historical data that allow us to ascertain if it contained Jesus' dead body?

Again, even the hints are intriguing. What if Meier's critical criteria also produced some strong evidence for the empty tomb, as perhaps even a majority of critical scholars have decided? The empty tomb tradition is reported in all of the five Gospel strata except Q. Many scholars think that the empty tomb is implied by Paul as the natural result of the sequence of (1) died, (2) buried, (3) raised, (4) appeared, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Another indicator is that of embarrassment. Female testimony received mixed reception in ancient Judaism, and in general, their word was not well received in most crucial situations. Yet all four Gospels report that women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb. Why is this the case if it were not so? Enemy attestation is found in reports that the Jewish leaders even admitted that the tomb was empty.[8] Another indication is the recognition that Jesus' disciples began their preaching in the city of Jerusalem, which is the last place for this to occur if the tomb was not empty, since it could have so easily been checked out.

For reasons like these, ancient historian Michael Grant asserts that "the historian . . . cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb." Grant concludes that "if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty."[9]

But in light of the general acknowledgment that the resurrection is the central New Testament claim regarding the historical Jesus, how can Meier devote hundreds of pages in the second volume to a discussion of Jesus' miracle accounts in the Gospels without a single detailed discussion of the historical aspects regarding the resurrection? But none is forthcoming either in this book or in Meier's projected contents for the fourth and final volume (645-6). The parallel between the miracle claims and the resurrection claims seems clear, especially when we honor Meier's methodological concerns

[7] Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1983), 99.

[8] Matt. 28:11-15; Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 108; Tertullian *On Spectacles* 30.

[9] Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 176.

pertaining to researching only those matters that may be ascertained by normal historical canons of evidence.

Some might think that these sorts of concerns are really quite parochial. But if the resurrection claim is central to New Testament faith (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:14, 17; 1 Peter 1:3-4), we must be wary of any attempt to banish the subject to backroom discussions of faith, removed from the rigors of history. I am reminded here of N.T. Wright's expressed cautions when addressing the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, another prominent scholar of the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus who also tends to separate the results of historical investigation from the transforming aspects of Christian faith. Wright takes Johnson to task for his stance, concluding that he separates fact from meaning. "I believe he speaks for a good many people both inside and outside the scholarly guild. If he is right, I am of course wasting both my time and yours. . . . [We] dare not allow the Christ of faith to float free from the Jesus of history."[10]

Of course, it may be objected, Meier cannot be guilty of this because his volumes prove his exceptional amount of interest in historical matters. But it must not be missed that Meier only seems to draw back from this emphasis when it comes to the most cherished conclusions of faith, such as the resurrection of Jesus. Might this not be seen in Meier's splendidly lengthy treatment of Jesus' miracle claims compared to the almost complete absence of any similar discussions concerning the resurrection claims, even when there are numerous historical footholds that beg to be developed? I may be mistaken, but the inference seems difficult to miss. The projected fourth volume, ending with a discussion of Jesus' death (646), seems to be short about one volume!

And once again, I want to be very clear that I readily agree with Meier about a methodology that centers only on matters of normal historical verification. My work on the New Testament resurrection claims is very similar. But it must not be missed that we can confirm a large portion of the strictly historical claims at the end of Jesus' life, without ever delving into causation or other theological claims. But here it is simply crucial that we stay on course: did Jesus die by crucifixion? And was Jesus verifiably seen a short time afterwards? To these two we may add a third: was the tomb in which Jesus was buried later discovered to be empty? Each of these questions involves several strictly historical issues.

A last and somewhat related issue concerns Meier's careful distinction between the real Jesus and the historical Jesus, with the latter being the result derived from modern historical research (9). Whatever one concludes concerning such a differentiation, it seems that in a later discussion, Meier has some trouble keeping his own distinction. In discussing a text in Mark, he

[10] N.T. Wright, "Looking Again for Jesus," *Stimulus* 4 (November 1996): 9.

mentions Jesus' *own* views, apparently calling this the position of the historical Jesus (443).

These caveats aside regarding Meier's limited disjunction pertaining to historical research and the New Testament accounts that his followers saw Jesus again after death, this is a masterful volume on the subject of Jesus' interactions with his contemporaries. The endnotes alone open many new vistas for future research projects. On these topics, I register few concerns. I can only largely applaud Meier's efforts.