

John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. V. Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven, CT – London: Yale University Press 2016). Pp. 464. \$ 65. ISBN 978-0-300-21190-0

### Marcin Walczak

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

marwal8@wp.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8189-6392>

John Paul Meier, Professor Emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, is a renowned exegete and one of the leading figures in the study of historical Jesus. He is also a Catholic clergyman. Meier's research interests, apart from the figure of historical Jesus, include the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, Second Temple Judaism and Christology of the New Testament. He is the author of several articles and many books. In applying critical-historical methods, he remains a student of Raymond Brown, with whom he wrote the highly regarded book *Antioch and Rome. New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press 2004). Meier's greatest achievement, however, is the monumental, multi-volume work *A Marginal Jew*, the first volume of which was published in 1991, and the next ones are still being written ([New York: Yale University Press 1991–2009] I–IV). This powerful book is one of the most important reference points for all Jesus Quest researchers. Meier's work is simply impressive with its panache and at the same time scientific solidity, reliability and meticulousness, so that one must agree with Benedict XVI, who, in his *Jesus of Nazareth. I. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday 2007), pointed to Meier's work as a model example of the historical-critical method.

The newest, fifth volume of *A Marginal Jew* deals with the parables of Jesus. This issue is not a flashpoint in the discussion of historical Jesus. Many scholars take it for granted that most of the parables in the canonical Gospels come from Jesus. It is even believed that they are almost the surest source that can be used to reach His authentic teaching. Both more conservative scholars and members of Jesus Seminar, led by John Dominic Crossan, agree that parables are key and reliable material in reaching the message of historical Jesus. They only differ in interpretation of their meaning. No wonder that in the last century exegetes devoted much attention to parables, analyzing them in detail, and – at least in their own opinion – thus reaching the authentic message of Jesus. Meier's book does not lack references to this rich exegetical tradition, including the works of two of the most famous exegetes of the parables, Joachim Jeremias and Charles Dodd. However, for all those who expect parables to provide some revolutionary material for reaching the historical Jesus, John Paul Meier has a truly bitter answer. In his opinion the parables, firstly, do not constitute the key

material that would add much to the historically reconstructed image of Jesus, and secondly, in many cases it is impossible to say whether they come directly from Jesus at all. Of the many parables in the synoptic Gospels, Meier mentions only four that can be attributed with a high degree of certainty to Jesus.

Before we get into what these four parables are and why there are so few of them, let us examine the structure of the book. It consists of an introduction, four extensive chapters and a summary. Each chapter ends with an extensive set of footnotes, which – despite some inconvenience – are worth reading. As usual in *A Marginal Jew*, they are stuffed to the brim not only with bibliographic references, but also with interesting analyzes carried out, as it were, next to the main thread of the chapter. The book ends with an Appendix in the form of an extensive bibliography on the parable of Jesus. In addition, the reader receives maps of Palestine and Galilee from the time of Jesus, the family tree of the Herods, a list of Roman emperors from the 1st century, and relevant indexes.

In the introduction (pp. 1–29), Meier introduces the reader to his basic assumptions that accompany him in writing a multi-volume work on historical Jesus. The author also initially sketches the problem of parables and their role in Jesus' Quest. Meier's strategy is as follows: first he presented some general framework for Jesus' life and mission (v. 1), then he focused on the fundamental dimensions of his public life, i.e. on preaching the kingdom and performing miraculous signs, also grounding Jesus' ministry in the mission of His master and predecessor, John the Baptist (v. 2). In the third volume, Meier focused on the attitude of various groups of people to Jesus, ranging from His disciples to various groups of His opponents. The fourth volume of the work examines Jesus' relationship to the Jewish Law. Only after all this, says Meier, can we move on to the parables. Otherwise, according to the author, their exegesis remains in a void and is prone to wishful thinking, as in Marxist, liberal or feminist interpretations, but also in mocking preaching (at which Meier laughs several times). It is worth paying attention to the presentation of the criteria that constitute the backbone of the author's methodology. Although the criteria themselves have been known since the publication of the first volume, it is worth refreshing this issue once again. And find out that, according to Meier, in the vast majority of cases it is difficult to apply any criterion other than multiple attestation to the parable. It is also worth noting that Meier understands the concept of a parable quite narrowly and precisely. They are therefore narrative stories, not mere metaphors or comparisons used by Jesus.

Chapter 37 (numbering begins with the first volume) is a collection of Meier's seven theses on the parables (pp. 30–81). The author describes his theses as unfashionable, wanting to emphasize that in assessing the sense of the parables, their context and historical origin, he differs from the vast majority of contemporary researchers of the issue. The first thesis is that no one knows for sure how many parables are in the Gospels. The very concept of a parable is blurred, and in addition there is the way of counting these stories that appear in several Gospels (e.g. if the parables of mines and talents are two or one parable). Contrary to common "obviousness," Meier states: "scholars generally do not agree on what constitutes a parable of Jesus" (p. 35). In the second thesis, Meier rejects the belief that

Jesus' parables fit Him in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. It is the way of teaching in parables that some scholars use to conclude that Jesus was, above all, a sage, and perhaps even a philosopher. Meier, meanwhile, states that there is no strong analogy between the wisdom literature and the parables of the Master of Nazareth. So what is the real context of Jesus' parables? It is the prophetic tradition (and this is the third thesis). Also, in telling parables, Jesus remains first and foremost a prophet of Israel. The fourth thesis is therefore straightforward: "The Synoptic Jesus who tells narrative parables stands primarily not in the sapiential but in the prophetic tradition of the Jewish Scriptures" (p. 40). The fifth thesis is that it is impossible to give a specific definition of a parable that would suit every case. The sixth thesis says that the Gospel of Thomas is not, contrary to what many scholars say, an independent source of sayings of Jesus, including the parables, but is completely dependent on the Synoptics. Finally, the seventh thesis states that very few parables can be attributed with high probability to the historical Jesus. A clear lecture in the form of seven theses undoubtedly gives the reader a good starting point for further reading. Meier remains a master of systematization and scientific rigor. It is also worth paying attention to the addition to the chapter, in which the author explains the meaning of the concept of allegory and its connection with the concept of a parable – all based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In chapter 38 (pp. 89–188) Meier extensively analyzes the question of the parables in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. Such a reliable treatment of this issue results from the context of contemporary trends in research on historical Jesus. As we know, sometimes great importance is attached to the *Gospel of Thomas*, even trying to date it to the times of the creation of the synoptic Gospels. Researchers from the circle of Jesus Seminar are even inclined to believe that it is in Thomas that we can refer to the authentic words of Jesus, which in the Synoptics are already more strongly modified. Meier distances himself from such views. However, it does not stop at a simple denial, but takes into account specific texts of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* – both those containing parables and others. He patiently proves that Thomas, despite his truly unique role among the apocrypha, cannot be a purer source of historical research on Jesus than the canonical Gospels. The text of Thomas depends at every step on the Synoptics, whose material he works through in his own proto-Gnostic spirit. Ultimately: "In every single case, both inside and outside the parable tradition, no matter what the literary genre or content, we have found it more likely than not that Thomas displays sings of some sort dependence on the Synoptic material" (p. 146). It is impressive how reliable and thorough analysis Meier carried out to prove this.

Since the *Gospel of Thomas* has fallen aside as an independent source of the parable, what is left for us? Meier goes in chapter 39 (pp. 189–229) to analyze all parables in search of candidates for the title of a parabola that certainly comes from Jesus himself. This does not mean, however, that the author analyzes in detail the content of each of several dozen parables. The entire chapter is structured in the key of the multiple attestation criterion, as, according to Meier, it is the most fruitful for the search for the authentic parables of Jesus. So we have first the parables from the Gospel of Mark listed and discussed, then with Q,

then the parables from Matthew's own sources and finally Luke. What conclusions does Meier draw from this comparison? First, we see that Mark's parables, not surprisingly, also appear in Matthew and Luke. The same is true, which is basically a truism, with the parables of Q. So it is difficult to speak of these texts being based on several independent sources. On the other hand, the own parables of Matthew and Luke do not appear anywhere else, and they are endowed with a strong outline of the style and theology of the Evangelists (and some of them are directly created by them, as Meier states about the parable of the Good Samaritan). All of this does not mean – as Meier emphasizes many times – that these parables certainly do not come from the historical Jesus. Most often it means that it is simply impossible to prove it, nor can the opposite be proved. Most of the parables end up in Meier's *non liquet* sphere. But what are the exceptions? Meier lists four parables which are worth considering as having, let's call it, potential for authenticity. These are: the parable of the Mustard Seed (as it appears in both Mark and Q), the parable of the Evil Tenants of the Vineyard (under the criterion of embarrassment), the parable of the Great Supper and the parable of Talents/Pounds (as derived from various sources of Matthew and Luke).

The climax of Meier's analysis we found in chapter 40 with the telling title "The Few, The Happy Few" (pp. 230–362). John Paul Meier examines in more detail the four parables that claim to be authentic. As for the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32; Matt 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19) the matter is relatively simple. The decisive criterion here is multiple attestation. The story of a seed that, although small, produces a large plant, can be found in both Mark and Q, a version of which is used by the other Synoptics. The meaning of the parable is, according to Meier, very simple: In the near future the spectacular kingdom of God will come, but it is present in the seed right now, in the ministry and teaching of Jesus (p. 239). The case of the parable of the Evil Tenants of the Vineyard is interesting (Mark 12:1-11; Matt 21:33-43; Luke 20:9-18). It comes from only one source, which is Mark. Nevertheless, Meier considers it authentic, referring to the criterion of embarrassment. What is so scandalous about this parable that it cannot be attributed to any of the Post-Easter Christians? Well, Meier proves that the ending of the parable in the form of Jesus' dialogue with his listeners, about the retaliation of the vineyard administrator and the fact that the rejected son will become the cornerstone, is a later addition, which does not belong to the parable in a strict sense. Thus, the original version of the parable ends with a poor fate of a butchered son sent to a vineyard. According to Meier, Jesus tells this parable about himself, anticipating his possible fate. The negative ending, without reference to the resurrection, allows us to estimate according to the exegete that the parable actually comes from the mouth of Jesus himself. Two subsequent parables, i.e. the one about the Great Supper (Matt 22:2-14; Luke 14:16-24) and the one about Talents/Pounds (Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27) meet the criterion of multiple attestation, for, as Meier argues, their versions differ so much that it must be recognized that each of the Evangelists used their own separate sources. Both parables fit well with the overall context of Jesus' teaching, as Meier reconstructs it.

At the end (pp. 363–376), Meier briefly presents his conclusions, referring once again to his seven theses presented at the beginning of the volume. So we read that parables are

not a sure path to reach the words of the historical Jesus. It is true that many of them may come from him, but only in four cases it can be argued. The polemic with the “aesthetic” argument, which often works in relation to the parable, seems to be right and accurate. Some people think it is enough to say that they feel that a parable suits Jesus because it is somehow particularly beautiful and touching. That kind of argument has no place in scientific research. This is one of the reasons why Meier dealt so ruthlessly with the parable of the Good Samaritan, beloved for many, revealing it as a construct of Luke.

In the end, the author leaves us without any satisfaction if we expected spectacular discoveries after the next volume of *A Marginal Jew*. It turns out that the parables are of less historical value and constitute a very shaky ground when it comes to discovering the details of Jesus’ historical message. Meier, in his ruthless research integrity, does not care whether we like this conclusion or not. He remains true to his critical assumptions because, as he states, “trying to be just a little bit critical is like trying to be just a little bit pregnant” (p. 230). Is Meier’s radical skepticism a bit of an exaggeration at times? The author can be accused of focusing very strongly on only one of his criteria, i.e. on the criterion of multiple attestation. One would like to read detailed analyzes of other parables than the four selected parables, look for something in terms of different criteria. Meier, however, goes constrained and decides that we won’t find anything. The parables of Jesus in the Gospels resemble those of biblical prophets, then they are continued in rabbinical parables. It cannot be shown that their character proves their descent from Jesus himself. In most cases, guesswork and premonitions remain – but this is no longer a scientific space. Meier’s reflection is bitter and hard to accept, because one would like more positive conclusions and discoveries. To all those who would very much like the known parables of the kind about the Prodigal Son to come from Jesus, Meier replies by shaking his head. Jesus was teaching his disciples in parables – that’s for sure. But He certainly taught them also how to teach in parables. So, do the parables we read in the Gospels come from Him or from them? In the vast majority of cases we simply do not know that.

For people who appreciate revolutionary and “unmasking” Jesus Quest propositions, Meier may seem tiresome with each volume more and more. However, his scientific rigor, meticulous diligence and maximal criticism and skepticism make it very difficult to argue with him. Although *A Marginal Jew* will never reach the popularity of sensational, sometimes para-scientific books about “real” Jesus, it is Meier’s work that will influence an authentic research on the historical Jesus for decades. Readers who prefer reliability over controversy can only hope that age and health will allow the author to publish the promised two remaining volumes – about the Christological titles in the Gospels and, last but definitely not least, about the death of Jesus.

