The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, known as the synoptic gospels, report a healing episode performed by Jesus that is rich in Jewish features (Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48). According to these synoptic accounts, a woman suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years touches the edge of Jesus’ garment and instantaneously becomes healed. The Mosaic Torah posits that a woman suffering from an abnormal discharge can render other objects and persons impure upon contact (Leviticus 15:19, 25; cf. 12:2–5; 18:19). The synoptic gospels do not focus on this halachic issue, emphasizing instead the power and authority of Jesus. Some, consequently, have suggested that the historical Jesus remained indifferent to purity matters and even the observance of the Mosaic legislation in general. Nevertheless, one should not push this point too far. In her work Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud (Oxford, 2002), C. E. Hayes has argued that some ancient Jews would not have viewed the acquisition of ritual impurity, a temporal form of defilement that could be removed through rites of purification, as a grave sin. Moreover, the synoptic gospels might be seeking to emphasize Jesus’ ability to reverse the spread of impurity, to highlight the invasive dimension of his healing, and, by extension, purifying powers.

According to Mark 5:25, the bleeding woman touches Jesus’ garment. Matthew and Luke, however, specify that the woman seizes the fringe of Jesus’ garment (Matthew 9:20; Luke 8:44). Quite interestingly, the Greek term kraspedon, which the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates as “fringe,” also appears in the Septuagint (an ancient Jewish translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek) to describe the fringes (in Hebrew, tsitsit) Jews are supposed to wear on the four
Fresco of bleeding woman touching the hem of Jesus, Cimitero dei SS. Marcellino e Pietro, c. 3rd Cent. CE, Rome, Italy.
corners of the garments as commanded by the Torah of Moses:

Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes (kraspeda/tsitsit) on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God Numbers 15:38; NRSV

It is remarkable that Matthew and Luke make this linguistic precision, which reinscribes Jesus within his Jewish milieu as a Torah-observant Jew who wears tsitsit on the edges of his garment. Traditionally, New Testament scholars have tended to view Matthew as the most “Jewish” gospel while depicting Luke’s gospel as a gentile work written for a Greco-Roman audience by a non-Jew ignorant of if not hostile to Judaism. But Luke’s portrait of Jesus at this point, as in many other instances, is no less Jewish than Matthew’s.

For quite some time, numerous scholars, whether Jewish or Christian, have reclaimed the Jewishness of the historical Jesus—lost during the unfortunate climate of tragic confrontation that dominated Jewish-Christian relations for centuries. In the new ecumenical and intellectual atmosphere emerging after World War II, specialists of early Christianity and Judaism have sifted the synoptic gospels, among other sources, seeking to recover the Jewishness of the historical Jesus. An appreciation of the Jewish matrix as a means for understanding the early Jesus movement now enjoys solid footing in many academic circles. Some have even reincorporated Paul, once viewed as a Jewish apostate and the true founder of Christianity, into the mold and fold of first-century Judaism. Currently, as the nature of Jewish-Christian engagement in antiquity is being revisited, new paradigms are emerging. Jewish contours of early Christianity are constantly being pushed further, challenging previously held notions about the formation of Judaism and Christianity.

Moving beyond the Jewishness of the historical Jesus, the time now seems ripe to explore the Jewish identity of the gospel writers themselves, not only Matthew, but even Luke, the alleged “Gentile Christian.” It should not be forgotten that the Jewish Jesus stems from a close reading of the synoptic gospels. In other words, the synoptic Jesus is the Jewish Jesus. If Luke chose to portray Jesus in a Jewish manner, what might this tell us about the ongoing Jewish texture of Christianity well beyond the time of the historical Jesus and Paul? For too long, translation, polemics, and cherished notions have kept Luke’s Jewish account of Jesus and his movement safely tucked away in the background. But by paying careful attention to the numerous Jewish features related to attire, purity, and Torah observance that Luke consciously chose to include within his narrative, we can finally recapture Luke’s Jewish edge.