

John P. Meier. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 4: *Law and Love*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. 752 pages. \$55.

I can imagine no better articulation of the spirit and substance of John Meier's approach in this fourth volume of his search for the historical Jesus and of the fruit of his labor than these words from his conclusion:

many American books on the subject of this historical Jesus now avoid the denigrating parodies of Torah and the Pharisees ensconced in older German tomes. In place of parodies, one finds a politically correct shift away from portraying a Jesus who attacks the Law . . . to a Jesus who attacks hierarchy, priesthood, and temple . . . .

It simply stands to reason that any Jew who chose to mount the public stage in early 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine and present himself as a religious teacher . . . would have to discuss and debate the Torah. . . (648-649).

From Meier's work emerges a 'mantra, 'the historical Jesus is the halakic Jesus'' (649).

Employing the widely-recognized criteria of *dissimilarity* and *multiple attestation*, Meier casts his rigorously critical eye upon material from all four Gospels upon Jesus' purported teachings relative to law and morality. He is careful to avoid facile bundling of sayings in the Gospels that are strictly different, and his interrogation of non-Christian Jewish literature for teachings concerning the same topics in the Gospels is thorough and exacting. His portrayal of Torah interpretation in pre-70 C.E. Jewish literature is rich and illuminating in providing the context for Jesus' teaching about the law. It throws into relief Jesus' peculiar contribution to halakic discussion, presents some deep puzzles, and clears away some commonly-held assumptions about both Jesus and the Judaism of his time. In regard to his Sabbath teaching, Jesus "presupposes and affirms this sacred institution enshrined in the Torah, all the while arguing against sectarian rigorism and in favor of a humane, moderate approach to detailed questions and observance" (297). At the same time, when it comes to divorce and oaths, he categorically forbids them, even though they are permitted and regulated by the Torah (297). And when it comes to purity, despite Mark 7, Meier concludes that with the possible exception of the *qorban* saying, Mark 7 is completely the product of Jewish-Christian tradition and Markan redaction, and that Jesus himself had no interest in the issue of purity. Stories of conflict over Jesus healing on the Sabbath are also the products of Christian polemic and do not go back to the historical Jesus. Of all the things listed as prohibited on the Sabbath in other Jewish literature of the era, healing was not among them (294).

Another major issue in regard to Jesus' teaching about the law is the question of whether there was some general principle at work in the way he handled halakic questions. The primary candidate for this general principle in Christian scholarly writing is the principle of love. Meier's discussion of the love commandments constitutes the largest chapter in this volume. He restricts the discussion to teachings which report Jesus as speaking specifically of love, (not compassion) and what readers might regard as related topics. He concludes that Jesus did quote Deut 6:4-6 and Lev 19:18b as the two commandments first and second in importance in the Torah, as Mark reports. But he did not go on to say that the entire law hangs on these two commandments, as Matthew reports. That is a step Matthew takes beyond Jesus himself (575-

576). Jesus also commanded love of enemies, a teaching not found in Jewish literature, but most closely paralleled in Stoic philosophers. In Meier's judgment, Jesus was not completely out of touch with Hellenistic Judaism that extolled the two virtues of *eusebeia* (reverence for God) and *dikaiosyne*, (justice towards one's fellows). Nevertheless, every other bit of evidence points to a teacher "first, last, and always a product of the Judaism native to the land of Israel" (574). A crucial conclusion of Meier's study is that Jesus set up no antithesis between law and love. On the contrary, it was the law that commanded love. Thus Jesus did not undermine the law in favor of love, as many interpreters propose.

Meier is stalwartly opposed to the agenda of uncovering an historical Jesus who will sell on the popular market. He rejects in derogatory tones "a 'relevant' Jesus dressed as a Jewish-hippie-iconoclastic-Cynic philosopher dabbling in academic postmodernism" (574). Jesus' relevance consists of the fact that he presents a moral vision that is diametrically opposed to our own, "saying no . . . to values and actions that most moderns take for granted and would defend as moral and necessary. There is value in being forced to rethink what we have always taken for granted" (650).

So what is the basis of Jesus' rather inconsistent relationship to the law? The best explanation Meier can offer is that Jesus' own view of his role was that of the Elijah-like eschatological prophet who would come at the end to re-gather Israel in preparation for the kingdom of God. There was increasing expectation in Judaism, first seen in 1 Macc 4:46, that a future prophet would clear up all halakic problems. This meant that though he lacked formal priestly status and formal scribal training, Jesus was literate in Scripture and in scriptural argumentation. "Anyone can declare himself a charismatic prophet. Getting the *gezera sawa* right requires study." (575). But as the expected prophet, Jesus did not rest upon traditional channels of authority like Scripture, custom, or official function or even upon logical argumentation. As a religious charismatic, he understood himself as having a direct pipeline to God's will (415, 655).

Adam Gilbert Bartholomew  
The Church of the Ascension  
Mount Vernon, NY