

# 'Noli Me Tangere': Why John Meier Won't Touch The Risen Lord

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## SUMMARY

John Meier distinguishes 'the real Jesus' from 'the historical Jesus.' Meier claims that whatever happened to the real Jesus after his death, his resurrection cannot belong to the historical Jesus because that event is in principle not open to the observation of any observer. But why think that the resurrection is not observable in this way? Meier finds justification in Gerald O'Collins' view that although the resurrection of Jesus is a real event, it is not an event in space and time and hence should not be called historical, since a necessary condition of historical occurrences is that they are known to have happened in our space-time continuum. Is this a good argument for the resurrection's being in principle excludable from the historical Jesus? A close examination of the argument reveals that it is not and that Meier's adoption of such a procedure contradicts Meier's own historical methodology.

## 'NOLI ME TANGERE': WHY JOHN MEIER WON'T TOUCH THE RISEN LORD

John Meier is the most important and influential historical Jesus scholar now writing. [1] When he therefore declares that, as a matter of principle, he *qua* historian cannot and therefore will not discuss the subject of Jesus' alleged resurrection, anyone interested in Life of Jesus research will want to know the reasons for this portentous restriction.

From the outset of his voluminous, on-going study of the historical Jesus, Meier makes it clear that the resurrection of Jesus is strictly off-limits for him as a historian: his study 'will bring us to the momentous and tragic final days of Jesus' life, ending with his crucifixion and burial . . . a treatment of the resurrection is omitted not because it is denied but simply because the restrictive definition of the historical Jesus I will be using does not allow us to proceed into matters that can be affirmed only by faith.' [2]

At first blush one might think that we have here an expression of methodological naturalism on Meier's part. It is a commonplace complaint among conservative biblical scholars that scepticism about the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is based not so much on a paucity of evidence as on a methodological or even metaphysical presupposition of naturalism, which precludes the hypothesis 'Jesus rose from the dead' from being among the various competing explanations of the facts. [3] As a miraculous event, the resurrection is excluded from the pool of live explanatory options, which is restricted to purely naturalistic hypotheses, and cannot therefore even be considered by the historian.

But such is not the source of Meier's inhibition. As is evident from his treatment of Jesus' miracles, Meier is quite willing to consider the historicity of the purportedly miraculous event itself, even if prescinding from a judgement as to its miraculous nature. He defines a miracle as follows:

A miracle is (1) an unusual, startling, or extraordinary event that is in principle perceivable by an interested and fair-minded observer, (2) an event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or in other known forces that operate in our world of time and space, and (3) an event that is the result of a special act of God, doing what no human power can do. [4]

It is the third condition which constitutes in Meier's thinking the obstacle for a historian's verdict that some event is a miracle. He observes, 'Anyone who claims that a miracle has happened is saying in effect: "God has acted here to accomplish what no human force or any other known power in our world can accomplish. This extraordinary event was caused by God alone".' [5] While Meier thinks that it is possible for the historian to prove that such a claim is false, he thinks that 'it is inherently impossible for historians working with empirical evidence within the confines of their own discipline ever to make the positive judgment: "God has directly acted here to accomplish something beyond all human power".' [6]

Interestingly, Meier thinks that the philosopher or theologian could legitimately make such a judgement, but not the historian:

To be sure, a professional historian who is likewise a believing Christian might proceed from one judgment ("this extraordinary event, occurring in a religious context, has no discernible explanation") to a second judgment ("this event is a miracle worked by God"). But this further judgment is not made in his or her capacity as a professional historian. The judgment that this particular event is a miracle accomplished by God necessarily moves the person making the judgment into the realm of philosophy or theology. [7]

This differentiation seems to assume a remarkably naïve bifurcation between philosophy and history. Meier treats history as though it were a pristine realm unsullied by philosophical judgements. That such a bifurcation is untenable is clear from Meier's own philosophical judgements exercised in his capacity as a historian, for everything we have been and shall be discussing in this paper concerns philosophy of history. Meier's definition of the miraculous, his prohibition of historian's judgements concerning the miraculous nature of events, his several distinctions concerning the historical and the real Jesus, his argument that the resurrection is not a historical event, are all of them the result of philosophical judgements on Meier's part. If these philosophical judgements are permitted the historian in his work, why not the philosophical judgement that some event is a miracle? Meier provides no justification for thinking that such a judgement could be made by the philosopher (or the historian acting as a philosopher) but not by the historian as such. He merely asks the question: 'What evidence and criteria

could justify a historian as a *historian* in reaching such a judgment?' [8] As Meier should know from the vast literature on the problem of miracles referenced in his footnotes, that question has not at all gone unanswered by those who think that miracles are identifiable via historical investigation. [9]

But let that pass. Meier's stricture against historical identification of miracles implies at most that the historian must prescind from judgements like 'God raised Jesus from the dead' but would still permit the judgement 'Jesus rose from the dead.' Such differentiated judgements would parallel those which on Meier's account are proscribed or permitted to the historian investigating the alleged miracles performed by Jesus. Meier does not rule the miracle stories off-limits, as he does the resurrection narratives, but seeks to render a historical judgement about the occurrence of the events while leaving aside the question of their miraculous nature. Just as the historian can affirm that Jesus raised various persons from the dead, so can he affirm on the basis of the evidence that Jesus himself rose from the dead. One cannot consistently on Meier's methodology deny to the historian the possibility of the judgement 'Jesus rose from the dead' on the grounds that such an event is so obviously miraculous, for this would involve the historian's rendering a verdict about the miraculous nature of the alleged event, which Meier insists is impossible for the historian as such. This situation might strike us as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Meier's claim that the historian cannot possibly identify any event as miraculous; but still, if we stick with his stricture concerning the sorts of judgements that are open to the historian, the judgement that 'Jesus rose from the dead' must be among them, since it neither refers to God nor identifies Jesus' resurrection as a miracle.

As an aside, it is a curiosity of this debate that Meier himself does not in fact think that Jesus' resurrection, if it occurred, was a miracle. He cautions against 'lumping together the miracles of Jesus' public ministry and his resurrection.' [10] He states, 'I would not classify the resurrection as a miracle, since it does not fit the definition I have proposed above. That is to say, it is not in principle perceivable by any and all observers (cf. the Apostle Peter's statement in Acts 10.40-41).' [11] Leave aside the tendentious appeal to Acts 10.40-41, which, given Luke's physicalistic portrayal of Jesus' resurrection appearances, surely has reference to divine selectivity of the witnesses than to the supposedly purely intra-mental nature of Christ's appearances. If the resurrection of Jesus does not on Meier's definition count as a miracle, then this is surely a *reductio* of that definition. And, in fact, his definition is tainted with epistemic notions which are irrelevant to an event's being a miracle. In condition (2), for example, why should the forces be said to be 'known'? If an event is caused by purely natural forces which due to human ignorance have not yet been discovered, is it still a miracle? On such a definition, events which were once miracles (not merely *considered* to be miracles) have now shed that status. Being a miracle becomes a function of human knowledge. Or again, why must the explanation referred to in condition (2) be 'reasonable'? What seems relevant is whether the event is explicable in terms of human abilities or natural forces, not whether that explanation is reasonable given the state of human knowledge at a

certain time. In the same way, condition (1), while crucial to the *identification* of any event as a miracle, is irrelevant to some event's *being* a miracle. It would surely be miraculous if God were suddenly to annihilate every sentient observer in the universe; yet such an event would be in principle unobservable. Epistemic considerations are thus important for the discernment of a miracle but not for an event's being a miracle. Hence, even if the resurrection of Jesus were, as Meier thinks, not in principle perceptible by any and all observers, it should not therefore be regarded as non-miraculous.

In sum, Meier's aversion to investigating Jesus' alleged resurrection historically is not due to his reservations about historians' identifying some event as a miracle. For he does not classify Jesus' resurrection as a miracle, and, in any case, the application of his stricture concerning the identification of miracles would preclude the historian only from judgements like 'God raised Jesus from the dead' but would leave open the possibility of judgements like 'Jesus rose from the dead.' So why does Meier refuse to investigate the resurrection or to discuss the resurrection narratives?

He says that the resurrection is off-limits due to the restrictive definition of the historical Jesus which he will be using throughout his investigation. So what is that definition? Meier says that the historical Jesus or the Jesus of history (the terms are used synonymously) 'is a modern abstraction and construct. By the Jesus of history I mean the Jesus whom we can "recover" and examine using the scientific tools of modern historical research.' [12] Meier notes that 'This definition is not some arbitrary invention of mine; it is the commonly accepted one in present Jesus-of-history research.' [13] The historical Jesus is to be contrasted with the real Jesus. The opening lines of Meier's first chapter of his first volume cleanly distinguish the two: 'The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus. The real Jesus is not the historical Jesus.' [14] We might think that by 'the real Jesus' Meier means the human person who actually lived and wrought. But that would be a mistake. For Meier the real Jesus is also a modern abstraction and construct, but a fuller one. The closest Meier comes to a definition of the real Jesus is 'a reasonably complete record of public words and deeds' of Jesus. [15] Later he refers to the real Jesus as 'a reasonably complete biographical portrait.' [16] In addition to these two abstractions, there is a third abstraction lurking in the wings which Meier calls the 'total reality' of Jesus, which is 'everything he . . . ever thought, felt, experienced, did, and said.' [17]

Although it is not strictly germane to our inquiry, I cannot but pause to reflect that this distinction is bizarre almost to the point of incoherence and almost entirely irrelevant to the historian's true concern. Neither the total reality of Jesus, nor the real Jesus, nor the historical Jesus is a flesh-and-blood human being who actually lived. For they are all of them mere abstractions, so that to refer to them by the proper name 'Jesus,' as though any of them was once a human being, is utterly misleading. The individual named Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew who lived in first century Palestine. But the entities referred to by Meier are in fact collections of propositions or statements. None of them is a 'he' but an 'it'; none is even an individual but a class. The total reality of Jesus seems to be the collection of all true

propositions about Jesus (that is, about that individual referred to above who actually lived in first century Palestine). The real Jesus seems to be the collection of all true propositions about the public life of Jesus. [18] As such the real Jesus would seem to be a proper subset of the total reality of Jesus, comprising enough propositions of the latter to constitute a fairly complete description of the public life of Jesus of Nazareth. The historical Jesus seems to be the collection of all propositions which can be rendered probable by historical research. As such the historical Jesus may or may not be a proper subset of the real Jesus, since the propositions composing the historical Jesus may not all be true. Historical evidence may support a proposition which is in fact false, so that a proposition belonging to the historical Jesus may not be a member of the real Jesus.

What is evident is that these collections of propositions are none of them persons and, as such, are not the object of the historian's study. A philosopher may take propositions as the object of his study, asking, for example, whether the Principle of Bivalence holds universally with respect to them, or whether true propositions have truth-makers. But historians do not take as the object of their study collections of propositions; rather they study the persons and events referred to by those propositions. One wonders how the actual person Jesus of Nazareth managed to escape Meier's interest. The reductio of Meier's claim that he is pursuing the historical Jesus in his study is the fact that if 'Jesus' refers to the historical Jesus, then virtually every sentence about Jesus in Meier's massive volumes turns out to be false. For the historical Jesus, contrary to Meier's assertions, was not born in Nazareth, did not speak Greek, and did not die by crucifixion. As a collection of propositions the historical Jesus is not a human being and so was never born, never spoke any language, and could not die. Only a person can do such things, and on Meier's account the historical Jesus is not a person. As such the historical Jesus is not the object of the historian's inquiry. What Meier and the rest of us really want to know is whether the person Jesus of Nazareth was born in Nazareth, spoke Greek, was executed by crucifixion, and so forth.

Meier states that the failure to distinguish between the real Jesus and the historical Jesus has led to 'endless confusion' in the quest of the historical Jesus. [19] In fact, it is the distinction as drawn by Meier which is terribly confused. The confusion becomes evident in Meier's own locutions, as, for example, when he says, 'the "reasonably complete" record of the "real" Jesus is irrevocably lost to us today,' [20] for on his definition this statement is like stuttering, meaning 'the reasonably complete record of the reasonably complete record is lost to us today.' On Meier's definitions we are forced to affirm the seemingly incoherent conclusions that the real Jesus was not a real person and that the historical Jesus was not a historical person. As a good historian Meier is really after the Jesus who actually lived, and to assign Jesus' proper name to collections of propositions can only lead to confusion.

Now someone might accuse me of pedantry and logic-chopping. Obviously, there is some sort of

distinction to be drawn between what Jesus was actually like and what historical inquiry can establish about Jesus! Of course, there is, but it is not a distinction between two Jesuses. Rather 'what Jesus was actually like' and 'what historical inquiry can establish about Jesus' refer to two classes of propositions about Jesus. We try to find out what Jesus was actually like by means of what historical inquiry can establish about Jesus. Because historical inquiry is uncertain our conclusions will be provisional. But they will be conclusions *about Jesus*, that is, about the actual person who is the referent of those propositions. In both ordinary language and in the history of research, phrases like 'the historical Jesus' and 'the real Jesus' typically refer to the individual who actually lived, and to use them as names of classes of propositions is idiosyncratic and misleading. We can draw the needed distinctions in a more philosophically discriminating and less confusing way. By so doing we shall avoid the illusion that in investigating Jesus historically we are not studying the real Jesus who actually lived and wrought.

But we digress. As we have seen, Meier takes the historical Jesus to be what we can recover and examine about Jesus using the scientific tools of modern historical research. All right; so what is it about that definition that precludes the resurrection narratives' being examined with such tools and our recovering the resurrection of Jesus as a part of the historical Jesus? Meier answers that 'in the historical-critical context, the "real" has been defined—and has to be defined—in terms of what exists in this world of time and space, what can be experienced in principle by any observer, and what can be reasonably deduced and inferred from such experience.' [21] Here Meier appears to state three necessary conditions of something's being real—that is, belonging to a reasonably complete biographical portrait of someone—in the context of historical inquiry. If we take the historical to be a proper subset of the real, then nothing can be a part of the historical Jesus unless it is a part of the real Jesus. If Jesus' resurrection fails to meet the conditions for being part of the real Jesus, then it follows that it is not part of the historical Jesus either. The difficulty with this construal of Meier's reasoning is that the historical Jesus does not seem to be a proper subset of the real Jesus. For given shifts in historical evidence there are in fact many historical Jesuses, but Meier seems to want to say that there is only one real Jesus. If we say there is also a multiplicity of real Jesuses, then the current historical Jesus need not be a subset of various possible real Jesuses. So something (like the resurrection) could belong to the historical Jesus even though it is not a part of the real Jesus. Perhaps Meier is best understood as thinking that the three afore-mentioned conditions of something's being a member of the real Jesus are also necessary conditions of something's being a member of the historical Jesus.

Now the three conditions stated by Meier for some things' being historically recoverable seems quite unremarkable. So which of those conditions preclude the resurrection from belonging to the historical Jesus? Here things really become interesting. To my knowledge, Meier never denies that the third condition could be fulfilled, that is to say, that it can be reasonably deduced and inferred from such facts

as Jesus' empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the Christian Way that Jesus rose from the dead. But Meier doubts that the first condition can be fulfilled by Jesus' resurrection. Citing Gerald O'Collins, Meier asserts that 'although the "resurrection is a real, bodily event involving the person of Jesus of Nazareth," the resurrection of Jesus "is not an event in space and time and hence should not be called historical," since "we should require an historical occurrence to be something significant that is known to have happened in our space-time continuum".' [22]

Here Meier asserts that Jesus' resurrection was an actual, bodily event but did not occur in time and space. Accordingly, it can be said to have actually occurred without being historical in Meier's idiosyncratic sense, that is, recoverable by the scientific tools of historical research. Now the claim that Jesus' resurrection can be an actual, bodily event involving the person Jesus of Nazareth without being an occurrence in time and space is certainly strange. Unfortunately, Meier does not explain the paradox. But a consultation of O'Collins' article, published in this *Journal*, sheds light on the conundrum. [23]

The key to understanding O'Collins' claim that the resurrection does not occur in space and time is his conception of the resurrection as a kind of transition. The resurrection, on his view, is Christ's transition out of space and time into a new reality. 'Through the resurrection Christ passes out of the empirical sphere of this world to a new mode of existence in the "other" world of God.' [24] Through the resurrection Christ moves outside the ordinary datable, localizable conditions of our experience to become an other-worldly reality. Whereas those raised from the dead by Jesus during his earthly ministry 'resume life under normal bodily conditions' so that 'Their space-time lives continue,' Jesus 'does not return to life in our space-time continuum.' [25] Christ 'on the far side of the resurrection' did not continue to exist under the bodily conditions which we experience and within which the historian operates. [26]

Now before pressing on, it must be said that O'Collins' claim that Jesus' resurrection did not involve a return to life in our space-time continuum presupposes a patent misreading of the gospel narratives, not to speak of Jewish texts. One of the merits of N. T. Wright's exhaustive study of ancient texts concerning resurrection from the dead is his demonstration that the notion of resurrection was not a flight to an other-worldly, non-spatio-temporal realm but inherently involved the restoration of life in the realm of space and time. [27] That life was not, of course, a mere reanimation to mortal existence, but it was bodily, physical, and spatio-temporal. O'Collins has turned Jesus' resurrection into Jesus' translation into heaven on the pattern of Enoch and Elijah, a quite different category than resurrection of the dead.

But let that pass. Let us grant O'Collins that with the resurrection the four-dimensional spacetime worm which was the human being Jesus of Nazareth came abruptly to an end. Still, we might object, the final

three-dimensional surface of that spacetime worm had specific spatio-temporal co-ordinates. It was at that place and time that the resurrection occurred. Pannenberg makes a similar point, observing that if the empty tomb is historical, then the resurrection did occur in space. 'If it really took place,' he says wryly, 'it took place in Palestine and not for instance in America.' [28] One might add, 'And it took place in time as well, sometime around A.D. 30 and not, for instance, in 1967.'

In his response to Pannenberg, O'Collins' conception of the resurrection as a transition becomes crucial. He responds,

It seems odd, however, to speak of a transition "out of" space, viz. to a reality not locatable in space, taking place in space, viz. in Palestine. For even if the "initial point" of this transition were located in space, this would not justify us in concluding that the transition "took place" in space. Besides it seems preferable to talk of the tomb containing the body of the historical Jesus not as "the initial point" of the transition, but as being the last place where Jesus in the normal historical sense was locatable. [29]

We can set aside immediately the red-herring of the tomb's not being the initial point of the transition, for no one has suggested that. Rather the idea is that the four-dimensional spacetime worm which in its final stages is Jesus' corpse has its terminus at a certain spatial location which is in the tomb. Why not say that the resurrection occurred there (and then)? The answer, says O'Collins, is that a transition out of space ought not to be said to occur in space.

There is something both right and wrong about this answer. Compare a shopper's exiting a grocery store. Does his exiting the store occur in the store? At any point in the store right up to and including its boundary point, the shopper is still in the building and so has not yet exited the store. But once he is outside the store, there is no first point at which he can be said to exit the store, for between any exterior point and the store's boundary there is a dense series of closer points at each of which the shopper had already exited the store. So where does his exiting the store occur?

It is evident that O'Collins has unwittingly entangled himself in the ancient sorites paradoxes of motion. [30] Transitional events like stopping, exiting, and dying do not occur at any single spacetime point. That the sorites paradoxes are, indeed, the culprit here, and not the nature of the resurrection, is evident from the fact that even if the resurrection were conceived as a transformation wholly within space and time, one could not specify a single spacetime point at which it happened. It would either not yet have happened or have already happened. Nevertheless, just as it is perfectly acceptable to say that the shopper exited the building, say, through the front door rather than the rear entrance, so Jesus' transformation to his glorified state can be similarly located in the sense that one can specify the spacetime point at which his corruptible existence ended. So just as the historian can determine where someone exited a building or when someone died, there is no in principle objection to the historian's

determining where and when Jesus' resurrection occurred. It would be very much like determining on the basis of testimony and evidence where and when the children in C. S. Lewis' tale first stepped from this world into Narnia.

The final irony of Meier's appeal to O'Collins' argument as justification for ignoring the resurrection narratives is that O'Collins, himself a strong proponent of the historical credibility of Jesus' resurrection, in the very same article goes on to insist, 'To argue that the resurrection of Christ is not appropriately described as an historical event is not to assert that historical evidence and inquiry are irrelevant.' [31] He lists three areas of inquiry: (1) the 'proclaiming faith' of the disciples can be investigated by the historian; (2) Christ's appearances at definite times and places to a particular number of persons are historical from the side of those who encountered him; and (3) the empty tomb can be the object of investigation by the historian. These are precisely the three independently established facts which I have elsewhere argued are best explained by the resurrection of Jesus, namely, the origin of the Christian Way, Jesus' post-mortem appearances, and the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. [32] Even given O'Collins' conclusion that Jesus' resurrection was not 'historical' in his Pickwickian sense, still all the evidence for Jesus' resurrection remains intact to be explored by the scientific tools of historical research. Yet Meier passes over this aspect of O'Collins' argument in silence.

So it cannot be said that the events of the resurrection narratives or even the resurrection itself fail to meet the first condition Meier lays down for being historical. What, then, about the second condition, that an event must be experienceable in principle by any observer? We have already seen that Meier denies that the resurrection 'is in principle open to the observation of any and every observer.' [33] But he does not explain himself. I see no reason to think that someone sitting in the tomb holding vigil over the body of Jesus would not have observed his resurrection. If Meier means to simply reiterate O'Collins' argument about the resurrection's being a transition out of this world, then the resurrection would be unobservable only in the sense that a person's suddenly vanishing is unobservable: one can see the person at the last point at which he exists visibly but there is no first point at which he is gone (sorites again). And again, even if it were true that the resurrection is in principle not observable by anyone, that is still no excuse for ignoring the events of the resurrection narratives listed by O'Collins.

That leads to my final point. O'Collins' argument that the resurrection of Jesus did not occur in space and time is the result of a prolonged historical study of the New Testament evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. But in the absence of any such investigation, how does Meier know whether or not Jesus' resurrection, if it took place, took place in space and time and whether it was observable or not? How can he know *a priori* that Wright is not correct that Jesus' resurrection was a spatio-temporal event which was in principle observable by any fair-minded and interested observer? How does he know that Jesus' resurrection can only be affirmed by faith and not through historical investigation, apart from

such an investigation?

I can think of only one answer to that question: theology. It is a theological conviction on Meier's part that Jesus' resurrection is affirmable only by faith. Meier's theological commitment intrudes in a comment like the following on Pannenberg's historical approach to the resurrection: 'In my opinion, Pannenberg's overall approach to revelation and faith on the one hand and history and reason on the other creates more difficulties than it solves. At times it comes close to saying that the object of faith can be proven by historical research.' [34] What is, of course, ironic about this is that Meier eschews theological commitments in his work as a historian, aspiring to approach questions from a theologically neutral stance. But it seems clear that the reason John Meier as a historian won't touch the Risen Lord is because his prior theological commitments preclude this. I hope that in view of the above criticisms he will shed those commitments and bring his considerable talents to bear on the question of the historicity of Jesus' post-mortem appearances, his empty tomb, the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection, and ultimately, upon the enigma of Jesus' resurrection itself. That would be a fitting conclusion to his masterpiece.

#### Footnotes:

[1]

Meier's principal work is his multi-volume *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, of which three of the projected four volumes have appeared: *A Marginal Jew, I: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); *A Marginal Jew, II: Mentor, Message, and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); and *A Marginal Jew, III: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). The subtitle of the much anticipated fourth and final volume will be *The Enigmas Jesus Posed and Was*. Significantly, it will end with the enigma of Jesus' death. Calling this 'the most central of the enigmas Jesus posed and was,' Meier says that 'Any reconstruction of the historical Jesus must end with this enigma' (*Marginal Jew*, III: 646). The enigma of Jesus' resurrection does not even come into view.

[2]

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I:13.

[3]

The fellows of the Jesus Seminar exemplify such a naturalistic approach. See comments in R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, 'Introduction' to *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993),

pp. 2-3. Cf. comments on p. 398, where it becomes clear that the risen Jesus is taken as a non-historical figure *by definition*.

[\[4\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 512.

[\[5\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 513.

[\[6\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 513.

[\[7\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 514.

[\[8\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 513-14.

[\[9\]](#)

For example, Bilynskyj proposes the following criteria for identifying some event *E* as a miracle: (1) The evidence for the occurrence of *E* is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space from the point of the inquiry; (2) An account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural agents, such that they could account for *E*, would be clumsy and *ad hoc*; (3) There is no evidence except the inexplicability of *E* for one or more natural agents which could produce *E*; (4) There is some justification for a supernatural explanation of *E*, independent of the inexplicability of *E* (Stephen S. Bilynskyj, 'God, Nature and The Concept of Miracle' [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1982], p. 222).

[\[10\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 529.

[\[11\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 529; cf. II: 525.

[\[12\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 25.

[\[13\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 34. That Meier may be right about this is borne out by a somewhat similar distinction drawn by another prominent Life of Jesus scholar James D. G. Dunn, whose weighty first volume of a projected multi-volume work *Christianity in the Making* has also recently appeared (James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, I: Jesus Remembered* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003], pp. 126-7, 130-1, 827, 876, 882). Dunn recognizes that although the historical Jesus is always identified as a construction of historical research, in practice the phrase is used to refer to Jesus himself. It seems to me that this slide is inevitable and unremarkable for any historian who is not a narrative non-realist. For his part Dunn distinguishes between Jesus himself and Jesus remembered—as though accurate memories of Jesus would not be memories of Jesus himself! Although Dunn asserts that the only reasonable objective for a quest of the historical Jesus is Jesus remembered, he inconsistently goes on to argue that from the impact Jesus made on the traditions about him, we can, in fact, discern something of the person who made that impact. This leads Dunn to the bizarre conclusion that "the Jesus tradition is Jesus remembered. And the Jesus thus remembered is Jesus . . ." (p. 335), from which it follows that Jesus himself is a tradition! As in Meier's case, the person Jesus of Nazareth has disappeared from view. What Dunn should say, and wants to say, I think, is that in the Synoptic tradition we find preserved memories of what Jesus said and did; those memories are largely accurate; we can, therefore, know a good deal about Jesus; and there is no competing portrait of Jesus that is as historically credible as the one delivered to us by the tradition and that can be used to overturn the conclusions drawn on the basis of that tradition.

[\[14\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 21.

[\[15\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 22.

[\[16\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 24.

[\[17\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 21.

[\[18\]](#)

This is not entirely clear. For if a reasonably complete portrait is constructed by historical methods, as Meier suggests, it need not be accurate and so could comprise false propositions. In that case it is the historical Jesus which is a proper subset of the real Jesus. Such a position is problematic, however, for then there will be no such entity as the real Jesus, since a plurality of reasonably complete portraits of historical figures is possible.

[\[19\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 21.

[\[20\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 22

[\[21\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 197.

[\[22\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, I: 201.

[\[23\]](#)

G. G. O'Collins, 'Is the Resurrection an "Historical" Event?' *Heythrop Journal* 8 (1967), pp. 381-7. The weight which this article has played in Meier's thinking is evident from the fact that Meier cites O'Collins' article in both volume one and volume two of *A Marginal Jew* and reiterates the reasoning in a more recent interview conducted by John Bookser Feister, "Finding the Historical Jesus," *St. Anthony Messenger*, December, 1997, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Dec1997/feature3.asp>.

[\[24\]](#)

O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 384.

[\[25\]](#)

O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 385.

[\[26\]](#)

O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 385.

[\[27\]](#)

N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God, III: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); see pp. 625-6 for a particularly powerful statement of the point.

[\[28\]](#)

Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology as History*, p. 265, n. 76, cited by O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 386.

[\[29\]](#)

O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 387.

[\[30\]](#)

See the engaging discussion of these paradoxes by Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), chap. 26.

[\[31\]](#)

O'Collins, 'Resurrection,' p. 385.

[\[32\]](#)

See, e.g., William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 3rd ed., *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 16 (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 2004).

[\[33\]](#)

Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 525.

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Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II: 529.