

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009. 283 pages. \$22 paper, \$32.50 cloth.

John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. IV: Law and Love*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009. 663 pages. \$55 cloth.

Two recent books do forensic research into the origins of the theological and institutional development of the Christian Church and its writings. Luke Timothy Johnson, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Chandler School of Theology and John P. Meier, Professor of New Testament at Notre Dame University, have provided the major sources of influence from the Greco-Roman and Jewish world that gave content and context to the Christian message and the Church that advanced it. Johnson says, “In the period when Christianity arose, Judaism could legitimately be called a form of Greco-Roman religion because of its sustained engagement with Hellenistic culture and the ways in which its religious responses matched those of pagans.” Johnson and Meier’s combined works show how Greco-Roman philosophical and religious thought, various modes of halakhic (related to Jewish Law) interpretation by diverse schools of Judaism, and the teachings of the historical Jesus coalesced into orthodox Christianity.

In *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*, Johnson traces four religious categories that he says were endemic to Greco-Roman religion: 1) religion as a benefit for sharing in the life of the gods; 2) religion as a source for ethical growth; 3) religion as a means to escape materiality; and 4) religion as a source of social stability. He shows how these were manifested in Greco-Roman philosophy and religious practice and connects them with similar strains found in the Old Testament, Intertestamental literature (200 BCE – 200 CE), and the writings of the New Testament, as well as the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.

The first two models are prominent in the New Testament. The second two developed in the second and third centuries C.E. For example, Model “A” — sharing in divine benefits is found in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians in the gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, healing, and the gift of tongues. Model “B,” which deals with the formation of ethical character, is expressed in Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians where he encourages Christians to “put on” Christ. (This is especially important to understanding Meier’s work, *Law and Love*.) Model “C” emerged in the form of Gnosticism and was rejected by the

Church because it disdained the human body. Model “D” provided for the office of the bishop.

John Meier’s *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. IV: Law and Love* investigates what the historical Jesus said or did not say regarding Jewish law. Meier says, “We must regularly remind ourselves that the first and second generation of Christians selected, reformulated, created and probably deleted sayings of Jesus on the Law. All these activities reflected the needs and problems of a group of Jews for Jesus as they both argued with other Jews and at the same time struggled to incorporate all-too-recently pagan Gentiles into their holy assembly of the last days, the church. It was this creative and somewhat chaotic matrix that gave birth to the various reinterpretations of Jesus’ approach to the Law but, first of all, the four evangelists’ reinterpretation of Jesus’ interpretation of the Law.”

Meier uses the tools of modern biblical criticism to uncover the actual teachings of Jesus that survive in the New Testament. He suggests four categories as a measuring stick for authenticity: 1) multiple attestation—that which is found in other sources; 2) dissimilarity—that which is contrary to the norm of what was common or expected in Jewish or pagan thought; 3) embarrassment—that which does not flatter Jesus; and 4) coherence—that which is consistent with the database established by the other criteria regarding the words and deeds of Jesus.

Meier states that these criteria are a means to uncover the Jesus of history and not the Christ from which the Christian message has developed in the epistles, gospels, and early creeds of the Church. These post-Pentecost reflections, he says, are the foundations of our faith and therefore, what is authentically Christian.

During the period of the historic Jesus, Meier says, Judaism was not a monolithic religion. He examines the various schools of halakha or interpretation of the laws found in the Tanach (Old Testament) and the unique take of Jesus on some of the debated moral issues of the day. He tells us that the Pharisees became the sole school of thought after the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE because they did not require it or the Promised Land to function as did, for example, the Sadducees and Scribes. Thus, they heavily influenced New Testament polemics.

Meier dissects the New Testament teaching on marriage, oath taking, purity laws (or kosher rules), Sabbath observance, and the Law of love. Jesus, according to Meier, was radical in his teaching on banning divorce and forbidding oath taking, in contradiction to Mosaic Law which permitted both. He therefore accepts these as the authentic teaching of Jesus based on the criteria of dissimilarity.

Jesus also had a unique take on Sabbath observance. Meier says it coheres “perfectly with Jesus’ humane, commonsense approach.” For Jesus, according to Meier, “The roots of the Sabbath lie in creation itself, but a creation that is meant to serve the good of a humanity created by God in the beginning and now restored by him in the last days.”

Meier reminds us, however, that the application of Jesus’ words, as well as other Gospel teachings on Law, were greatly influenced by the needs of the early gentile communities which rapidly overshadowed the influence of their original Jewish context. He states, “Indeed, in place of Jesus’ own Torah-teachings, the problem of a Jewish movement reaching out to a Gentile constituency created a need for new halakha decisions never covered by Jesus’ instructions.”

The Law of the New Testament was adapted to the pagan *sitz im leben* (setting in life). For example, in Meier’s investigation of Jesus’ teaching on divorce, he shows that whereas only males were permitted to divorce their wives according to Jewish law, the Gospel texts refer to husbands and wives not being permitted to divorce. He says that this is indicative of an accommodation of Jesus’ teaching to Roman law that allowed each partner to end the marriage. Also, Meier contends that there is no biblical evidence that Jesus spoke on the purity laws. He believes these were additions to the Gospel for the sake of the Gentiles being misled by the Judaizers who wanted to force them to observe kosher rules for eating and washing.

In Meier’s exegesis of the love commands, he examines the ethical demands for righteousness. He finds two that can be traced to the historical Jesus. The first is the double command of Jesus that places the love of God and neighbor on the same plane. The second is Jesus’ exhortation to love one’s enemies. Both, Meier says, fit the criteria of dissimilarity since neither can be found in the Jewish halakha tradition or in any teaching from the pagan world. They also cohere with Jesus’ self-understanding as the eschatological prophet, re-gathering Israel in the last age, trying to make things right according to God’s original plan in Genesis.

Meier, however, finds no support for attributing the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” to Jesus. He shows how this concept was present in Jewish teaching and pagan philosophy. He also says that ancient people adhered to this proverb as a common sense *modus vivendi*. Meier contends that the rule was appropriated from the culture itself by Matthew to summarize Jesus’ teachings on love in his Gospel. He says, “...it is Matthew, and Matthew alone, who creates the impression that a common saying of popular pagan ethics sums up, in Jesus’ eyes, the Jewish Scriptures.”

The message of these two books is that Jesus did not teach nor were the Gospels of the Church formed in a vacuum. Johnson states, “My analysis further suggests that there is no primitive, pristine form of Christianity that does not bear a strong resemblance to Greco-Roman religion, and that, further, the four ‘ways of being Christian’ in the contemporary world all have some claim to legitimacy within the tradition both of Judaism and earliest Christianity.” The Greco-Roman culture and a variety of Jewish groups debating halakha, as well as the unique take of Jesus on Torah regarding legal issues, remind us that revelation comes through history, culture, and in a unique way, through Jesus’ Incarnation.

The combining of reason with faith is therefore a past and present event in the formation of the Christian religion. These two books do not show faith or religion as over-ruling human reason. Instead they show that faith enlightens what humanity has traditionally seen as a reasoned good and raises it to a higher level. Far from dismissing culture, the Incarnation is its fulfillment. Good religious practice enhances humanity’s natural sense of right and wrong, and calls persons to a higher righteousness.

Michael Orsi
Ave Maria School of Law