



*Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.06.10*

**Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*. New York: The New Press, 2012. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-1-59558-878-4. Paperback. \$17.95.**

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*The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* by Daniel Boyarin enters into the discussion of the relationship between Judaisms and Christianities in the first centuries C.E., and attempts to relate some of the results of this profitable scholarly discussion to a wider audience, while extending the discussion into a description of the shared ideological underpinnings of these traditions. His central claim is that the religious terminology and ideology that provide foundation to Mark's depiction of Jesus (and indirectly to that of the other Gospel writers) bears close ties to claims about a divine messiah being made within various Jewish groups of the first century. Boyarin frames the discussion like this: "Christology, or the early ideas about Christ, is also a Jewish discourse and not—until much later—an anti-Jewish discourse at all" (6). That Jesus and his followers were Jewish is now obvious. But the notion that Christology itself began as a Jewish discourse is a provocative claim, and well worth consideration. This review will progress by first summarizing the main lines of Boyarin's argument, and then by offering a brief evaluation.

In the introduction, Boyarin puts forward a more modern, academically rigorous position on the first century reality of multiple Judaisms. Here he argues that neither "Judaism" nor "Christianity" exists in the first century, but that these modern religious categories are both derived from the forms of Israelite religion which existed at that time. This now obvious point becomes the theoretical underpinning for Boyarin's central contention in this book—that Christology is itself a "Jewish" endeavor. His objective in this introduction is to dissolve the ideological lines which divide "Judaism" from "Christianity." He accomplishes this dissolution by recognizing that in the first century neither "Christian" nor "Jewish" orthodoxy was well defined—rather there were "Christian Jews" and "non-Christian Jews" (7). While this terminology is itself anachronistic and even imprecise, it serves well to blur these lines of division between these religious systems that become separate only later—in the fourth century, according to Boyarin's reconstruction of history (11-22). As further evidence for this theological blurring, Boyarin briefly treats Jerome's description of the Judeo-Christian sect of the Nazoreans. This group forms what Boyarin calls a "third category"—that is, "not-Jews, not-Christians" (18). Inclusion of one of the Judeo-Christian sects is important, as they are often

neglected in the popular discussion of “Christian origins.” However, a more thorough consideration of both Nazorean beliefs in particular and of the phenomenon of Judeo-Christianity broadly would have served Boyarin’s purposes very well by demonstrating alternative ways of framing the theological issues which are now indicative of the division between “Jew” and “Christian.”

In ch. 1, Boyarin focuses on the first century understandings of the titles Son of God and Son of Man which are used in the Gospels. It is his conclusion that, “the title ‘Son of Man’ denoted Jesus as a part of God, while the title ‘Son of God’ indicated his status as King Messiah” (26). This suggestion is justified through analysis of specific passages from the Hebrew Bible. First, several passages are elicited (1 Sam 10:1, 16:3; 1 Kgs 1:34, 19:6; 2 Kgs 11:12, 23:30) to show that kings were anointed upon their ascension to the throne of Israel. This proves the royal connotation of the term “Messiah.” Psalm 2:2, 6-7 are then cited to illustrate the Israelite conception that, “the anointed, earthly king of Israel is adopted by God as his son; the son of God is thus the reigning, living king of Israel” (28). On this basis, Boyarin argues that after the exile and the cessation of the Davidic line, some Jews were looking for the return of an “earthly and actual” Davidic king (30).

Next, Boyarin offers a reading of Daniel 7, which he suggests shows evidence of a variant notion of redemption circulating in the first century C.E. By putting Daniel’s vision in Dan 7:1-14 into juxtaposition with the angelic interpretation of that vision in 7:15-28, Boyarin finds evidence of an intra-Jewish debate at the time of the composition of the book of Daniel. He asserts that the angelic interpretation of the vision shows that “the author of the book of Daniel, who had Daniel’s vision itself before him, wanted to suppress the ancient testimony of a more-than-singular God, using allegory to do so” (43). Therefore, the text from Daniel represents both a stream of Judaism which recognizes binitarianism, and a stream which quashes this perspective. This ancient discussion is refreshed by the Gospel writers (particularly Mark), who put their hope in a divine redeemer, described using imagery from Dan 7. In this way, the title “Son of Man,” used of Jesus in the gospels, is a divine appellation, suggesting that Jesus is Daniel’s “Son of Man” who would be given authority over all the world by the Ancient of Days (God), and would then rule the world. Therefore, Christology, Boyarin asserts, is not a distinctively Christian endeavor, but is the recitation of an old intra-Jewish debate.

In ch. 2, Boyarin traces the “Son of Man” figure through *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra* in an attempt to show that the concept of a divine messiah (which he calls Christology) was not unfamiliar to at least some Judaisms of the first century. His point is to show that this concept was not unique to the communities trying to understand Jesus, but that “Jesus for his followers *fulfilled* the idea of the Christ, the Christ was not invented to explain Jesus’ life and death” (72, emphasis mine). In making this claim, Boyarin draws primarily from the Similitudes (esp. *1 En.* 46, 48, 69, and 70-71), where he finds that “all the elements of Christology are essentially in place” (94), meaning that the Similitudes presents both an pre-existent heavenly figure, that is, the Son of Man from *1 En.* 46:1, and a human exalted into heaven at the end of his life, referring to Enoch’s apotheosis as described in *1 En.* 70-71. Boyarin also considers *4 Ezra* 13, which, in his understanding shows both binitarianism and the suppression of that position. After considering these texts which speak about the Son of Man, Boyarin posits that the gospel writers innovate only in their assertion that the Son of Man is already present, and that the community is already living in the eschaton.

Whereas the previous chapters deal with ideological parallels between “Jewish” and “Christian” Christologies, in ch. 3, Boyarin engages in some halakhic analysis of Mark 7 in an effort to show the essential “Jewishness” of Jesus’ thought and practice. Within the scholarly community, this is nothing novel, and within the main argument of this book is something of a left turn—proving that Jesus kept kosher does not seem entirely necessary to the central argument of this book because it is practical rather than ideological. Boyarin’s treatment of the halakhic material is interesting and engaging. Certainly, we see here the benefit of his Talmudic expertise being applied to halakhic debates within the New Testament. The conclusion he comes to is that Mark 7 does not depict different institutions coming into conflict, but reflects a disagreement about practice and the role of the law that is quite at home within Judaism. Therefore, Jesus’ position and that of the Pharisees represent different Jewish reactions to the crisis of Roman occupation and the resultant legal interpretation.

In ch. 4 Boyarin suggests that Dan 7 and Isa 53, along with the psalms of lament, were interpreted by early Jesus followers using ancient Jewish methods of exegesis which came to be known as midrash, and further that the results of their interpretations were not substantively different from other contemporary Jewish interpretations of these texts. He therefore suggests that the common consensus that the Christians invented the tradition of the suffering messiah to explain the death of Jesus must be rejected. In his own words: “I am not, of course, denying them [Jesus followers] their own religious creativity. I am claiming that even this innovation [the suffering Messiah], if indeed they innovated, was entirely within the spirit and hermeneutical method of ancient Judaism, and not a scandalous departure from it” (134).

Boyarin defends the “Jewishness” of the notion of a suffering messiah in two steps. First, he shows that the suffering messiah presented in the Gospels is based on traditional Jewish rules of exegesis which came to be known as midrash (132-33). In his view, the suffering Son of Man in Mark 8:31, and the exalted Son of Man of 14:62 is the result of a midrash on Dan 7. The description of the place of Elijah on the mount of transfiguration in Mark 9:11-13 is a midrash on Mal 3:23 (or 4:5 depending on the English translation). Neither represents a “revolutionary departure within the religious history of the communities of readers of the Bible but an obvious and plausible consequence of a well-established tradition of reading Daniel 7 [with other texts from the Hebrew Bible] as being about a divine-human Messiah” (144). Second, Boyarin uses ancient interpretations of Isa 53 to show that the idea of the suffering messiah was not unique to communities who thought Jesus was the messiah.

Boyarin also includes a very short epilogue entitled “The Jewish Gospel,” which is an attempt to centralize his observations about the Jewish background of the Christological claim made about Jesus in the Gospels. His argument is that “Christianity hijacked not only the Old Testament but the New Testament as well by turning that thoroughly Jewish text away from its cultural origins . . . and making it an attack on the traditions of the Jews” (157). The point Boyarin makes is clear: a thorough understanding of the New Testament requires the recognition that it is a product of Jewish authors, who wrote using Jewish images, drawing from Jewish scriptures, and presenting Jesus as the Jewish messiah that at least some first century Jews were looking for.

There are a few difficulties with Boyarin's argument. Throughout the book, the intended audience seems ill-defined. It is obvious that some facets of Boyarin's argument are already well known in scholarship: Jesus, his followers, and his audiences were Jews; neither "Christianity" nor "Judaism" properly existed in the first century; and that Jesus' followers made free use of Jewish ideas and imagery in their explanation of Jesus' significance. The repetition of these arguments suggests a more popular audience—and in this case, repetition of these arguments makes perfect sense because these points of scholarly consensus are slow to percolate into the popular strata. But there are places where Boyarin presents texts in Greek (116, 121, 126), which seems to imply that a more scholarly audience is intended.

There is also a certain imprecision and anachronism inherent to the terminology employed throughout the volume. In the introduction, Boyarin demonstrates well that "Christianity" and "Judaism" do not properly exist in the first century—but then continues to use each term throughout his argument to refer to groups within the first century.

And it must also be mentioned that the title, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*, is something of a misnomer. This book deals primarily with exploring backgrounds to Christology within the literature of second temple Judaism. Where the Gospels enter into the picture, Mark's Gospel serves as primary evidence. Since there are notable differences between the depictions of Jesus in each of the Gospels (more evidently between the Synoptics and John), the reader should be aware that this volume focuses more directly on comparing several descriptions of the "Son of Man" figure from Dan 7 in second temple texts with the description of Jesus as "Son of Man" in the Gospel of Mark.

These difficulties aside, there is much to commend about this volume. The central argument of this book is that the concept of "Christ" employed in the Gospels is a Jewish concept. That is to say, the ideological underpinning of the claim that Jesus is messiah is rooted in theology developed under the Jewish umbrella in the time shortly before Jesus lived, as evidenced in various texts produced in the second temple period.<sup>1</sup> Understanding, and perhaps even overemphasizing, the essential "Jewishness" of the New Testament is also well taken, and is a point, though perhaps now obvious in scholarship, missed by mainstream readers of the Bible for far too long. Boyarin's argument is accessible and current, and therefore the volume has fantastic usefulness within graduate and undergraduate classrooms (and even potentially outside of the academy). Understanding the relationship between Israelite religion and Judaism and between Judaism and Christianity is unavoidably complicated. While it is clear that there were significant and important variations in beliefs between different communities in the first century, studies like Boyarin's *The Jewish Gospels* are commendable for seeking to provide a more complete picture of first century Judeo-Christian religious structures.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. p. 6: "I wish us to see that Christ too—the Divine Messiah—is a Jew. Christology, or the early ideas about Christ, is also a Jewish discourse and not—until much later—an anti-Jewish discourse at all."