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John P. Meier and the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus
A Review Essay on Companions and Competitors

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The long awaited third volume of John P. Meier’s set, A Marginal Jew, has finally appeared. 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.
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." 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

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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.”

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. 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.”

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


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.

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

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.”

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 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.

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