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## The Most Jewish about Jesus – Part Two

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### 2.2 Characteristic β: The Jealous, One God

One central feature of the God of Israel, highlighted in the holy Scriptures of the Jews, was that he had  $\text{קנא}$ . The word means zeal, jealousy, and envy.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Yahweh is a jealous God, envious of and zealous for all that belongs to him. He will give his glory to no other, “nor my praise to graven images”.<sup>2</sup> This God had now chosen Israel to be his people. The people, then, were to show that they had no one else besides him. In earlier times, it sufficed the jealous God that no other gods were worshipped by his people. Dewing closer to Jesus’ time, monolatry was increasingly superseded by monotheism.<sup>3</sup>

The Greek and Roman writers of our time universally attest to Jewish worship of one God and at the same time underline how different the Jews were from other people (D).<sup>4</sup> Theirs was a defiant faith regarding worship of any other deity but their own as totally unacceptable.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, the Jews’ right and freedom to “ob-

1 See for example Exod. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15.

2 Isa 42:8.

3 Second Isaiah (cf. Isa 41:21–29; 43:10–13; 44:6–8; 51:9–11) is commonly seen as the first expression of a belief where other gods are denied their existence. Cf. also the famous fragment of Hecataeus of Abdera, dated ca. 300 BCE, in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 40:3:4. See L. L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 161–163. M. S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 154, however, warns of seeing too clear an evolution from monarchic monolatry to (exclusive) monotheism.

4 L. L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 218. Similarly, according to J. J. Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century”, J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (eds.), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 163–186 (175), the practice of monotheism was a greater dividing line between Jews and Gentiles than, for example, circumcision.

5 This may be the reason why the Jews were called “atheists”, at least occasionally; see Josephus, *Apionem* 2:148; cf. also Philo, *Leg.* 353; see further M. Whittaker, *Jews and Christians: Graeco-Roman Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 90–91. The outcome of recent scholarly discussion concerning the meaning, depth, prevalence and distinctiveness of early Jewish monotheism within the Gentile world is succinctly but successfully expressed by J. F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 35: “The sacrificial worship of the one God without images was the make-or-break issue.” See further idem pp. 23–37. See also, for example, R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 107–126.

serve their national customs and sacred rites”<sup>6</sup> were of crucial importance here. The Jews were exempted from offering to the emperor.<sup>7</sup> They did not need to place statues of deities in their temple. In fact, the whole city of Jerusalem was to be kept clean and clear from artefacts that had direct contact with paganism and especially from figures of pagan gods.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, this is something that was both shared by all Jews (S) and also considered quite fundamental to their concept of God (C). No Jew of the time could deliberately compromise God being one without simultaneously proclaiming himself or herself an apostate and an idolater. A case apart is formed by the many diverging views that existed regarding the question of how to actually serve the one God, viz. how to respect and fulfill his oneness.

Compared with the first trait that was inspected ( $\alpha$ : The Jews as the people of God)<sup>9</sup>, expressions of the monolatrous and monotheistic concept of God in the Jesus tradition are not quite as conspicuous and concrete. Still, we must strongly assume that Jesus shared the concept. No doubt, all traits that are to be scrutinized in the present study represent central ingredients of first-century Judaism and are therefore to be seen as default qualifiers of Jesus the Jew, as well. And yet, in principle, they will always remain in need of examination and corroboration. In this particular case, however, viz. the belief in the one God, the silence of the Jesus tradition about anything that would clearly suggest the opposite should be deemed indicative.<sup>10</sup> Jesus indeed joined the monotheistic belief of his fellow Jews.

In my view, there are at least two claims bespeaking characteristic  $\beta$  that,<sup>11</sup> afforded by the tradition, qualify as parts of a scholarly description of the historical Jesus (c):

1. Jesus advocated the exclusivity of God.
2. Jesus told parables about the one God to advocate his own activity.

Conveniently, again, the claims share the common tenor of representing something very central and plausible within first-century Judaism. Regarding the first claim, it goes without saying that a Jewish teacher would advocate attributes of God, such

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6 Repeated frequently within Josephus, *Ant.* 14:185–267.

7 Instead, they offered for his well-being. See Philo, *Leg.* 156–157, 232, 317; Josephus, *Apionem* 2:76–77; Josephus, *Bell.* 2:197, 409; Josephus, *Ant.* 19:290. See also, for example, E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 147–148.

8 This is the background of, for example, the incident where a Roman golden eagle was taken down from the exterior of the grand door of the temple by the disciples of the two Jewish “doctors” (σοφισταί) Judas and Matthias (Josephus, *Bell.* 1:648–655), as well as the case of the Roman standards with figures on them that Pilate insisted on bringing into Jerusalem (Josephus, *Bell.* 2:169–174). It may be true that aniconism was a more clear-cut and less complex feature of the Jewish worship than monotheism. Still, it is not accurate to say that the worship was aniconic *rather* than monotheistic.

9 See Part One.

10 Surrendering the oneness of God would have made Jesus an apostate.

11 More broadly on the theme, see M. M. Thompson, “Jesus and God”, T. Holmén and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: Volume 3: The Historical Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 2575–2596.

as “exclusivity” here, that dovetail with his oneness. The contemporary Jewish tradition displays quite a variety of such attributes and shows no particular reluctance towards developing new and different ones.<sup>12</sup> The second claim, on the other hand, while essentially reflecting the same Jewish concept of God, has sides to it that make it stand out. There was not exactly a phenomenon of Jewish parable tellers at the time of Jesus or before that.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, even the subsequent rabbinic parables usually display a halakhic or exegetical focus;<sup>14</sup> they do not often pertain to God directly as is here claimed that Jesus’ parables do.<sup>15</sup> Of course, the aim of Jesus’ parables – be it found in all of them or only in some of them; be it primary or subsidiary – to defend and/or to explain their teller’s own behavior or teaching by way of referring to how God is and what God does, is the most conspicuous part of the claim. Indeed, the parable telling activity presupposed by the claim is otherwise well understandable on the basis of the Old Testament parables and the Hebrew *mashal*.<sup>16</sup> The kind of double reference (to God and to Jesus himself) and its function, however, stretch our understanding even of the dynamic first-century Judaism by requiring an unusually elevated self-understanding on Jesus’ part. Yet, this does not quite call for denying the claim a contextual plausibility.

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

As for the first claim, we are mainly referred to a) four individual sayings: the recital of the monotheistic “confession” of the Jews, the *Shema* (Mark 12:29); the insistence to call no one good but God (Mark 10:18); the assertion that no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24 / Luke 16:13); and the urge to seek first / only the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33 / Luke 12:31); and b) the teaching that God holds control over everything that happens in the world (for instance Matt. 6:26–30 / Luke 12:24–28; Matt. 10:29–31 / Luke 12:6–7). In these texts, the *Shema* being the case *par excellence*, the exclusivity of God is promoted by expressions such as “no one but God alone”, “no one is able”, “seek first / only” as well as by a representative sampling of things falling under God’s control. There is thus, as suggested by the texts, no doubt about Jesus’ commitment to the oneness of God. On the other hand, the texts do display some diversity, which makes their common case some-

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12 See, for example, I. Abrahams, J. Gutmann, A. Altmann, and M. Fox, “God”, *Enc. Jud.* 7 (2007), pp. 652–672 (652–654, 656–657, 658–660, 666, 669–670) and L. F. Hartman and S. D. Sperling, “God, Names of”, *Enc. Jud.* 7 (2007), pp. 672–678 (672–676). See, further, W. H. Lockyear, *The Old Testament Names of God: A Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

13 K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 42; see also pp. 38–46.

14 This is so particularly in the Mishnah. See J. Neusner, *Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective: Volume 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 58–59.

15 D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991), p. 93, claims that “the *mashal* represents the greatest effort to imagine God in all Rabbinic literature.” However, as J. Neusner (*Rabbinic Narrative: A Documentary Perspective: Volume 1* [Leiden: Brill, 2003], pp. 305–306) points out, the claim bears “more enthusiasm than enlightenment.” Stern moves uncritically between different eras and documents and builds upon selective evidence.

16 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, pp. 38–42; B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pp. 9–13; C. A. Evans, “Parables in Early Judaism”, R. N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 51–75, esp. pp. 52, 73.

what stronger. The ways their contents relate to the first claim are all different. They belong to two different strands of tradition. Also, despite the fact that there are only a few texts, they exhibit three different aspects to uphold God's exclusivity: exclusive characteristics of God (the *Shema*; no one is good but God); exclusivity of serving God (only one master; seek God's kingdom); and God's exclusive power (he has the whole world in his hand).

All that being said, it remains a fact that the assortment of texts we are dealing with here is rather restricted. We cannot speak of a broad appearance of contents in which the claim could be seen to be represented. One of the texts, however, allows for a scrutiny of the claim from a different perspective, viz. Mark 10:18, suggesting that no one should be called good but God, *not even Jesus himself*.<sup>17</sup> How are we to explain that a Jesus tradition suggests so? Here are some alternative explanations of the first claim to account for the tradition. How do they fare?

- a) Jesus advocated the exclusivity of God by insisting that no one, including Jesus himself, should be called good but God.
- b) Jesus advocated the exclusivity of God but he did not insist that no one, including Jesus himself, should be called good but God.
- c) Jesus advocated the exclusivity of God by insisting that no one, *exclusive* of Jesus, should be called good but God.
- d) Jesus did not advocate the exclusivity of God(; he did not insist that no one, including Jesus himself, should be called good but God).

Alternative a) would of course readily explain what we find in the tradition. Alternative b) is mostly improbable for this would require us to explain why, then, the tradition suggests that Jesus denied himself the epithet "good". Alternative c) is clearly more improbable for then we would need to explain why the tradition, despite Jesus' explicit exclusion of himself, explicitly includes him. Alternative d) is improbable on the same basis as alternative b). While alternatives b) and d) (maybe even alternative c)) cannot, as such, be regarded as impossible, in comparison they fall behind alternative a). Only alternative d) revokes the claim,<sup>18</sup> all others require it.

As for the second claim, Jesus' parable telling activity as such and the parables' ultimate reference to the one God do not need to bother us at present.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I will expend the space available to inquire into the more specific contents of the claim, viz. Jesus using parables about God to advocate himself. At least the following parables have been suggested to contain this aspect:<sup>20</sup>

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17 Greek suggests an emphasis on "me": "Why do you call *me* good?"

18 In fact, it requires us to reverse the claim: Jesus did *not* advocate the exclusivity of God.

19 Suffice it to state that, with respect to these, this study must simply build on the wide agreement of scholars that renders the claim useable in a scholarly description of Jesus. See, for example, A. J. Hultgren, "The Message of Jesus II: Parables", Holmén and Porter, *Handbook Volume 3*, pp. 2549–2571, esp. p. 2549.

20 As known, J. Jeremias suggested that the parables hold a general context of apology and defense in Jesus' life. Even though this function is no more upheld as primary and common to all parables, many of them are still considered well – some even best – fit to serving that kind of situation. In addition to those listed below in the text, these two parables, among others, have been seen to advocate Jesus while speaking about God: The Two Sons (Matt. 21:28–32; see Snodgrass, *Stories with In-*

- a.
  - The Lost Sheep (Matt. 18:12–14 / Luke 15:4–7)
  - The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10)<sup>21</sup>
  - The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)<sup>22</sup>
  - The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41–43)<sup>23</sup>
  - The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9–14)<sup>24</sup>
- b.
  - The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16)<sup>25</sup>
  - The Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23–35)<sup>26</sup>
- c.
  - The Wicked Husbandmen (Mark 12:1–12)<sup>27</sup>
  - The Great Supper (Matt. 22:2–14<sup>28</sup> / Luke 14:16–24)

The parables in group a. seek to reveal the depth of God’s amazing love, especially for the lost. The parables in group b., again, tell about the out-of-this-world forgiveness and mercifulness of God. Why would Jesus tell such parables? I fail to see how it could not have anything to do with his exceptionally close and unreserved dealings with sinners and other outsiders.<sup>29</sup> A need to explain and justify those

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tent, p. 275); the Children in the Marketplace (Matt. 11:16–19 / Luke 7:31–35; see P. R. Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* [Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1999], p. 31).

- 21 According to Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p. 116, the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin both “present a defense of Jesus’ association with tax collectors and sinners and show that those complaining about his actions reveal their lack of understanding of God’s attitude and actions.”
- 22 D. J. Harrington, *The Synoptic Gospels Set Free: Preaching without Anti-Judaism* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), p. 201: “Jesus the Jewish teacher defends himself and his practice before other Jewish teachers. He explains why he spends time with marginal Jews and suggests that other learned and pious Jews who ought to know better (scribes and Pharisees) fail to understand the ways of God and of Jesus his agent in proclaiming and inaugurating God’s kingdom.”
- 23 A. J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 213: “Thereupon Jesus replies with his Parable of the Two Debtors (7:41–43) in defense of the woman and her activity, as well as in defense of himself for allowing her to touch him.”
- 24 Jones, *Studying the Parables*, p. 249: “This parable defended his ministry, explaining his glad acceptance of penitent tax collectors and extolling the radical grace of the kingdom.”
- 25 W. R. Farmer, “Reflections upon ‘the Historical Perimeters for Understanding the Aims of Jesus’”, B. Chilton and C. A. Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 59–81 (77): “Parables like the one about the lost son and his elder brother (Luke 15:11–32) or the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–6) were first created in response to this crisis in Jesus’ ministry. They were used to defend the gospel of God’s unmerited and unconditional acceptance of the repentant sinner.”
- 26 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, p 73: “The concern of the story is twofold: the necessity of mercy and forgiveness and the seriousness of any failure to show mercy and forgiveness. This parable warns of judgment for the failure to show mercy.”
- 27 J. Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), p. 114: “While telling this parable Jesus shows how God is bringing his kingdom and how the right response is required from Israel. Jesus also defends himself.”
- 28 Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure*, p. 138: “With this parable Jesus concretely reveals God and his redemptive action in our world. With this parable Jesus also defends himself and his sending.”
- 29 Unfortunately, the claim that Jesus had exceptionally close and unreserved dealings with sinners

dealings of his would certainly have presented itself, and the parables in question do that job perfectly. The tradition, further, tells of several occasions in which Jesus defended himself against various accusations, silent or spoken.<sup>30</sup> We can also spot parables that can be seen as responses to other demanding situations in Jesus' life, for instance, parables that encourage his disciples.<sup>31</sup> All in all, therefore, I cannot refute the understanding of the parables in the groups a.–b. as aiming, on some pertinent level, at advocating certain salient words and deeds of Jesus. As an equally important element, we can add the parables in group c. that would advocate for Jesus' mission as a whole, equally with ultimate reference to God.

Concomitantly with these estimates focusing on the interpretation presupposed by the second claim, we have already surveyed the main part of traditions coming with contents the claim can be directly related to. Based on this, we can establish that the claim is multiply represented in several strands of tradition. It should be observed that all possibly correlating material outside the genre of parables has been left out of this survey. This material would certainly add depth and sides to the picture and potentially broaden the manifestation of traditions with contents the claim can be seen to cohere with.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as suggested by the survey, the claim seems to have ties to a relatively wide web of traditions regarding Jesus' teaching and doing. However, since in the present study the claims merely aim to make a point and exemplify<sup>33</sup> this will suffice for now.

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and other outsiders cannot be scrutinized in the present study. I trust, however, that most scholars would readily include the claim in a presentation of the historical Jesus.

30 Responding with a parable or the like: the Divided Kingdom and House (Mark 3:23–25; Matt. 12:25 / Luke 11:17); a Strong Man (Mark 3:27; Matt. 12:29 / Luke 11:21–22); the Children in the Marketplace (Matt. 11:16–19 / Luke 7:31–35); the Wedding Guests and the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19–10). Other than parables are, for example, Mark 2:7–11, 17, 24–28; 3:2–4, 33–34 (sic); 7:5–13; Luke 13:15–16; 19:40.

31 Cf., for instance, the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29); the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32; Matt. 13:31–32 / Luke 13:18–19); the Leaven (Matt. 13:33 / Luke 13:20–21). See even Luke 12:32.

32 Cf., for example, the second claim bespeaking characteristic  $\alpha$  (see 2.1. in the first part of the present study).

33 See Part One of the present study.