

# **The Exegetical Method of John P. Meier in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* Evaluating His Approach that Prescinds from Faith**

## **I. Introduction**

“Who do people say that I am?” (Mk 8:27). This question posed by Jesus Christ to his disciples along the road to Caesarea Philippi is still one that fascinates Christians and non-Christians alike to this day. For many people, the question of the historical Jesus poses a major challenge to their faith. The mere suggestion that events detailed in the Gospels may not have occurred exactly as the Evangelists wrote can cause some to seriously doubt the credibility of the Revelation expressed in particular Gospel pericopes.

This brief study in fundamental theology intends to investigate the theological method and the search for historicity in the writings of one of the late twentieth century’s most prolific and influential exegetes, John P. Meier. It will attempt to place Meier within the context of a contemporary third quest for the historical Jesus. After a study of the basic concepts of Meier’s methodology, we will be able to draw some conclusions as to the validity and ultimate value of his unique contribution to theology.

## **II. The Historical Context of the Third Quest**

Meier is researching the historical Jesus. By the term “historical Jesus,” Meier means “the Jesus whom we can recover, recapture or reconstruct by using the scientific tools of modern historical research.”<sup>1</sup> For Meier, the “historical Jesus” is different than the full reality that was Jesus of Nazareth as he lived in first century Palestine. The historical Jesus will always be “a scientific construct, a theological abstraction.”<sup>2</sup>

Some speak of a contemporary third quest for the historical Jesus. The first quest for the historical Jesus is said to have begun in the eighteenth century with the posthumous publication of Hermann Reimarus’ *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (between 1774-1778).<sup>3</sup> D. F. Strauss wrote *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1835-1836), which issued a

---

<sup>1</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 1: the Roots of the Problems and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Craig A. Evans, “Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 3-4.

clarion call for “unbiased” historical research on the life of Jesus. This was a “call based on the assumption that the Gospels could no longer be read straightforwardly as unvarnished historical records of what Jesus actually said and did.”<sup>4</sup>

The second quest was initiated by Albert Schweitzer’s important work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (1906). Schweitzer believed that the first quest had told us more about the authors engaged in the study than about the historical Jesus whom they sought to describe.<sup>5</sup> The focus on this second quest was on the teaching of Jesus with emphasis from Schweitzer on the eschatological and apocalyptic nature of the life of Jesus. Others, such as Martin Kähler in his study *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ* (1896), focused on the faith that the historical Jesus inspires. Later scholars like Rudolf Bultmann took this to mean that we should separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.<sup>6</sup>

The search for the historical Jesus was largely thought over until the mid-1950s, when exegetes such as Ernst Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm questioned whether or not one could truly be as skeptical as those writers of the First Quest about what could be known about the Jesus of history. This was largely a reaction to Bultmann. Eventually, scholars lost interest in this issue. Ben Witherington III comments: “It is fair to say that as the towering influence of Bultmann and the enthusiasm for existentialism began to wane so did the enthusiasm for the Second Quest, leaving the movement dead in the water by the early 1970s.”<sup>7</sup>

However, interest in the topic was rekindled by the 1980s and subsequently has been dubbed the “Third Quest” by some.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps fueled by archaeological and manuscript discoveries, new refinements in methodology and new interest in historical data, the topic seemed to have

---

<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. New Expanded Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> René Latourelle, “Rudolf Bultmann,” *The Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 88-91. There is a very fine introduction to the thought of Bultmann in Rino Fisichella, *La rivelazione: evento e credibilità*. 6<sup>a</sup> edizione riveduta e corretta (1997) (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1985), 201-215.

<sup>7</sup> Witherington, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Most attribute the phrase “Third Quest” to N.T. Wright from a lecture from 1986 as referenced by Mark Goodacre, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7 (2000): 156-61; although according to Goodacre, Mark Allen Powell in *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ*, (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999) puts the date to 1992.

emerged again in the last two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Like the first quest, it can sometimes seem that the work is more revelatory of the scholar's own interest and personality than the Jesus who can be known through history and scripture. This research into the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth can either be as subjective and ridiculous as the Jesus Seminar's voting on the historicity of Gospel pericopes by dropping colored beads,<sup>10</sup> or as well documented and grounded as E. P. Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism*.<sup>11</sup> Depending on whom one reads, Jesus of Nazareth might be portrayed as an itinerant cynic philosopher (J.D. Crossan), a "man of the spirit" (Marcus Borg), a prophet calling for social change (Gerd Theissen), or an early feminist (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza).<sup>12</sup>

### III. John P. Meier in Context

One self-described "quester" is John P. Meier, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York. Currently, he is the William K. Warren Professor of Theology at Notre Dame University, Indiana.<sup>13</sup> In 1990, Meier began his massive and still incomplete work for the *Anchor Bible Reference Library* (later the *Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library*) entitled *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. It is envisioned as a five-volume project. The first volume's subtitle is "The Roots of the Problem and the Person" (1991). In this volume, Meier lays out his methodology and the vast scope of his project. Here, Meier warns his readers not to expect the creation of a "Life of Jesus" in his volumes. He writes: "To use either John or the Synoptics as a chronologically reliable grid for the discrete events of the public ministry is to confuse theological artistry with historical fact."<sup>14</sup> The subtitle of the second volume is "Mentor, Message and Miracles," and the focus is on the role of John the Baptist in the life of Jesus; the Kingdom of God as the central message preached by Jesus; and the historicity of the Gospel miracles.<sup>15</sup> Solely using

<sup>9</sup> Witherington, 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-52. The Jesus Seminar was convened in 1985 by Robert Funk as a project of the Westar Institute and consisted of over 200 scholars of various fields and denominations. For a detailed explanation of the Seminar, please see <http://virtualreligion.net/forum/index.html> (accessed on December 2, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-132. See also E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. (Norwich: SCM Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Many of these classifications are taken from Witherington's *The Jesus Quest*'s chapter titles.

<sup>13</sup> University of Notre Dame, "John P. Meier," Faculty, <http://theology.nd.edu/people/faculty/john-p-meier/> (accessed October 25, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> *MJ*, vol. 1, 408-409.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning the historicity of Gospel miracles according to Meier, I urge the reader to read *MJ*, vol. 2, 970: "In sum, the statement that Jesus acted as and was

the historical-critical method, Meier, in summary, states: “Indeed, as a global affirmation about Jesus and his ministry it [the working of miracles] has much better attestation than many other assertions made about Jesus, assertions that people often take for granted.”<sup>16</sup> Volume three, published in 2001, bears the subtitle “Companions and Competitors,” and studies Jesus in light of his followers as well as the Scribes, Pharisees and other key groups in first century Palestine. Meier pays special consideration to the very Jewish nature of these relationships. The fourth volume, subtitled “Law and Love,” was published in 2009 and focuses on Jesus’ teachings on the Mosaic Law and his commandment to love given to his followers. Meier is still working on his fifth and final volume in this series. In his fifth book, he plans to study “the three final enigmas of the historical Jesus: the riddle-speech of his parables, the riddle-speech of his self-designations... and the final riddle of his death.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Ben Witherington III, “Meier’s work is characterized by cautious and careful detailed argumentation.”<sup>18</sup> This puts him in great reaction to the subjectivity of many publications in the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus. He is the only one of his generation to devote an entire volume to his methodology before delving into discussions about the historical Jesus. Meier’s work has garnered critical praise in several circles. P.J. Achtemeier describes it as “a balanced presentation...a new standard against which all future studies of this kind will have to be measured.”<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky is quoted as calling Meier’s first volume “the guide on the quest for the historical Jesus.”<sup>20</sup> Pope Benedict XVI mentions *A Marginal Jew* as “a model of historical-critical exegesis, in which the significance and the limits of the methods emerge clearly.”<sup>21</sup>

---

viewed as an exorcist and healer during his public ministry has as much historical corroboration as almost any other statement we can make about the Jesus of history.” He further writes: “Any historian who seeks to portray the historical Jesus without giving due weight to his fame as a miracle-worker is not delineating this strange and complex Jew, but rather a domesticated Jesus reminiscent of the bland moralist created by Thomas Jefferson (*MJ*, 970).

<sup>16</sup> *MJ*, vol. 2, 970.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Witherington, 197.

<sup>19</sup> P. J. Achtemeier, cover jacket of *MJ*, vol. 1 as quoted in Roch Kereszty, “Historical Research, Theological Inquiry, and the Reality of Jesus: Reflections on the Method of J.P. Meier,” *Communio* 19, (1992): 576.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 366. Clearly, Meier, due to his careful methodology and pain-staking application of the historical-critical method, is in a very different category than others who have published their studies at the same time. He does not, in my opinion, attempt to

#### IV. The Premise of *A Marginal Jew*

Meier is researching the historical Jesus. For Meier, as stated earlier, the “historical Jesus” is different than the full reality that was Jesus of Nazareth as he lived in first century Palestine. The method used by Meier has a simple rule: it must prescind from what the Christian faith or later Church teachings declare about Jesus. The exegete/historian is careful not to affirm or deny any such claims.<sup>22</sup>

In order to arrive at the Jesus that historical research can acclaim, Meier proposes the fantasy of “an unholy conclave.”<sup>23</sup> If four scholars, a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew and an agnostic (all of whom are “honest” historians) were locked inside the basement of Harvard Divinity School and forced to create a consensus document on the Jesus of history, what would they say? No statements of faith or ecclesial doctrine could enter into the discussion. The resulting document would please no one group in particular. All facts used have to be open to verification through modern historical and scientific research.<sup>24</sup>

The key for Meier is to be an “honest” historian. According to him, this is required in order to find out the identity and the intentions of Jesus in his own day. He is aware that it is difficult, if not impossible, to come to objectivity. It is, for Meier, an “asymptotic goal,” borrowing the language of Karl Rahner.<sup>25</sup> All scholars, in some way, write from some ideological point of view. This appeal to a certain *Tendenz* simply cannot be avoided. “There is no neutral Switzerland of the mind in the world of Jesus research.”<sup>26</sup> Meier holds that in order to be an “honest historian,” all religious faith would have to be set aside in order to come to objectivity.

In my own case, I must candidly confess that I work out of a Catholic context. My greatest temptation, therefore, will be to read back anachronistically the expanded universe of later Church teaching into the “big bang” moment of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In what follows I will try my best to bracket what I hold by faith and examine only what can be shown to be certain or probable by historical research and

---

“create a Jesus,” as do so many others, to fit an ideology. In fact, it is his strict application of the historical-critical method, his method of “complete objectivity,” without recourse to faith and magisterium, that can lead his readers to have more questions in the end about the historical Jesus than they did at the beginning.

<sup>22</sup> Meier, *MJ* vol. 1, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> By definition, an asymptotic goal is one that approaches, but never quite meets its ultimate goal.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

logical argumentation. I hope non-Catholic scholars in particular will point out where I may fail to observe my own rules by reading Catholic theology into the quest. At the same time, Catholic readers of this book should not be upset by my holding to a strict distinction between what I know about Jesus by research and reason and what I hold by faith.<sup>27</sup>

## V. The Problem with Meier's Methodology

Meier believes that this practice of exegesis without faith is fully within the Catholic tradition, and he appeals to St. Thomas Aquinas in order to defend his position. He states: "Thomas Aquinas distinguishes carefully between what can be known by reason and what we affirm by faith." He adds: "This book remains in the relevance in the prior realm, while, of course, not denying the relevance of investigations into the historical Jesus for faith and theology."<sup>28</sup>

Is Meier's task "to be an honest historian" even possible? Every human being brings to any discussion his or her own personal worldview.<sup>29</sup> This is no less true when it comes to Sacred Scripture. Human experience is a key part of the theological enterprise and our own personal adherence to faith must factor in when studying and discussing the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

In his attempt at complete academic honesty, it can seem that there is a great dichotomy between faith and reason. On the relationship between faith and reason, Blessed John Paul II, quoting the *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 1, remarked: "Thomas had the great merit of giving pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason. Both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God, he argued; hence, there can be no contradiction between them."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Pope states: "Faith (...) has no reason to fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. Just as grace builds upon nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> One might refer to Bernard Lonergan's "Principle of the Empty Head" (*Method in Theology*, 157) as an apt description of the 'ideal' of not bringing any preconceived notions to the interpretation of a text.

<sup>30</sup> See Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 235-247.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*: AAS 41 (1999), no. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Meier staunchly attempts to remain “unbiased” and even comments with surprise at “how militantly untheological *A Marginal Jew* is.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, this is not always the case within the methodology of Meier in his text. After establishing sets of criteria for determining the historicity of Gospel pericopes in his first volume,<sup>34</sup> Meier begins to use them to evaluate passages from the Gospels. Yet, midway through his first volume in order to prove a point, he “doffs for a moment the hat of an exegete using merely historical-critical methods, and puts on the hat of a theologian.”<sup>35</sup> For one who wishes to be an “honest historian,” Meier reverts to being a theologian to enforce his point.

This subjectivity on the part of Meier’s methodology is troubling. Rino Fisichella comments:

We note an underlying sense of fideism or subjectivism which leads to separating the faith of the more simple who, as such, have no need of the historical Jesus, from the faith of the theologians which instead requires research of this kind. The work of the theologian is not a solipsistic investigation into the ruins of the past, but serves to provide the believing community with an increasingly better understanding of the mystery of faith, for which research into the historical Jesus is essential.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult for Meier to live up to the neutral impartiality he wishes to apply in his methodology. It appears, at times, that he is inconsistent in keeping history and theology separate. This is witnessed most especially in the first volume of *A Marginal Jew* in Meier’s treatment of the virginity of Mary which is neither affirmed or denied but is considered to be “obscure from the historical point of view.”<sup>37</sup> He further states “taken by itself, historical-critical research simply does not have the sources and tools available to reach a final decision on the historicity of the virginal conception narrated by Matthew and Luke.”<sup>38</sup> Later on in his first volume, Meier

---

<sup>33</sup> Meier, “*A Marginal Jew - Retrospective and Prospective*,” *Archbishop Gerety Lectures 1992-1993* (South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>34</sup> Meier, *MJ* vol. 1, 167-168. The five primary criteria consist of embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation, coherence and rejection and execution. The five secondary criteria are traces of Aramaic, Palestinian environment, vividness of narration, the developing Synoptic tradition and historical presumption. An alternative criteria for historicity can be found in Francesco Lambiasi, *L'autenticá storica dei vangeli: Studio di criteriologia*, 2<sup>a</sup> edizione riveduta e aggiornata (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniana Bologna, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 197. This is noticed and commented on in Rino Fisichella, review of *A Marginal Jew, Volume 1* in *Biblica* 74 (1993): 126.

<sup>36</sup> Fisichella in *Biblica* 74 (1993): 126.

<sup>37</sup> Meier, *MJ* vol. 1, 230.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

determines as an exegete “prescinding from faith and later Church teaching”<sup>39</sup> that *adelphos* means blood brothers and sisters of Jesus without regard for the dogmatic consequences of this judgment. It is interesting that he will make a judgment on one aspect of Marian doctrine (virgin birth) but not another (the relatives of Jesus and perpetual virginity of Mary). It is this inconsistency that can cause the reader to question his hermeneutic and his judgment.

Fisichella, making an excellent observation concerning Meier’s understanding of faith as a possible form of truth, writes: “Meier seems to think that it is only by sidestepping faith – understood as non-historical knowledge – that one can reach the historic truth expressed by the texts.”<sup>40</sup> Meier’s project, a work firmly entrenched in the historical critical method, seems to misunderstand what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council describe about the method: “(t)he interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture” (DV 12). The Gospels are not merely possible historical documents; they are intended by their authors to be expressions of faith in Jesus Christ reflective of their particular communities.<sup>41</sup> Meier does not seem to respect the Gospels within their genre as Gospel<sup>42</sup> and thus is entering into his own study incorrectly.

## VI. Conclusion

Meier’s *A Marginal Jew* is an impressive work in its scope and in its subject. His prime contribution for theology will be his ten-fold criteria for the determination of the historicity of a Gospel pericope. However, it is the sheer epistemological impossibility of the task he sets forth that causes the fatal error in his choice of a strictly rationalistic methodology. The weakness of *A Marginal Jew* is not that Meier’s approach limits itself from an opposition to faith, but that he has chosen a methodological separation of reason from faith in the interpretation of the Gospels. The exegete need not be in opposition to the theologian. His subject matter is both a historical fact and an object of faith.<sup>43</sup> In an attempt to arrive at an understanding of who Jesus is, one cannot set aside faith and rely on reason alone. In fact, Jesus of Nazareth himself, the object of this particular study, demanded a response of

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Fisichella in *Biblica* 74 (1993):128.

<sup>41</sup> For Biblical references, please see the following New Testament texts: John 20:31, Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

faith from his contemporaries. As the object of research, Jesus himself makes a methodological separation of faith and reason untenable. The Scriptures, as part of Divine Revelation, call for us to read and interpret them through a methodology that takes into consideration not only the historical-critical method, but also a lens of faith. Until Meier is able to reconcile his methodology to account for the faith expressed in the Gospels, the value of his work will be limited.

Rev. John P. Cush, S.T.L.

Diocese of Brooklyn

S.T.D. candidate

The Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), Rome

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Dulles, Avery. "Historians and the Reality of Christ." *First Things* 28. December, 1992: 20-25.

Evans, Craig A. "Life of Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology." *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 3-36.

Fisichella, Rino. *La rivelazione: evento e credibilità*. 6ª edizione riveduta e corretta. Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane Bologna, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Review of *A Marginal Jew*." *Biblica* 74 (1993): 123-129.

Goodacre, Mark. "The Quest to Digest Jesus: Recent Books on the Historical Jesus." *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7 (2000): 156-61.

Jesus Seminar Forum. "A Gateway to the Research of the Jesus Seminar." <http://virtualreligion.net/forum/index.html> [accessed December 4, 2012].

John Paul II. Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*: AAS 41 (1999). 5-88.

Kereszty, Roch. "Historical Research, Theological Inquiry, and the Reality of Jesus: Reflections on the Method of J.P. Meier." *Communio* 19 (1992): 576-600.

Lambiasi, Francesco. *L'autenticà storica dei vangeli: Studio di criteriologia*, 2ª edizione riveduta e aggiornata. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniana Bologna, 1986.

Latourelle, René. "Rudolf Bultmann." In *The Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, 88-91. New York: Crossroads, 1994.

Meier, John P. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Marginal Jew- Retrospective and Prospective." *Archbishop Gerety Lecture 1992-1993*. South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 2: Mentor, Message and Miracles*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 3: Companions and Competitors*. Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 4: Law and Love*. Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

Nichols, Aidan. *The Shape of Catholic Theology*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.

Powell, Mark Allen. *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ*. Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999.

Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Trans. Adrian Walker. New York: Doubleday, 2007. (German original: *Jesus von Nazareth. Erster Teil. Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*. Freiburg: Herder, 2007.)

Sanders, E. P. *Jesus and Judaism*. Norwich: SCM Press, 1975.

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra Gentiles. Editio Leonina Manualis*. Romae: Libreria Vaticana, 1934. (English Translation: *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, Trans with notes and introd. Anton C. Pegis. London/Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.)

University of Notre Dame. "John P. Meier." Faculty. <http://theology.nd.edu/people/faculty/john-p-meier/> (accessed October 25, 2012).

Witherington III, Ben. *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth. New Expanded Edition*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997.