

has written it to mean” (985). Yet how can we establish what God intended to say, except by examining the (divinely inspired) intentions of the human authors? And what authoritative role should the church community and its tradition play in a biblical interpretation that begins with the literal meaning intended by the human authors?

Appropos of Catholic teaching, one could agree with Carson: “Catholicism has held that tradition has an authority comparable to that of Scripture” (1163; see 292). After all, Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation insisted on Scripture and tradition being closely bound together: “they flow from the same divine well-spring [revelation], come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move toward the same goal” (*Dei Verbum* [DV] 9). Since the origin, function, and finality of Scripture and tradition are so intimately linked, one should agree that their authority is at least “comparable.” Carson, however, presses on to claim in an unqualified fashion that in the Catholic view “the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the church, *alone* determines what Scripture and tradition mean” (1163; emphasis mine). Vatican II teaches rather that the “task of authentically [i.e. authoritatively] interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed down, has been entrusted only to the living teaching office of the church” (DV 10). The Council then states that “interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject” to the judgment of the church [i.e. the magisterium] (DV 12). This corresponds to practice. On a day-to-day basis, the magisterium is far from determining *alone* what Scripture and tradition mean. It does so rarely, as the ultimate, authoritative interpreter of divine revelation. Earlier Carson rightly speaks about the “ultimate” teaching authority claimed for the Magisterium (24). Being “ultimate” is not the same as standing “alone.”

A further statement by Carson about the “exclusive sufficiency” of Scriptures also calls for qualification (1163). Very many Catholics have accepted their “material” sufficiency, in that they convey the full truth of divine revelation, but not their “formal” sufficiency. The Scriptures need to be interpreted by tradition, church teachers, and Christian believers. Those who return to the language about the “sufficiency” of the Scriptures need to distinguish between “material” and “formal” sufficiency (see 294, 305–7).

All in all, this volume should be welcomed not only for its invitation to let the Scriptures guide Christian thinking and acting, but also for its repeated message that sinful human beings can evade or distort what the Holy Spirit wishes to say to us through the inspired Word of God.

Gerald O’Collins, SJ  
University of Divinity (Melbourne) and Australian Catholic University

*A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus.* By John P. Meier. Volume 5: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables. New Haven: Yale University, 2016. Pp. xiii + 441. \$39.95.

This installment in Professor Meier’s ongoing project, producing a historical-critical account of the first-century Jewish prophet, teacher, and healer Jesus of Nazareth will

disappoint most readers. General readers, students, and pastors hoping for fresh insights into the many fascinating stories attributed to Jesus should be warned that this book is not such a guide. M.'s decision to demand that his reader refer back to material covered in the four previous volumes in his study for crucial points in the argument may add to their frustration. Of course the subtitle provides the red flag. The entire book is a sustained argument against the authenticity that is definitively originating in the words of the historical Jesus in all but four of the parables attributed to him in the Gospels. "The few, the happy few," as M. entitles the final chapter devoted to them, are The Mustard Seed, The Evil Tenants of the Vineyard, The Great Supper, and The Talents or Pounds.

At that point, both the interested non-specialist and the scholar may feel that the birds, rocky ground, sun, and thorns have done in the harvest! M. wages a relentless attack on one of the most widely held views in Jesus scholarship, whether on the conservative or liberal side, namely, that in the parables we encounter the unique voice and aesthetic genius of Jesus of Nazareth. Two long, dense, and footnote-loaded chapters are devoted to making this argument. The first (chapter 38, numbered in sequence from volume 1) launches a relentless attack on the dominant North American view that the second- or third-century Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* provides access to our earliest evidence for the words of Jesus, himself. Following what is the consensus among European scholars, M. pursues a meticulous examination of each parable in *Gos. Thom.* with parallels in the Synoptic Gospels. In all cases the *Gos. Thom.* version exhibits typical features of second-century use of Jesus traditions. Rather than citing the text of a particular canonical Gospel, these authors often present a conflation of canonical versions. Enough traces of the particular vocabulary of the Synoptic Gospels remain in the *Gos. Thom.* material to justify treating its Jesus material as dependent upon versions of the canonical Gospels. However, M. presses his argument too far on occasion when he invents allegedly gnostic interpretations for *Gos. Thom.* passages dependent on Sethian mythologizing that is nowhere evident in this work.

A second equally dense chapter subjects all of the Synoptic parables to the severely historicist criteria that M. has employed throughout his historical Jesus project. Since that requires a unit of Jesus tradition be handed down in more than one independent source, no parable attested in only one Gospel will survive. Disqualification of such favorites as The Good Samaritan or The Prodigal Son is bolstered with a painstaking linguistic analysis to demonstrate that either Luke or the source unique to that Gospel composed the parable. M. dismisses more recent scholarly attempts to apply memory theory, observations about oral performance, and the like in accounting for Jesus material which survives only in a particular evangelist's voice. Rigorous application of M.'s second favorite criterion, dissimilarity or embarrassment, results in an even more surprising result, rejection of commonly proposed Jewish settings as authenticating evidence for a number of the parables.

The third chapter presents an equally detailed treatment of the four parables which M. confidently brands "authentic" Jesus. Though he grants that others may be categorized as *non liquet*, M. does not employ either conclusions reached about the teaching of Jesus in his earlier volumes or his assured results to promote some of those parables

to probably authentic. Why? Perhaps because the overall result of what the conclusion acknowledges as a thoroughly contrarian argument is that the parables play only a marginal role in reconstructing the teaching and ministry of the Jewish eschatological prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. The Evil Tenants parable shows that Jesus was aware of the mounting hostility against him and linked his fate with that of Israel. The parable of the Talents or Pounds (M. argues for two distinct versions) highlights divided responses to the eschatological proclamation. The rich, powerful, or professionally pious tend to reject it, while the poor and marginalized find hope in the great reversal imaged in the Great Supper. The Talents/Pounds divested of the modern tendencies to see the master as harsh or abusive, an accusation voiced by the servant who failed, teaches an important lesson about God's grace, a free gift with strenuous demands.

Exegetes, especially those criticized in M.'s extensive footnotes, will have plenty of objections to details. For the theologian or ethicist, the book on its own leads to a Bultmannian conclusion: the historical Jesus is the presupposition of Christian theology, not its foundation.

*Pheme Perkins*  
*Boston College*

*The World's Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria.* By Michael Peppard. *Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture.* New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2016. Pp. xi + 320. \$50.

Books often come with sensationalist titles, but, in this instance, the superlative is warranted. The house church in the border town of Dura-Europos, which was buried in 256 CE by the Roman army and excavated in the 1930s, represents the oldest church to have survived to the present day. As such it is of inestimable significance, though the only monograph-length study of it in English was the final excavation report published in 1967. This is therefore a topic that has long needed a scholarly, yet accessible treatment, and in many respects that need is fulfilled in the new study by Peppard.

P.'s book is focused on the most remarkable feature of this church, its partially preserved wall paintings in the room used for a baptistery. P. provides a revisionist interpretation of these paintings, employing a methodology that draws on both texts and ritual to imaginatively recreate the experience of the neophyte processing through the room toward the basin. Most of the new interpretations he offers have been set forth in the past decade by several scholars in a variety of shorter studies, two by P. himself. Still, it is a worthwhile achievement to have drawn together all of this scattered scholarship into a single, readable volume giving a comprehensive interpretation of this ritualistic space.

While P. rightly does not insist on a single referent for each of the images, but gladly concedes the polyvalent way in which early Christian art was conceived, he does argue for the primacy of certain themes with reference to each of them. So, for example, the image of David slaying Goliath (chapter 2) evokes David's status as God's "anointed,"