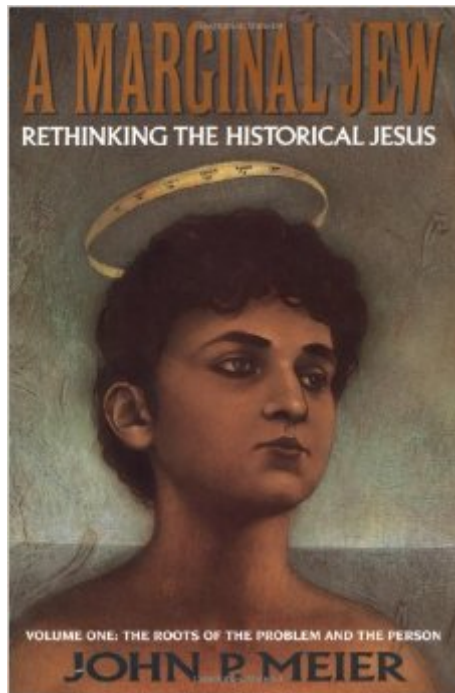


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A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus: The Roots Of The Problem And The Person, Vol. 1



Synopsis

In this definitive book on the real, historical Jesus, one of our foremost biblical scholars meticulously sifts the evidence of 2,000 years to portray neither a rural magician nor a figure of obvious power, but a marginal Jew.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John Meier's "A Marginal Jew" is the leading study of the historical Jesus of our time.

Notwithstanding three sizeable volumes the work is still incomplete, but this reputation is clearly well-deserved. The first volume only deals with the basic contours of his life, but it is the most intelligent discussion of these questions available. Meier, a Catholic priest, reminds us that the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. For a start we have a radical shortage of information of information about all but a few people in classical times, and Jesus is not one of those lucky few. What he has presented is what a spectrum of theologians and historians would conclude about Jesus if they were forced to provide a basic consensus. So Meier starts with the sources for Jesus' life, which basically consists of the Gospels. There is a long, thorough discussion of the reference to Jesus in Josephus, from which Meier agrees with most scholars is mostly genuine, with several obvious Christian interpolations. He then discusses other sources, which reveal a very meagre crop. There is Tacitus' reference to Christians, nothing of value in the Talmud, as well as a thorough deflation of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. Thomas consists of sayings, many of which resemble

those in the Gospels. But Thomas' sayings are simpler, and many have concluded that they are more primitive and therefore earlier than the canonical gospels. Meier disagrees. He points that one reason Thomas' order of sayings does not resemble the synoptic gospels is because many of them were remembered orally, not because they preceded them. He also points out one reason Thomas' sayings appear simpler is because the Gnostic concerns of the author/editor has pared away those elements of the original Gospel saying that were too clear or too eschatological for the author's taste. We then get a discussion of the criteria for deciding what comes from Jesus; embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation and providing a motive for Jesus' execution. We then turn to Jesus' actual life himself. We start off with a discussion of his name, and then we have a discussion of the infancy narratives. Notwithstanding the fact that Meier is a Catholic priest, by the time he is finished there is not much left of them, or the doctrine of Jesus' virginal conception. The narratives are inaccurate about precisely those childbirth rituals that Mary, the presumed source, would have to know. Both Matthew and Luke use questionable historical elements (the Massacre of the Innocents in Matthew, unattested to by any other source, the census in Luke that could not have happened at the time Luke gives) and give clearly different routes of Joseph and Mary to and from Nazareth and Bethlehem. Even more disconcerting is Meier's later discussion of Jesus' siblings, of which there were at least four brothers and two sisters. For centuries Catholics, seeking to preserve both the eternal virginity of Joseph and Mary, have sought to argue that the references in the gospels to brothers are really to his cousins. This is based on the idea that Hebrew does not distinguish between the two terms. Of course the gospels were written in Greek, which does distinguish the two. Nor were the authors of the New Testament woodenly translating Jesus' Aramaic into Greek. After all Paul refers to brother(s) of the Lord in both Galatians and Corinthians, where he is writing originally in Greek. Josephus refers to James the brother of Jesus, even though he could and did distinguish between brother and cousin. Moreover statements by Jesus such as "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother," (Matt 12:50) lose their force if the term for sibling is replaced by cousin. The safest assumption is that Jesus' siblings were Mary's children. (It has been argued that they were actually her stepchildren, being Joseph's from a previous marriage. Elsewhere Meier has written while this is not impossible, it is not supported by the gospels--where there is no clear use of the term "stepbrother"--and it is based on a late source, the second century Protoevangelium of James which is patently inaccurate about many Jewish rituals. What is gratuitously asserted can be gratuitously denied.) Was Jesus illegitimate, as some scholars have speculated? No, the simplest explanation for references to Jesus as "Mary's son," was because the speaker wished to assert Jesus' ordinariness by referring to his ordinary

parents. Mary was right near by and Joseph was presumably already dead. Was he married? No again, since while it was unusual, it was not unprecedented, as we can see from the examples of Jeremiah, the Essenes and John the Baptist. What language did Jesus speak? Almost certainly Aramaic, says Meier. If a cosmopolitan author like Josephus had trouble with Greek, it is not likely that the Greek of a marginal villager like Jesus was likely to be any better. Archaeological evidence has confirmed this sceptical attitude towards mass hellenization, as helpfully summarized in James Dunn's "Jesus Remembered." Jesus was probably literate and he was probably a layman. When did Jesus die? Most likely on April 7, 30 CE. He was executed on the eve of Passover. Meier is thorough on all matters but he is especially illuminating on why John, the most mystical Gospel is more accurate on this point than the synoptics. For they claim Jesus was executed on Passover. The answer is that the passage on Mark is a later addition, which we can see by comparison with the surrounding passage, and which Luke and Matthew unfortunately copied. Such is the conclusion to Meier's first volume, the beginning of a most scrupulous, scholarly and well-read journey indeed.

Every once in a while, public attention turns to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A few years ago, it was the "Jesus Seminar." Lately, Dan Brown's book THE DA VINCI CODE sparked some interest, particularly among the conspiracy minded. The impression that many people have is that the conventional story about Jesus is wrong, and the more established churches don't want you to know it. What many people haven't been told is that there is a large body of work in recent years which is supportive of the historical accuracy of the Gospels. One such work is John Meier's series A MARGINAL JEW. Meier is a Catholic priest who teaches at Notre Dame. In 1991 he came out with the first volume. It might not be the first book you want to read on the subject, but it's a work that anyone interested in the historical Jesus should tackle. Volume two and three are out, and a fourth and final volume is promised. Meier's work is nothing if not comprehensive. Volume 1 describes the sources for the life of Jesus, the historicity of those sources, the chronology of Jesus' life, and his background (his family, what languages he spoke, whether he could read, and the like). Meier is particularly good on some of the supposed sources for Jesus' life, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter. As he shows, careful analysis of these documents indicates that they are later than and rely upon the canonical Gospels. Contra people like Crossan, it is highly unlikely that they contain a separate Jesus tradition. This book is also interesting for a couple of other reasons. First, although the book contains the imprimatur of the Roman Catholic Church (indicating it is free from doctrinal error), Meier actually denies the perpetual virginity of Mary and is

noncommittal on the virgin birth (both of which are Catholic dogma, or so I thought). Second, Meier disputes the historicity of portions of the Gospels, particularly the infancy narratives. For example, he thinks it unlikely that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Ben Witherington provides a review of Meier's project up to the second volume in THE JESUS QUEST. Witherington reaches more conservative conclusions while using a similar methodology.

Why even bother trying to learn about the historical Jesus? Why try where so many others have given up or gotten bogged down in disagreement? In his great, academic book, Fr. John Meier recalls Plato: "The unexamined life is not worth living." For the Christian, some things are sacred, but nothing about Yeshu the "marginal" Jew is forbidden in a proper historical examination. And Fr. Meier does just that in this, the first of three volumes. Was Jesus an illegitimate child? Could he read? Did he have brothers and sisters? Why was he "marginal"? What was his early life like? The scarcity of the evidence can at first be discouraging, but Fr. Meier takes us through the centuries of scholarship and the best available modern evidence to paint us a picture of the young son of Mary and Joseph. Faithless and faithful alike may be unhappy with Meier's conclusions, but his arguments are well-researched and presented. You can read the text and skip the chapter endnotes for a decent academic presentation, or you can delve into the notes and branch off into the cutting edge discussion on the Jesus of history. Most interesting to me was the fact that the book bears the Imprimatur of Bp. Sheridan, but does not have the Nihil Obstat, or the approval of the Church's censor office. Normally the two go together. Fr. Meier's message may not be popular among modern Christians, Catholic or otherwise, but he's not been censured either. It's a testimony to the impeccability of his scholarship and the validity of his message: The historical Jesus is not the Jesus of faith. He is also not the "real" Jesus, irrecoverable now after 2000 years. He is simply the Jesus that we can recover from "purely historical sources and arguments."

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