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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary research on the historical Jesus always underlines the fact that Jesus should be viewed and interpreted as a first-century Palestinian Jew. Further, it stands that Jesus was not just marginally Jewish but very Jewish. He was a piously religious person fully in touch with his Jewish heritage.<sup>1</sup> Such focus and emphasis notwithstanding, however, rather seldom does one encounter investigations that expressly sought to analyze those aspects of Jesus' work and teaching that best manifest this integral Jewishness of his. The present study purposes to provide some such analyses.

Indeed, the question about the most Jewish about Jesus meets various obstacles. One such obstacle is the usual definition of the Judaism of the time as an utterly heterogeneous phenomenon with no mainstream or center.<sup>2</sup> Of course, if we picture Judaism without any distinguishable core, we will not manage to place Jesus near that core as "very Jewish" either. A simple solution: Our strategy of defining

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- 1 See my earlier and latest accounts of this research historical feature: T. Holmén, "The Jewishness of Jesus in the 'Third Quest'", M. Labahn and A. Schmidt (eds.), *Jesus, Mark and Q: The Teaching of Jesus and Its Earliest Records* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 143–162; idem, "'Jesus of Context: Putting Perspective in Perspective'", P. von Gemünden, D. G. Horrell and M. Küchler (eds.), *Jesus – Gestalt und Gestaltungen* (Festschrift G. Theissen; Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 515–535 (517–521). See also, for example, T. Holmén and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: Volume 3: The Historical Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 2575–2909 (*Part Three: Jesus and the Legacy of Israel*); J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 201–396 (*Section 3: Jesus within Judaism*).
  - 2 Cf. for instance the following statements: "early Judaism appears to encompass almost unlimited diversity and variety" (G. W. E. Nickelsburg and R. A. Kraft, "The Modern Study of Early Judaism", R. A. Kraft and G. W. E. Nickelsburg [eds.], *Early Judaism and its Modern Interpreters* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], pp. 1–30 [2]); "there were only the infinite and diverse Judaic systems" (J. Neusner, *The Judaism the Rabbis Take for Granted* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994], p. 18); radical pluralism was "the order of the day" (B. Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992], p. 181); one should realize "the total impossibility of any type of closed, systematic, normative Judaism" (J. H. Charlesworth, "The Foreground of Christian Origins and the Commencement of Jesus Research", J. H. Charlesworth [ed.], *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus in Early Judaism* [New York: Crossroad, 1996], pp. 63–83 [72]); and "all these movements were in some way unique, controversial, contentious, and convinced of their 'orthodoxy'" (H.-D. Betz, "Wellhausen's Dictum 'Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew' in Light of Present Scholarship", *ST* 45 [1991]), pp. 83–110 [100–101]).

Judaism can be chosen differently, with a view to what serves the task we are faced with. We can choose a type of definition that builds on discerning the central traits of Judaism, an essential Judaism so to say, and so make possible and methodically legitimize the pursuit of picturing Jesus as a deeply Jewish figure.<sup>3</sup>

A more difficult question is how to pick the traits of Judaism that were most central, that could be seen to epitomize “very Jewish.” In this study, I will hold the perspective of actuality crucial. In other words, the traits that are to be discussed as the foremost in expressing and representing the Judaism of the time should be ones that in actual fact were regarded as such. This is a contrast to modern theoretical constructs such as average or lowest common denominator. In this respect, I believe, the best and most genuine results will be assured by focusing on traits that were

- *shared* by different branches and movements of Judaism (S), that were
- considered *central* by them (C), and that also were
- *distinctive* of Judaism in comparison to other religions and cultures of the time (D).

I will call such traits *characteristics* of Judaism. Additionally, these traits (SCD), or characteristics, should also

- be correlated with *claims* about the historical *Jesus* useable in a scholarly description (cJ).

In light of the heterogeneity of first-century Judaism, it is clear that the two first clauses (SC) are quite demanding. Understandably, therefore, traits where they both materialize will be those most typical of Judaism. The third clause (D) leads to the same direction. At the same time, however, it also aids in dealing with the two preceding ones. In certain important respects, the Jews stood out from other peoples because of the privileges they had been granted by the Romans.<sup>4</sup> More freely and more widely than usual in Roman Hellenism, the Jews were allowed to practice their own religion and customs as well as to refrain from being involved in those of others.<sup>5</sup> In a most obvious way, these entitlements display what was distinctive of

3 See here Holmén, “Jesus of Context”, pp. 521–525. A Finnish version is in T. Holmén, “Kuinka juutalainen Jeesus oli? Pohdinnan ongelmia”, T. Holmén and V. Ollilainen (eds.), *Juutalainen Jeesus* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2011), pp. 93–111 (98–104).

4 Due to the services Herod the Great’s father, Antipater, had done to Gaius Julius Caesar; see *Ant.* 14:185–267; 16:160–178.

5 M. Pucci Ben Zeev, *Jewish Rights in the Roman World: The Greek and Roman Documents Quoted by Josephus Flavius* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998) offers a most welcome thorough analysis of the Jews’ “privileges.” She concludes that one should distinguish between privileges and common rights granted to many peoples subdued by the Romans. Even the privileges were not always seen as altogether exceptional, specific to the Jews, by the Romans. Likewise, T. Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 301–302, is right in noting that in many cases the Jewish customs were not formally incompatible for example with the laws of a non-Jewish city. Their distinctiveness can, however, not be questioned (cf. for instance Sabbath observance, special food markets and separate meeting places also mentioned by Rajak). Of course, the estimate is different regarding Jews that had chosen not to follow their ancient customs.

Judaism (D). On the other hand, the privileges had naturally been targeted to cover those forms of the religion of the Jews that they generally (S) considered fundamental (C).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the question of how to configure claims useable in a scholarly description of the historical Jesus (cJ) is unavoidable and presents an obstacle, too. However, I will for now abstain from formulating any more explicit theoretical and methodological solutions thereto. I will return to dealing with them at the end of this project.

In my view, at least the following five traits should qualify as characteristics of Judaism:<sup>7</sup>

- α: The Jews as the people of God
- β: The jealous, one God
- γ: The holy Scriptures (the Torah)
- δ: The one temple of the Jews
- ε: The Sabbath

I wish to underline that these items should exhibit a good albeit not nearly comprehensive assemblage of features that were in actuality regarded as genuinely and centrally Jewish. They should suffice well to *exemplify* the characteristics of the Judaism of the time. I would also venture to say that they represent weightier ones of such characteristics.

I will now briefly study how these characteristics (SCD) of Judaism appear in the proclamation of Jesus (cJ). Here, too, I will content myself with giving a few examples.

## 2. Characteristics of Judaism – Jesus’ Judaism

The purpose of the following reviews is not to define Jesus’ view on the characteristics in a more detailed manner. The reviews merely serve to note that he shared them and to sketch out a few features of his take on them.

### 2.1. Characteristic α: The Jews as the People of God

One central factor that contributed to the shaping of the privileges of the Jews was their collective self-understanding which came with some considerable panache. In the Jews’ view, God had chosen one particular people to be his, viz. them. He had “elected” the descendants of Abraham, given them the Law of Moses, and set them apart from all other nations of the world in order that they could and would wor-

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6 E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 212, correctly states: “These rights doubtless covered aspects of Jewish practice that Jews themselves thought were basic.” The statement applies even though Sanders highlights a partly different assortment than what is discussed here (see shortly below in the text). L. L. Grabbe’s list of what Greco-Roman writers often remarked about the Jews comes closer to mine, probably because he also seeks to demarcate the Jewish identity: “It is difficult to find persons identifying themselves as Jews who lack one or more of these.” L. L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 294.

7 I will briefly give grounds for each of these in the following sections.

ship him who alone was the true God.<sup>8</sup> Many things resulted from such an expression and contention of faith. Suffice it to say that the Jews would not partake in the alien customs of the Gentiles. A famous passage in the Letter of Aristeas maintains that this had earned the Jews an exceptional characterization from the leading Egyptian priests: “men of God.”<sup>9</sup> Conversely, those without a Jewish origin could not participate in the “intimacies of our daily life.”<sup>10</sup> Besides explicit religious rites, for example dining and marriage were where the Jews were exclusive.<sup>11</sup> While all this did not prevent all forms of contacts between Jews and non-Jews, the result was that the Jews were distinguished as a group of its own in a way most other ethnic or religious groups were not (D).

Among the Jews themselves, the theology of election both united and divided people. The fundamental question, often lying behind the many debates that arose between different movements and groupings, was who most faithfully represents the Jewish tradition, who truly are the people of God.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Josephus, who from his own experience knew the factiousness of the Jews well,<sup>13</sup> considers it possible to underline even their sense of togetherness.<sup>14</sup> Strong mutual affinity was felt at least on special occasions, for example during great feasts like the Passover, gathering people from all over the world.<sup>15</sup> More than a feeling, God’s choosing of Israel in its history was an overarching concept of Judaism (S) and a basic constituent of its identity (C).

Jesus, too, embraced the view that there was a division between Jews and Gentiles. The view also came to concrete expression in his activity and proclamation. As scholarly claims about Jesus (cJ) bespeaking this, I will briefly study the following two examples:

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- 8 See, for example, D. Goodblatt, “Varieties of Identity in Late Second Temple Judah (200 BCE–135 CE)”, B. Eckhardt (ed.), *Jewish Identity and Politics between the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 11–27 and especially p. 27. Naturally, that a certain people saw itself in a special light was not a unique phenomenon in antiquity. However, the Jewish monotheism together with some other particularities of their faith enhanced the experience of their distinctiveness.
- 9 “Now our Lawgiver being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, took a comprehensive view of each particular detail, and fenced us round with impregnable ramparts and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, but remain pure in body and soul, free from all vain imaginations, worshipping the one Almighty God above the whole creation. Hence the leading Egyptian priests having looked carefully into many matters, and being cognizant with (our) affairs, call us ‘men of God.’” *Ep. Arist.* 139–140. Translation of H. Andrews in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English: Volume II: Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), pp. 109–108.
- 10 *Apion.* 2:210. In fact, Josephus excludes here only “casual visitors” while letting the legislator (sc. Moses) accept those “who desire to come and live under the same laws with us.” As much as he does not speak of proselytes here, the non-Jews, how law abiding ever, were, to be sure, prohibited from participating in the Jewish rites and sacred customs.
- 11 Cf. for instance Tacitus, *Hist.* 5:5, who characterizes the Jews as separate in their meals and their beds.
- 12 A good epitome from a sociocultural perspective is in H. C. Kee, *Who Are the People of God?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 17–54. See further, for example, L. L. Grabbe, “When Is a Sect a Sect – or Not? Groups and Movements in the Second Temple Period”, D. J. Chalcraff (ed.), *Sectarianism in Early Judaism: Sociological Advances* (London: Equinox, 2007), pp. 114–132.
- 13 *Vita* 9–12.
- 14 *Apion.* 2:179–81.
- 15 See Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1:70.

1. Jesus restricted his mission to Jews in Israel.
2. Jesus chose twelve disciples from among his Jewish brethren to form the beginning of the new Israel.

Most conveniently – and, of course, resulting from the choice of topic of this study – the claims share this common tenor: they represent something very central and thus also plausible within first-century Judaism. It is perfectly natural that a Jewish teacher would confine himself to teaching only Jews. Because of long distances and also because of the unique significance of the holy land, it is likewise quite understandable that he would stay within the historical limits of Israel for all of his career. Contemporary figures that fit such descriptions, and thus in whom the first claim also finds a match, can be shown.<sup>16</sup> The second claim, on the other hand, while reflecting many quite ordinary Jewish themes, has some sides to it that make it stand out. It places Jesus outside the number twelve thus reserving for him some more particular part to play.<sup>17</sup> It also suggests a realized eschatology of some kind, not entirely comparable to anything we know of the Judaism of the time. Nonetheless, while these features would indeed appear to be somewhat distinct in regard to the *contents* of that Judaism, they do conform to the *dynamics* of it. People living in the “swirling dynamo full of life,” also known as first-century Judaism,<sup>18</sup> would have been shaped by its dynamic currents.<sup>19</sup> Both a symptom and result of the radical pluralization of Judaism,<sup>20</sup> then, a Jewish teacher like Jesus would have displayed an independent profile. This means the involvement of features distinct from others’ to some degree.<sup>21</sup> Hence, in a more nuanced understanding of the context of Jesus even the second claim emerges as fully plausible.

Let us now turn to the Jesus tradition. How are the claims represented therein?

As for the first claim, there are some general statements maintaining that Jesus only went to Jewish places and preached to Jews alone.<sup>22</sup> Further, the descriptions of the actual routes travelled by Jesus mainly correspond to these statements,<sup>23</sup> and the same can be said about the actual preaching situations.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, there are

16 See C. Keener, “Jesus and Parallel Jewish and Greco-Roman Figures”, S. E. Porter and A. W. Pitts (eds.), *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 85–111. Cf. even, for instance, C. A. Evans, “Prophet, Sage, Healer, Messiah, and Martyr: Types and Identities of Jesus”, T. Holmén and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: Volume Two: The Study of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 1217–1243; R. Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine: The Evidence from Josephus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 80–163.

17 D. C. Allison, “Jesus and the Covenant”, *JSNT* 29 (1987), pp. 57–78 (67).

18 J. H. Charlesworth, “From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology: Some Caveats and Perspectives”, J. Neusner and al. (eds.), *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 225–264 (227).

19 J. H. Charlesworth, “Preface”, J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus’ Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 13–17 (16) delineating the consensus among Jewish and Christian historians.

20 Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus*, p. 181.

21 See G. Theissen and D. Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 179–188.

22 Mark 1:38–39; Matt. 15:24; cf. Matt. 10:6.

23 For a start, see Mark 1:9, 12, 14, 16, 21; 2:1; 6:1, 6; Matt. 8:5 par. Luke 7:1; Matt. 11:21 par. Luke 10:13; Matt. 9:1; Luke 7:11; John 2:11–13; 3:22; 4:3–4, 43–46; 5:1; 6:1. Etc.

24 Cf. Mark 4:1; 6:1–5; Matt. 5–7; Luke 6:17–49. While there are statements and stories that account

some notable exceptions to this “rule” that indeed confirm it.<sup>25</sup> In one account, Jesus helps a centurion and his servant (Matt. 8:5–10 par. Luke 7:1–10).<sup>26</sup> In light of the wording in the texts, the ethnicity of these persons remains somewhat vague.<sup>27</sup> However, the thrust of the story presupposes that at least the centurion ought to be seen as a Gentile. The exceptional nature of the incident is most clear in the Lukan rendering. Some elders of the Jews first need to persuade Jesus to help the centurion. The centurion, they explained, was worthy of help, loved the Jewish nation, and had even built them a synagogue. In both texts Jesus is also depicted as marking the situation off by comparing the centurion (and what he represents) with Israel. Surprisingly to Jesus (ἐθαύμασεν), the comparison falls out to be favorable to the former. A similar case is the discussion pictured between Jesus and a Gentile woman whom Jesus helps, even this time after some persuasion and argumentation.<sup>28</sup> The clear nature of these episodes as exceptions in need of commenting shows that even in them Jesus’ restriction to Jews is conceived as the rule.<sup>29</sup>

There are thus many different forms and strands of tradition, a broad manifestation, with contents which the first claim can be related to. I could pursue the analysis further but because the claims – and the characteristics, too, for that matter – merely aim to make a point and exemplify, this will do for now.

An examination of how the second claim is represented in the Jesus tradition produces a corresponding result. Several different occurrences contain material the claim can be seen to cohere with.<sup>30</sup> However, the occurrences involve a particular feature that allows for a scrutiny of the claim from a quite different perspective, too. The tradition broadly and univocally asserts that one from among the twelve most intimate followers Jesus himself had chosen deceived him.<sup>31</sup> How can we best explain this remarkable fact, i.e., that the tradition so asserts?<sup>32</sup> Here are some alternative explanations of the second claim to account for the tradition. How do they

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for the exclusivity of the Jews and the Jewish areas in Jesus’ mission, no clear reason is given for Jesus’ occasional exits from the Land: Samaria (Luke 9:52–53; 17:11; John 4:4), the Decapolis area (Mark 5:1–20; 7:31), the territory of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24, 31), and the villages surrounding Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27; Matt. 16:13). Hence, it is difficult to see any programmatic purpose in them.

25 For a recent study of the following accounts see J. Sankamo, *Jesus and the Gentiles* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2012), pp. 141–209.

26 Matt. 8:5–10 par. Luke 7:1–10 = Q. See even John 4:43–54.

27 Q mentions a centurion but John characterizes him as a royal official, which refers to Antipas’ troops also including Jews. The person who actually is ailing, again, is πᾶσις in Matthew, δοῦλος in Luke, with probably the same reference. John, however, calls him son, υἱός.

28 Mark 7:24–30. See even Matt. 15:21–28.

29 The healing of the Gerasine demoniac (Mark 5:1–20) does not contain such aspects of exceptionality. However, the main point of the incident is demonological and Christological; only slightly if at all does it touch upon the question of Jesus and the Gentiles. Jesus’ relation to the demoniac himself and to the people from the city and the country is also mixed at best (cf. verses 17–19).

30 A good presentation an analysis can be found in J. P. Meier, “The Circle of the Twelve: Did it Exist During Jesus’ Public Ministry?”, *JBL* 116 (1997), pp. 635–672 (643–663).

31 Matt. 10:4; 26:14–16, 25, 47–50, 27:3–10; Mark 3:19; 14:10–11, 43–46; Luke 6:16; 22:3, 47–48; Acts 1:16–20, 25; John 6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 26–27, 30; 18:2–5.

32 It is remarkable indeed that the tradition so openly, widely and unanimously discloses that one of the closest followers Jesus himself had chosen and called, thus placing his trust on him, turned against Jesus.

fare?

- a) Jesus chose twelve disciples from among his Jewish brethren to form the beginning of the new Israel; one of them deceived him.
- b) Jesus chose twelve disciples from among his Jewish brethren to form the beginning of the new Israel; many of them deceived him.
- c) Jesus chose twelve disciples from among his Jewish brethren to form the beginning of the new Israel; none of them deceived him.

Finally, there is even the counterclaim that should be inspected:

- d) Jesus did not choose twelve disciples(; none of them deceived him).

Naturally, alternative a) would readily explain what we find in the tradition. To my estimation, alternative b) is also possible: actually, as it were, several of the disciples deceived Jesus, but the tradition wants to tone down Jesus' failure – and the shame – and so puts the blame on one individual only. Alternative c) is improbable, for it is more difficult to explain why, under the circumstances, the tradition asserts that Jesus failed even in one case. Moreover, alternative d) is clearly implausible. While it would not be impossible to explain why, in the first place, the tradition maintains that Jesus after all did choose twelve close disciples, that it also asserts his failure on the point of one of them remains a puzzle.

I consider that alternatives a) and b), which both provide that Jesus chose the twelve, explain the assertion of the tradition best.<sup>33</sup>

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33 It is unnecessary in the present context to decide between the alternative explications a) and b). However, I do not see any reason to assume that some other disciple(s) would have sided with Judas in deceiving Jesus. After all, there is in the texts no point of reference for that kind of assumption. The alternative b) was introduced in order to test the claim in question.