At just above 440 pages, the fifth installment of John Meier’s *A Marginal Jew* stands out for its comparative brevity. The books published so far in the series add up to 3,500 pages, and a good number of complex issues remain to be treated before Meier’s scholarly heptalogy is completed. As the title of this volume promises, *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* is tightly focused on Jesus as a teller of parables. Whereas Meier’s primary interest is in the question of authenticity, the book is also a contribution to parable research as such and to the exegesis of individual parables.

The volume consists of an introduction, four chapters (numbered consecutively throughout the series), a conclusion, and indexes. Meier devotes part of the introduction (1–29) to a rehearsal of the larger project’s scope and method. He also indicates that his results will go against the grain of most previous studies of the historical Jesus as a parable teller, which have usually treated the parables as a secure inroad into Jesus’s own teaching. Meier’s less optimistic thesis is that “many of the parables attributed to Jesus should be assigned to the frustrating no-man’s-land of *non liquet*” (5); that is, we cannot really know whether they originated with Jesus.

Chapter 37, “The Parables of Jesus: Seven Unfashionable Theses” (30–81), develops the point about Meier’s work constituting a break with earlier scholarship. Reminding his
readers that his project is firmly situated within historical criticism, where “the intricate web of structuralist analysis woven into an ahistorical vacuum or the clever word games of postmodernism are of no interest” (33), Meier formulates seven theses that to various degrees question the common opinion. Theses 1 and 5 point out that there is lack of scholarly agreement on what constitutes a parable of Jesus and claim that any attempt to define it by certain characteristics is bound to be misleading. Theses 2, 3, and 4 dismiss the proverbial wisdom of the Hebrew Bible as the primary analogy of Jesus’s parables, note that is the Latter Prophets that provide narrative parables of the kind later to be found in the Synoptic Gospels, and argue that Jesus’s parables are an expression of his prophetic identity. Thesis 6 questions the claim that the Gospel of Thomas provides independent attestation of Jesus’s parables. Thesis 7, finally, repeats what may be the book’s most controversial claim, that “relatively few of the Synoptic parables can be attributed to the historical Jesus with a good degree of probability” (48, emphasis removed). An excursus to the chapter discusses “The Problem of Allegory” (82–88).

Chapter 38, “Parables and the Problem of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas” (89–188), serves to substantiate Meier’s thesis 6. Already in volume 1 of A Marginal Jew (The Roots of the Problem and the Person, 1991) Meier laid out some arguments for his position that Thomas is dependent on the canonical gospels. In the present chapter, a more detailed analysis of some of the parables in Thomas leads up to what is essentially a restatement of that conclusion. The obvious implication is that the presence of any given parable in Thomas cannot be used to argue that it is multiply attested.

The title of chapter 39 is “Searching for Likely Candidates: A Survey of the Synoptic Parables” (189–229). This chapter backs up thesis 7 on the paucity of parables that can be positively identified as authentic parables of Jesus. Meier sorts the Synoptic parables into four categories: Markan narrative parables, narrative parables in Q, narrative parables in M, and narrative parables in L. Meier here points out that the number of parables increases in later sources, a state of affairs that “should at least give one pause before presuming that any and every Synoptic parable is to be attributed to the historical Jesus unless serious objections intervene” (197–98). He further subjects the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) to detailed analysis, arguing that this exclusively Lukan parable—often thought to be a splendid example of the historical Jesus’s undiluted teaching—most probably derives from Luke the Evangelist. For most of the remaining parables, Meier takes the position that there are no strong arguments either in favor of authenticity or against it. At the end of this chapter, only four parables seem to have a chance of being judged authentic: the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32 and Q 13:18–19), the evil tenants of the vineyard (Mark 12:1–11 parr.), the great supper (Matt 22:2–14 and Luke 14:16–24), and the talents/pounds (Matt 25:14–30 and Luke 19:11–27).
It is to these four parables that Meier turns in chapter 40, “The Few, the Happy Few” (230–362). The parable of the mustard seed is a so-called “Mark–Q overlap” and, as such, arguably authentic by the criterion of multiple attestation. As an expression of the conviction that the kingdom of God was present and growing in Jesus’s prophetic ministry, the parable also meets the criterion of coherence. The parable of the evil tenants of the vineyard fails to satisfy any of these criteria but instead meets the criterion of embarrassment. Mark 12:1–8 represents the parable as told by the historical Jesus, “a parable of prophetic judgment ... that ends with his death at the hands of the temple authorities” (251). Faced with the original parable’s embarrassing ending, where the son is simply killed and thrown out of the vineyard, the early transmitters of the story felt obliged to add 12:9 and 12:10–11 as more appropriate endings. The parable of the great supper and that of the talents/pounds are harder to judge, since it is not obvious whether Matthew and Luke drew these parables from a common source (Q) or from separate traditions. Meier concludes in favor of the latter option, which means that the two parables meet the criterion of multiple attestation. On the lips of the historical Jesus, the parable of the great supper was “the great and final call to Israel to accept the eschatological prophet’s message before it is too late” (273), while the parable of the talents/pounds was “an exhortation-plus-warning spoken by Jesus to his disciples, a summons to rise to the challenge of his demanding call to leave all and follow him” (309).

Finally, the conclusion (363–76) repeats the seven theses of chapter 37 and adds a number of further conclusions to them. On this follows, in the form of an appendix, “An Introductory Bibliography on the Parables of Jesus” (377–86).

This volume constitutes an invaluable contribution both to parable research and to historical Jesus studies. In my opinion, it is one of the high points of the A Marginal Jew series so far, rivaled only by volume 2, Mentor, Message, and Miracles (1994). As always, Meier’s prose is both smooth and precise, his arguments clearly laid out, and his sense of humor lightening up the presentation without ever detracting from his scholarly seriousness. I find convincing his demonstration of the redactional origin of the parable of the good Samaritan and his thesis that few individual parables can be traced back to the historical Jesus with any certainty. The book is a major step forward.

Meier’s decision not only to devote an entire chapter to the problem of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas but also to address questions related to Thomas repeatedly in the analyses of individual parables seems a little peculiar. It is true that the independence of Thomas “was once the opinio communis among North American scholars” and that a decisive shift of the burden of proof took place recently with the publication of Simon Gathercole’s and Mark Goodacre’s monographs on the topic in 2012 (73 n. 47). Still, I find it odd that the discussion of Thomas in chapter 38 takes up nearly sixty pages, while the survey of the
Synoptic material in chapter 39 is done in twenty-two. The latter chapter would have benefited from a more in-depth treatment in order to avoid the impression that some of the parables are being brushed away too quickly. For example, Meier excludes the parable of the seed growing by itself (Mark 4:26–29) from further consideration as a potentially authentic parable by pointing out that, “not only does [it] lacks multiple attestation, it is not even taken over by Matthew or Luke” (192). But does Matthew’s and Luke’s rejection of this parable really speak against its authenticity? If anything, one would have expected it to count as an instance of embarrassment or discontinuity, thus providing an argument in favor of authenticity. A more extensive treatment here, besides a clarification of under what circumstances the criterion of discontinuity may be invoked, would have been helpful.

Notwithstanding these critical remarks, I find the fifth volume of A Marginal Jew to be an excellent book and an important section of Meier’s “long and dusty” road trip. Luckily, the journey continues.