

# Christology, History, and Frankenstein's Monster:

The Evolution of the Historical Jesus in John P. Meier<sup>1</sup>

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In the first three volumes of his projected four-volume work on the historical Jesus, John P. Meier has articulated a position on the nature of historical inquiry that would exclude theological concerns from the pursuit of properly historical questions. For Meier, historical inquiry proceeds by means of a rigorous and commonly accepted methodology and finds confirmation in the emergence of a consensus among historians. Meier concedes that this methodology yields only a profile of Jesus' ministry and death. This profile is a compilation of various pieces of an inherently incomplete puzzle, and to this extent, he compares the results of historical Jesus research to the popular image of Victor Frankenstein's monster—a mass of assembled pieces, hardly identifiable as a “real” human being.<sup>2</sup> When brought to bear on properly theological questions, this profile—this monster—exercises a negative function. Since the historical Jesus is a hypothetical reconstruction, it is not the object of Christian faith, but can serve as a restraint against flights of theological fancy and preserve the autonomy of the historian (or the historical critical exegete) against the encroachment of theology, or ideology.

This paper contends that Meier's practice of historical Jesus research goes beyond the narrow methodology and the modest goals he has articulated. While Meier has remained stridently faithful to his understanding of history and historical methodology, one can recognize, not massive shifts, but rather tensions, in his work, in particular, the tension between Meier's formal statements on methodology and his performance of historical Jesus research.<sup>3</sup> The paper will seek to advance the general discussion of the relevance of historical inquiry for the Christian faith by examining the work of John P. Meier on the historical Jesus and the manner in which that work has evolved through the publication of the first three volumes of *A Marginal Jew*. The first part of the paper will focus on Meier's understanding of historical inquiry and the criticism that understanding has received. The second part of the paper will look at both the positive and negative aspects of Meier's performance of historical Jesus research as he brings life to the material he judges historical.

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### *Christology and History:*

#### *The Genesis of Meier's Project and Methodology*

Any assessment of Meier's understanding of history must begin with the theological developments that occasioned the project. Recently, John Galvin and William Loewe have provided important insights on the developments within Roman Catholic christology that have taken place over the last fifty years. Their insights provide ample opportunity to gain a hold on the theological milieu in question.<sup>4</sup>

Karl Rahner's seminal essay "Current Problem in Christology" crystallized the work of a generation of theologians critical of neo-Scholastic Christology. Rahner's essay helped to inaugurate a wave of renewal within Christology which placed appropriate emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. This renewal soon called for a critical examination of the biblical data on Jesus—data that was available as a result of concomitant developments among Roman Catholic exegetes following the endorsement of historical critical method. Galvin notes that two shifts really take place in this process. The first shift called for a renewed emphasis on the humanity of Christ and was fundamentally and self-evidently a *theological* question that required a theological answer. The second shift, however, was not so nearly self-evident. It occurred when the theological question of Jesus' humanity required the resources of exegetes and historians. No longer were theologians operating within the realm of theological reflection and confining themselves to the investigation of the humanity of Jesus; rather, theologians sought specific answers to *historical* questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Loewe suggests that this situation was further complicated by the breakdown in scholarly consensus on what constituted "the historical Jesus" in the 1980's. Inattentiveness to the subtleties and limits of these two shifts is what created the morass into which Meier waded as he began his work on the historical Jesus.

The first stirrings of Meier's project are evidenced in a series of short articles and essays that appeared between 1984-1991.<sup>5</sup> These articles appear to be the fruit of his thought as he prepared the article on Jesus for the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* which appeared in 1990. In these writings Meier situates his project squarely within the theological matrix just described, and challenges some of the most important theological minds of the period. Meier accuses Hans of Küng of a failure to understand the tentative nature of historical Jesus research by boldly equating the historical Jesus and "the real Jesus." Meier also sanctions Jon Sobrino and Juan Luis Segundo for their lack of exegetical sophistication and their selected use of exegetical literature in their reconstructions of the historical Jesus. For Meier, the portraits of Jesus that these scholars have

produced seem surreptitious, idiosyncratic, and theologically self-serving. Two figures, however, are singled out for measured praise—Edward Schillebeeckx and Ed Sanders. Both are lauded for their discussion of criteria/methodology,<sup>6</sup> their ability to engage a breadth of timely exegetical literature, and their modesty about the claims historical Jesus research can have on Christian faith. Still, Meier faults Schillebeeckx for not observing what Meier perceives as the chasm between historical judgments and Christian faith, particularly in his treatment of the resurrection. This last point seems to be key in Meier's project, the autonomy of the historical discipline as a critical enterprise whose formal objects are matters of fact, not matters of faith.<sup>7</sup> Unlike many involved in historical Jesus research today (i.e., the Jesus Seminar), Meier does not seek to substitute the historical Jesus for the Christ proclaimed by the Christian Church. Instead, Meier wants to avoid theological issues as much as possible.<sup>8</sup> Yet he still believes that the quest for the historical Jesus plays an important role in contemporary theology. For Meier, theology is essentially the task of placing faith in contemporary context, i.e., making the content of the faith intelligible by addressing the questions, and concerns of a particular audience or community. Since historical consciousness is one element that helps to define our contemporary context, the historical Jesus must be the object of theological attention. While this might seem to hold out promise for the theological relevancy of the historical Jesus, Meier's definition of the historical Jesus as well as his proposal for its theological pertinence compromises this possibility.

In his early articles on the historical Jesus and in volume one of *A Marginal Jew* Meier describes the historical Jesus alternately as "the Jesus who is knowable or recoverable by the means of modern historical-critical research," a "modern abstraction and construct,"<sup>9</sup> and "an idea."<sup>10</sup> Meier intends to reconstruct the historical Jesus by asking, "What, within the Gospels and other sources, really goes back to the historical Jesus?"<sup>11</sup> In other words, the task of the historian is fundamentally limited to adjudicating what material from what sources may be considered historical. The historian makes these judgments by conducting a "purely empirical"<sup>12</sup> investigation, using the tools and methodology common to historical critical exegetes, basically those articulated by Schillebeeckx and Sanders. In the end, Meier believes that what emerges is a sketch of the historical Jesus that is acceptable to any and all disinterested observers.<sup>13</sup> This sketch is the product of a general consensus among historians, regardless of one's religious commitments or ideological bent. Meier emphasizes that this sketch should not be confused with "the real Jesus." For Meier, the distinction between the historical Jesus and the real

Jesus is summed up in the contrast between the hypothetical, limited nature of critical history, and the unboundedness represented by the word “real.” This distinction makes the historical Jesus stand as a necessary, but very limited, historical project, a bulwark against contemporary attacks on the Christian faith, as well as a defense against pious distortions of Christian faith.

What Meier has done in attempting to clarify categories and defend the practice of historical reconstruction according to the canons of historical critical method is to introduce an epistemological issue into the discussion. Some have suggested that Meier does this without carefully considering the implications for his own project. Meier critiques various efforts at reconstructing the historical Jesus and simultaneously offers an alternative, an alternative that is framed in terms of a corrective or therapeutic methodology rather than a comprehensive one. This effort, however, seems to involve Meier in “a philosophic undertow that he cannot quite master,”<sup>14</sup> and has drawn sharp criticism from many theologians and exegetes, especially those committed to the foundational work of Bernard Lonergan. For example, the late Ben Meyer takes exception to Meier’s definition of the historical Jesus as “a modern abstraction” and a “hypothetical reconstruction,” and suggests that this represents an unfortunate example of neo-Kantian idealism.<sup>15</sup> Ben Meyer joins others, including Roch Kereszty, in finding troublesome John Meier’s apparent repudiation of the historian’s subjectivity as the necessary precondition for authentic historical inquiry.<sup>16</sup> His image of an unapal conclave seems to evidence a naïve realist epistemology in as much as his methodology likens the act of knowing to the act of seeing. This image illustrates Meier’s concern that the intellectual and religious commitments of the individual members of the conclave be effectively bracketed.<sup>17</sup> Though Meier remains wedded to his methodology, in spite of the criticisms mentioned, that methodology belies Meier’s insightful, sympathetic, and heuristic performance of historical Jesus research—a performance in which the results exceed the methodology and confirm the two lines of criticism just mentioned: the historical Jesus is more than an abstraction or an idea, and the subjectivity of the historian is crucial to his performance.

### *Meier’s Performance as an Historian*

Meier’s performance as a historian is remarkable. The meticulous detail evidenced in his work confirms his thoroughness as a scholar, his desire to be fair to those with whom he disagrees, and his desire to fight the demise of historical critical exegesis. Even as he appeals to the criteria he has established in his desire to pursue an “objective” reconstruction of the

historical Jesus, Meier's performance demonstrates some gaps in his formal account of methodology.

Meier's characterization of the historical Jesus as a pale sketch, "a hypothetical reconstruction," is contravened at several key points in his presentation. The most striking evidence of this is Meier's section on the question of Jesus' miracles in volume two where he makes the following conclusion:

Put dramatically, but with not too much exaggeration: if the miracle tradition from Jesus' public ministry were to be rejected *in toto* as unhistorical, so should every other gospel tradition about him. For if the criteria of historicity do not work in the case of the miracle tradition, where multiple attestation is so massive and coherence so impressive, there is no reason to expect them to work elsewhere. The quest would simply have to be abandoned. Needless to say, that is not the conclusion we have reached here.<sup>18</sup>

The spirit of this judgment as well as the wording in which it is expressed bear witness to the fact that Meier's reconstruction of the historical Jesus is hardly an abstraction, and much less hypothetical than his methodological statements would have us believe. In this Meier affirms that as a matter of historical fact, Jesus was viewed as a miracle worker in first-century Palestine. Here, as in many other places in *A Marginal Jew*, Meier affirms the idea that historical knowledge does in fact attend to the Jesus of ancient Palestine. Insofar as Meier has made true historical judgments about the Jesus of ancient Palestine, he has affirmed something real about Jesus.

In addition to slipping in his own historical realist claims about such things as Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker, Meier's repudiation of the historian's subjectivity in his methodology is also compromised. In his performance, Meier consistently projects himself into the mind of Jesus and the minds of first century Palestinian Jews. For example, in volume one of *A Marginal Jew*, Meier treats the question of Jesus' family. Through his knowledge of intertestamental history, and by reflecting on the name of Jesus and family members mentioned in the gospels (i.e., James, Joses, Simon, and Jude) Meier extends himself into the social and political world of the first-century, and paint a picture of Jesus' family as an Israel in miniature, looking to the future, to a time when YHWH's eschatological salvation and national restoration would be realized.<sup>19</sup>

Meier's projection of himself into the historical past is not limited to the dark recesses of Jesus' "hidden years." In volume two, Meier situates himself into the very center of the mind of Jesus. The message of Jesus is reconstructed using the primary criteria, especially the criterion of

multiple attestation of forms and sources, but the meaning of this data is not entirely clear. So Meier makes an effort to pull together the available data in order to reconstruct the myth that informed the ministry of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> This myth is not like the *Enuma Elish* where the historian has copies of the text in her hand and extra-textual references to the occasions and rituals in which the myth was recited. Meier candidly admits that the “kingdom of God” is a symbol that draws upon a story that is only implicit in the OT, but he insists it is a story with which Jesus and his contemporaries were intimately familiar. Meier thus provides us with the narrative world of Jesus by sympathetically extending himself into the world of first century Palestine in an effort to better understand the words and deeds of Jesus that might be culled from the canonical gospels.<sup>21</sup>

Although Meier’s unpapal conclave has been cited by some as a primary example of Meier’s lack of emphasis on the subjectivity of the historian, often neglected is a note on the matter in which Meier eschews the idea that he or any historian ought to be a slave to scholarly consensus: “A scholar must be prepared at any moment, because of the force of data and arguments, to go against scholarly consensus on any issue.”<sup>22</sup> Some of the more obvious issues are: 1) his use of the Fourth Gospel as a source for historical material on Jesus, 2) his position on the miracle tradition of Jesus, and 3) his affirmation that the circle of the Twelve was part of Jesus ministry and not a creation of the early church.

Meier’s performance as a historian certainly has its lacunae, and these can be traced to his hesitancy regarding the intrusion of allied disciplines into the domain of the historian. One glaring example of Meier’s reluctance to engage the sociological and political aspects of Jesus’ ministry<sup>23</sup> can be found in his discussion of the disciples in volume three. Although Meier acknowledges the inseparability of religion, society and politics in first century Palestine, he rightly seeks to debunk the popular image of ‘Jesus the revolutionary’, and portray Jesus’ ministry primarily in a religious setting. But while Meier seeks to portray the disciples and followers of Jesus as a broad cross-section of the Judean population, he fails to tell us anything about the social and political dimensions of Jesus ministry. Additionally, while Meier asserts that Jesus accepted women among his closest followers, and states that this “traveling entourage of women followers...probably disturbed [the stridently pious],”<sup>24</sup> he fails to explain why this is so, and what Jesus motivation might have been in this remarkable practice. Meier has Jesus share table fellowship with disreputable people, but he fails to explore the social, economic and political aspects of Jesus of such actions with the thoroughness he demonstrates in his treatment of Jesus’ sayings on the Kingdom of God. In his defense Meier contends that “a present-day historian must

not...retroject modern thought about social classes, revolutionary, utopian egalitarianism, and theoretical anarchy *into the mind* of a first-century Palestinian Jew..."<sup>25</sup> Granted that anachronisms are to be avoided, and cross-temporal/cross-cultural models are rightly viewed with skepticism by Meier, this does not mean that the historian ought, in principle, to refrain from using appropriate theories about social and economic systems in order to gain some clarity about the social world of first century Palestine. Meier does not recoil from using narrative theology (certainly a theoretical innovation of the last century) to describe the Kingdom of God as the myth that Jesus would have understood. Just because a theory is modern it does not follow that the reality a theory helps to illuminate is necessarily anachronistic.

### **Conclusion**

For Meier, the contemporary theological climate has become somewhat hostile to historical critical method; his work on the historical Jesus represents an opportunity to vindicate the method and demonstrate its fruitfulness. Meier is fond of saying that it is not only important to know something about the historical Jesus, but it is important to know how we know it. In other words it's the methodology that is important.

In the performance of his work as a historian, Meier proves to be adroit, attentive to the artistry of the historian. Meier is forced beyond his stated goal of determining 'what material in the sources might indeed come from Jesus'; rather, Meier seeks to make sense of the context of Jesus, impart motivation, and make tentative connections and correlations in an effort to fill out a picture of the historical Jesus. These activities involve Meier in acts of self-transcendence and give us a real picture of the Jesus of ancient Palestine.

Meier's comparison of his work on the historical Jesus to Frankenstein's monster is instructive. Although Meier seeks to use the image of Frankenstein's monster both to illustrate the limitations of historical inquiry by dramatically calling to mind the piecemeal character of historical Jesus research, and to chastise over-zealous historians who vainly seek to master their own creations. In the end, however, I believe the image is not a little ironic. In the novel there is no description of the "secret of life" which makes the monster come alive; Victor refuses to share it with Walton since he believed that this secret would corrupt whoever possessed it. It is this secret that gives life to Meier's portrait of Jesus (it is indeed a portrait and not an abstraction). The Jesus of ancient Palestine was a human being capable of being known through a historical investigation which necessarily involves the commitment and extension of the historian into the world of Jesus and involves the historian in

generating questions and finding satisfactory answers to those questions.

Meier's project stands as a remarkable achievement to the way historical Jesus research ought to be done, but it fails in its account of how historical research is to be understood. Failure to account for concrete character of the historical Jesus and the requisite imagination and sympathy of the historian indicates a theory of knowledge that is problematic and that threatens to leave the results of Meier's work on the bookshelf of theologians. Without an adequate account of knowledge which mediates and integrates the two fields of experience (faith and history) historical Jesus research in general will only have a limited (marginal) impact on contemporary Christology.

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the College Theology Society annual meeting on May 31, 2002 at St. John's University, Jamaica, New York.
- 2 John Meier, *Christ and His Mission: Essays in Christology and Ecclesiology* (Good News Studies, 30, Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazer, 1990), 34.
- 3 This point has formed the nucleus of Luke Timothy Johnson's negative assessment of Meier's project (see *The Real Jesus* [San Francisco: Harper, 1995]; see also his reviews of *A Marginal Jew* in *Commonweal* April 24, 1992, pp. 24-26; Nov., 18, 1994, pp. 33-35; Nov., 9, 2001, pp. 21-23).
- 4 John P. Galvin, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 252-73; William P. Loewe, "From the Humanity of Christ to the Historical Jesus," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 314-331.
- 5 John P. Meier, "Who Really Was Jesus o Nazareth?" in the "Outlook" section of *The Washington Post*, December 23, 1984, pp. 1 and 5; idem, "Jesus Among the Historians," *New York Times Book Review*, December 21, 1986, pp. 1,16-19; idem, "Scripture as a Source for Theology" *The Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 43 (1988): 1-14; idem, "Jesus Among the Historians," "Jesus among the Theologians I" "Jesus Among the Theologians II," in *The Mission of Christ and His Church* Good News Studies, 30 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazer, 1990); idem, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 3-24.
- 6 Although antecedent criteria have been discussed since the Enlightenment, a continuous discussion of the criteria of historicity has been sustained from the very beginning of form criticism until today. In this regard, Meier's criteria of historicity are dependant on the insights and shortcomings of form and redaction criticism. Unlike the rather unwieldy discussions of criteria in historical Jesus research, Meier presents a crisp and focused discussion of five primary criteria and several secondary criteria. His presentation of criteria is most directly inspired by Schillebeeckx, but as always, Meier is familiar with the vast expanse of literature on the matter. For an important overview of the development of the criteria see Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research: Previous Discussion*



- and *New Proposals*, JSNTS 191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
- 7 Van A. Harvey (*The Historian and the Believer* [New York: Crossroad, 1966, 1996] offers an important overview of this issue in terms of an ethics or morality of historical knowledge. For an interesting assessment of Harvey see Terrence W. Tilley, "Practicing History, Practicing Theology," in *Theology and the New Histories*, Gary Macy ed., (CTS Annual Volume 44; New York: Orbis, 1999), 1-20.
  - 8 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, v.1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1.
  - 9 John P. Meier, "Jesus" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy eds. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1317. Meier repeats this definition and those that follow throughout the three volumes of *A Marginal Jew*. This definition of the goal of historical Jesus research was not invented by Meier, but comes from James M. Robinson (*A New Quest for the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959], 31; see n.3 for further discussion and Peter Biehl, "Zur Frage nach dem historischen Jesus," *Theologische Rundschau* 24 [1956-7]: 55).
  - 10 *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, 198.
  - 11 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, v.1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 10. This approach to history is pejoratively labeled "scissors and paste history" by R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 257-263, 269 f., 274-82 as quoted in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994), 205.
  - 12 John P. Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 (1999): 463.
  - 13 Meier, "Jesus," 1328.
  - 14 Lonergan, 197.
  - 15 Ben Meyer, "The Relevance of Horizon," *Downside Review* 386 (1994):1-15; idem, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazer, 1994). Others have followed in this line of criticism including Tony Kelly, "The Historical Jesus and Human Subjectivity: A Response to John Meier," *Pacifica* 4 (1991): 202-228 and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol 2., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) among others.
  - 16 Roch Kereszty, "Historical Research, theological inquiry, and the reality of Jesus: Reflections on the method of J.P. Meier," *Communio* 19 (1992): 576-600. Kereszty uses Paul Ricoeur's notion of the role of subjectivity in the historian's craft as articulated in "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1965), 21-40.
  - 17 John Meier accuses Ben Meyer of "rampant subjectivism." See John Meier, "A Marginal Jew – Retrospect and Prospect," (Archbishop Gerety Lecture at Seton Hall University, February 18, 1993, <http://theology.shu.edu/gerety.htm>).

- 18 *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, pp. 630-631.
- 19 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 207-208.
- 20 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 241, 252.
- 21 In some ways this is similar to N.T. Wright's reconstruction of the stories that informed the worldview of first-century Judaism where he employs the structuralism of A.J. Greimas; see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 215-243.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 195 n.70.
- 23 Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 144; Larry W. Hurtado, "A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Research," in *Whose Historical Jesus*, William E Arnal and Michael Desjardins eds. (Studies in Christianity and Judaism n. 7, Waterloo, Ontario: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1997), 283.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 247.
- 25 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 250, emphasis added.

## Irony and the Eucharist

Terry Eagleton

In one region of our lives, we have no problem in understanding how a thing can change its substance while apparently remaining itself. The process is known as metaphor. 'Fire' can mean anger or amorousness rather than literal flame, but the word 'fire' remains unaltered in this exchange, rather as the bread and wine of the eucharist still look and behave like bread and wine. Since the meaning of a word is its being, we can say that the being or 'substance' of the word has changed with this metaphorical transaction. Flame has transubstantiated into fury.

Moreover, 'fire' can act as a metaphor of passion only because there are real resemblances between the two. The relation between the two signs is not iconic (they don't look much like each other), but it is not arbitrary either. Maybe Seamus Heaney could get 'carburetter' to mean erotic passion, but for most of us 'fire' is a less laborious way of doing it. In a similar way, the bread and wine of the eucharist, as signs of our human solidarity which need to be destroyed (consumed) if they are to yield life, have natural affinities with the body of Christ. As Herbert McCabe once remarked, you couldn't consecrate Coke and burgers