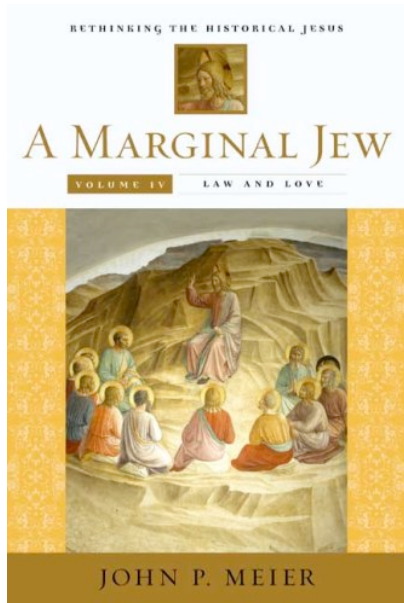


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Meier, John P.

***A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,
Volume 4: Law and Love***

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The first volume of John P. Meier's *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* was published in 1991, followed by the second volume three years later. For a variety of personal reasons, the next two volumes in the series were delayed. The third volume, subtitled *Companions and Competitors*, was published in 2001, and the fourth, *Law and Love*, has just been released. Meier's intention was to complete his work with a discussion of four "enigmas" in volume 4, but the subject of the study, Jesus and the Mosaic law, required the entire book. Disappointingly, his analysis of the three final enigmas is yet to be completed.

Meier defines the enigma of Jesus' teaching on the law early in the volume: "the real enigma is how Jesus can at one and the same time affirm the Law as the given, as the normative expression of God's will for Israel, and yet in a few individual cases or legal areas (e.g., divorce and oaths) teach and enjoin what is contrary to the Law, simply on his own authority" (3). After six years of work on the question, he concludes that, while he may not be right, "every other book or article on the historical Jesus and the Law has been to a great degree wrong" (2). He then sets out to make his case in six chapters, numbered consecutively from the preceding volume.

The first chapter deals with definitions, beginning with the “proper” translation of the Hebrew *tôrâ*, contrasting the term with *hālākâ*, an opinion or rule concerning conduct. Meier refuses to begin with the presupposition that there is “one organizing principle (e.g., the love commandment) that pervades all the teachings of Jesus” (46–47), although he allows that such a principle might emerge from his investigation. These questions and issues suggest both the direction of his argument throughout the book and his ultimate conclusions.

The second chapter (ch. 32) deals with divorce, the third (ch. 33) with the prohibition of oaths. Following his usual method for establishing historical evidence, Meier argues for the historicity of Jesus’ prohibition both of divorce and of swearing oaths on the basis of the classical criteria of authenticity. In both cases, Meier argues that the historical Jesus seems to have revoked individual institutions or commandments of the Mosaic law. Because these findings run counter to his original stance that Jesus affirmed the law, Meier must explore whether Jesus revokes the law in other areas. He turns then to an exploration of the observance of the Sabbath (ch. 34) and purity laws (ch. 35).

Meier begins his chapter on the Sabbath with an exploration of the pre-70 literature, discovering a “total absence of any prohibition of healing on the sabbath” (251). So even if the narratives concerning healing miracles on the Sabbath were authentic, such healings would not be a violation of the Sabbath at the time of Jesus. Rather, such passages show that Jesus was involved in arguments “with the halakic opinions of various Jewish groups that, like himself, were competing for the adherence of ordinary Jews attached to no one party” (296). Such a Jesus could not possibly, in Meier’s view, attack, subvert or annul the Sabbath. His conclusion regarding the Sabbath is that “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 of observance” (297).

In his chapter on ritual purity, Meier argues that much of the material is inauthentic but that the detailed examination of the question yields important insights, particularly the conclusion that “apart from the logion on *qorbân*, the controversy and teaching in Mark 7:1–23 do not come from the historical Jesus” (413). Meier’s Jesus was not indifferent to Jewish law, as his stance on the questions of divorce, oaths, and Sabbath observance show. But it is a “basic mistake” to look for a consistent or systematic approach to the law in Jesus’ thought or practice. In particular, Meier denies that there is any “principle” from which Jesus’ position can be deduced. Rather, as a “charismatic prophet of the end time,” Jesus claims to know the mind of God on particular questions, and it is this that explains his “patchwork approach to the Law” (415). His silence on questions of ritual purity must be seen in this light.

Meier concludes this volume with an exploration of the love commands, particularly the double commandment in Mark 12:28–34. After analyzing all the material on love in the sources, he concludes that “the double command of love (love for God and for one’s neighbors) has the best likelihood of coming from the historical Jesus” (572). In addition, the commandment to love one’s enemies is judged authentic. In both cases, Meier relies on the criterion of discontinuity, despite the fact that the commandment to love one’s enemies is widely attested in substance across the ancient Mediterranean world. What is unique to Jesus is “the terribly terse, totally unexplained, in-your-face demand ‘love your enemies’” (573). The argument is “tenuous,” as Meier himself admits, but he needs the Markan and Q forms of the love command to complete the portrait of Jesus that arises from his lengthy analysis of Jesus and the law. He concludes, then, that Jesus reflected on the law as a whole and said that love is the supreme commandment, even though he stops short of “claiming that Jesus made love the hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole Law” (576).

Meier considers his work on Jesus on the law to have brought several positive insights to historical Jesus studies. To begin with, the “Jewish Jesus” image common in recent historical Jesus work has been fleshed out: Meier’s Jesus engages in legal discussions and debates “proper” to his time and place. In volume 3, Meier had accepted the concept of “mainstream” Judaism centered on the temple in Jerusalem (and including the Pharisees and Sadducees) as the main context for understanding Jesus. In this volume, he develops his description of Jesus’ stance in the debates on specific topics, and the book is best read in conjunction with the preceding volume.

Meier’s historical Jesus “is both deeply steeped in Jewish Scriptures ... and at the same time open to the cultural influences of the larger Greco-Roman world” (573). Those influences are from pagan Stoic philosophy, however, not from Cynics, and Meier remains critical of those scholars who have long argued for Hellenistic influence in the Jewish world of Galilee. His concern is that such an approach does not pay adequate attention to Jesus’ Jewishness or to the Jewish social context of rural Galilee in the first century. However, his own rejection of social-scientific models and method and his understanding of Jewishness in terms of mainstream Jerusalem concerns and practices leave him open to the same critique, albeit from a different direction.

There remain some unresolved issues, which Meier considers negative insights, in his work. First is the fragmentary and sparse nature of the materials that can be traced back to the historical Jesus. In this volume, as in the others, he relies solely on literary evidence from a limited number of texts, primarily the canonical Gospels, and he determines the historicity of his evidence based on criteria of authenticity without acknowledging the critical discussion that questions his method. If one accepts his critical presuppositions and

method, it is difficult to argue with his conclusions, but it is not surprising that the historical source material is sparse. If one wishes to explore Jesus' context using the tools of sociology and anthropology, this is not the place to look.

The second unresolved issue is the lack of an organizing principle that makes sense of Jesus' views and particularly the lack of a link between the love commandment and Jesus' other pronouncements on the law. Meier suggests that Jesus saw himself as "the Elijah-like prophet of the end-time" (656), an interpretation that comes out of the analysis of all four volumes of *A Marginal Jew*. This allows him to characterize Jesus' teaching on Torah as "eschatological morality ... that is, the life that conforms to the coming of God's kingdom in the end time" (657).

This book is a continuation of arguments begun in the first three volumes, and much of the material here touches on issues raised in preceding volumes. Meier has not changed his mind on fundamentals, and his future treatment of the remaining "enigmas" will probably not be full of surprises. In the first four volumes, Meier has raised a number of issues and questions regarding Jesus' social and economic context. These deserve the same careful treatment that he gives to the material he has treated so far. It is to be hoped that he will allow himself to consider these questions in the rest of his work and to provide scholars with a portrait of a Jewish Jesus thoroughly embedded in his socioeconomic setting.