The way I started my talk this past week at the University of Michigan on Jesus, the Law, and the New Covenant was by discussing the confusion a number of my students have about the Jewishness of Jesus. The first day of class, in my New Testament course, I give the students a pop quiz to see how much they know about the New Testament. The quiz deals with basic, factual information: How many books are in the NT? What language were they written in? Etc.

Well, I do throw in a couple of curve balls for good measure.... But mostly it’s just factual information. One of the questions asks the students to indicate which of the following persons was Jewish: John the Baptist, Alexander the Great, Jesus, Simon Peter, Tacitus, the Apostle Paul. As it turns out, most of the students get all these right. Including Jesus. I’m not sure that, when I started teaching over thirty years ago now, it was as widely recognized that Jesus was Jewish. But today, virtually everyone knows that he was.

But what does it mean? Sometimes I ask my students: does it mean that Jesus lived like a Jew?

“Yes, of course. “

“OK, does that mean he kept the Jewish law?”

Some students think: “Yes, he must have. He was Jewish!”

Other students think: “Well, he was accused by Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath, so maybe he didn’t keep the law.”

“OK, then, if he didn’t keep the law, in what sense was he Jewish?”

They aren’t really quite sure. And then

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