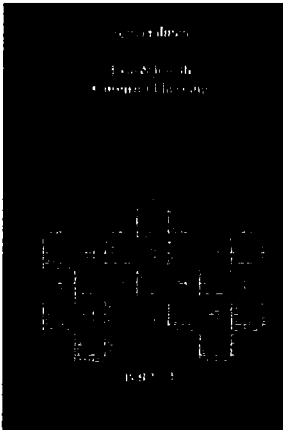


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Holmén, Tom

Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking

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Serving the first of a two-part investigation, this revised Th.D. dissertation initially written for Abo Akademi University investigates the attitude of the historical Jesus towards the Mosaic covenant. Tom Holmén, presently a Research Fellow of the Academy of Finland, addresses the question: “Was Jesus engaged in trying to find out how to remain faithful to the covenant?” “Intended to be a first step” (a foundation) “towards clarifying the issue” (p. 23), Holmén’s investigation has proven to be thorough, systematic, and clearly presented.

In his thirty-six page introduction, Holmén first calls attention to the centrality of covenant to early Jewish religiosity. In keeping with E. P. Sanders, he muses that “God called and chose Israel (“covenantal”); the proper response to the call is obedience (“nomism”). Thus, ‘election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God’s mercy rather than human achievement’” (pp. 2–3). He rightly points out, however, that though “the covenant was the basic, fundamental belief of the Judaism of the time, cherished in the Scriptures and evoked in daily worship,” it was debated among the Judaisms of Jesus’ day as to its actual meaning and its application (pp. 6, 47–48). Next he addresses the Jesus-of-history. In a manner in keeping with the third quest of the historical Jesus (pp. 8-15), Holmén appears to agree that “Jesus was a Jew living in Palestine before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and his thought was accordingly ‘shaped by the dynamic currents within that Judaism’” (pp. 1, 23, 343). Thus a Jewish person, like Jesus, who belonged to the covenant people of God, would have kept and remained loyal and faithful to the covenant. Or would he? Determining whether the Jewish Jesus-of-history did so is Holmén’s daunting challenge.

First, sources for Jesus making explicit statements on the covenant are nearly nonexistent. The Jesus-of-history is recorded to have spoken about a covenant only once and that was during his Last Supper (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20). The issues that plague the Last Supper (i.e., what is said and done at the meal) direct Holmén away from the Last Supper, and thereby he opts to launch his study from the overall teaching of Jesus (pp. 22–23). Second, the need exists for a methodological way of assessing Jesus' teaching and the indirect information provided about his perception of the covenant. Using the canonical synoptic gospels alone, Holmén applies various criteria of authenticity (i.e., dissimilarity, multiple attestation, coherence, "rejection and execution," implausibility, incoherence) "not because I trust them" he says, "but because there is nothing else or nothing better" (pp. 24–36).

In chapter two (51 pp.), Holmén carefully presents his detailed methodological approach. Before assessing the teaching of Jesus for his perception of the covenant, Holmén first defines covenant (pp. 39–51) and covenant demands of obedience and loyalty. Holmén has coined the phrase, "path searching" to describe how one remains loyal to the covenant. Crucial in understanding Holmén's method of approach, "path searching" was, says Holmén, "an essential feature of the Jewish covenant thinking of Jesus' time" (pp. 52; exemplified in *Sirach, Baruch, 1 Enoch, Jubilees, 4QMMT*; pp. 54–62).

Furthermore, "path searching," according to Holmén, "denotes the way or means of contemplating, discussing and expounding individual issues and topics, the various practices and beliefs of the Jewish faith, in order to determine how to keep faithful to them and, together with that, faithful to the covenant itself" (pp. 48–49). Naturally, how to be loyal or how to live faithfully according to the covenant was debated among the "Judaisms" of Jesus day (pp. 62–70). Nevertheless, path searching turned issues and topics into path markers, namely the practices and beliefs of the Jewish faith (i.e., circumcision, sabbath; pp. 70–79).

Like any good Jew of his day, the Jesus-of-history also practiced covenantal loyalty. Probing traces of covenant "path searching" in the genuine teaching of Jesus, then, is carried out through the analysis of "path markers." Does Jesus regard "path markers" (the practices and beliefs of the various Judaisms of his day) relevant routes to covenant loyalty? Realistic about his task, Holmén confesses that "we cannot, of course, find out about all 'practices and beliefs of Judasim' whether Jesus treats them as covenant path markers" (p. 80). Thus his analysis centers on major issues that generally functioned as path markers of one's loyalty to the covenant.

Following his methodological approach, chapter three (255 pp.) conveys Holmén's step-by-step analysis. He addresses the issues that in the Judaisms of Jesus' day functioned as path markers and that are evident in the synoptic Gospel traditions—traditions that Holmén has verified as genuinely Jesuanic in order to find out whether Jesus was engaged in covenant path searching. Chapter three is structured into three sections. The first section discusses individual halakhic issues: Sabbath (pp. 90–106), tithing (pp. 106–28), fasting (pp. 128–57), divorce (pp. 157–69), oaths (pp. 170–87), and burying of one's family member (pp. 187–99). The second section

addresses issues pertaining to the integrity of God's people: companionship with the outcasts (pp. 200–220), purity matters (pp. 221–51), enemies and neighbors (pp. 251–74). The last section considers the “crucial institution” of the temple and its cult (pp. 275–28). For each issue, Holmén discusses how it functioned as a path marker in early Judaism, investigates how it was addressed by Jesus, and assesses its function as a covenant path marker for the Jesus-of-history. Each case is researched thoroughly, presented clearly and carefully, and argued convincingly.

Holmén's results are twofold: (1) “Jesus did not participate in covenant path searching,” and (2) Jesus' “dismissal of path markers seems to have been caused by the message of the kingdom of God” (p. 331). Although stated case by case in chapter three, he reiterates his results again in chapter four, “General Conclusions” (20 pp). Despite the fact that the minority of NT scholars who take part in the Jesus seminar may not agree with much of the work, many more will find that Holmén's concluding assessments are both thought provoking and worthy of consideration. Holmén is to be commended for his groundbreaking methodology in assessing whether the Jesus-of-history participated in covenant path searching. Equally significant are the determinations about Jesus' general attitude towards Judaism's established path markers that supposedly pointed to one's loyalty to the Mosaic covenant. Thus the fairly unexamined question about Jesus and the covenant is no longer unexamined. Both Holmén's methodology and general conclusions make for a fine contribution to the study of the historical Jesus. It is a book worth reading.