

**Boyarin, Daniel. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004**
2010 Hashivenu Forum (Los Angeles, CA)
Reviewed by Joshua Brumbach

Do the terms ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ truly represent two distinct religious entities in late antiquity, and are they the direct result of a very early parting of ways over the issue of an exalted messianic figure? In *Border Lines*, Daniel Boyarin, Professor of Talmudic Culture at UC Berkeley, seeks to dispel commonly accepted notions of each community’s origins, and presents a striking case for re-imagining the historic development and partition of Judaeo-Christianity.

According to Boyarin, the primary difference between Judaism and Christianity as we know them today is belief in or denial of “complexity within the godhead.”¹ However, during these early centuries there were plenty of Jews who “firmly held theological doctrines of a sort of second God, variously called Logos, Memra, Sophia, Metatron, or Yahoel; indeed perhaps most Jews did so.”² The fact that this insight is affirmed by a scholar of rabbinic literature signals an important opening for further dialogue with the wider Jewish community, and should inform our thinking as we develop a mature Messianic Jewish understanding of the nature of God.

1. Heresy: The Two-Sided Mirror

Boyarin suggests that Judaism and Christianity developed as distinct entities as a result of “an imposed *partitioning* of what was once a territory without border lines.”³ He likens this partitioning to the artificial borders erected by colonial powers:

Judaism and Christianity, throughout late antiquity and even beyond, was a crossing point for people and religious practices. Religious ideas, practices, and innovations permeated that border crossing in both directions. There were people, as well, who simply didn’t recognize the legitimacy or even the existence of the border.⁴

The means by which these two communities would determine the answers to the very difficult questions of identity, Boyarin argues, is through heresiology. He proposes that the construction of orthodoxy and heresy in the two communities provides us with a genealogical and theological record of sorts, and that the concept of orthodoxy only enters the world sometime in the second century through ‘Christian’ writers called heresiologists, and their counterparts ‘the Rabbis.’⁵

¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 90.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

According to Boyarin, authorities on both sides sought to establish an artificial border, that when crossed, implied a clear departure from one community for another. Through such labels as “Judaizer” and “*minim*,” Boyarin contends each group attempted to codify their identities, beliefs, and practices; thereby eradicating the “fuzziness” of their borders (both semantic and social). Paradoxically, however, the two communities evolved in surprisingly parallel ways.

Boyarin proposes that it is not until the fourth century that we can even begin to speak of Judaism and Christianity as separate “religions.” Prior to this time (and even after) it seems the borders between the two communities are far more permeable than previously supposed. During this early period there were not only varieties within Judaism (and Christianity), but even varieties of “Jewish Christianity” (i.e. Nazarenes, Ebionites, etc.).

“Just as certain entities can be more or less tall or red, I wish to suggest they can be more or less Christian (or Jewish) as well. And just as certain entities can be tall and short given different perspectives, so too can certain people or groups be Christian or Jewish from different perspectives, or both. Indeed, the determination itself will be a matter of contention.”⁶

The result of such plurality is hybridization – which purists in both groups begin to perceive as a hazardous mixing of species. Heresiology provided a response to the need to establish “purity” (the opposite of hybridization). As Boyarin tells it, the ultimate distinctions between Christianity and Judaism did not develop organically, but were artificially constructed, each by the other community’s theologians. Within this “perfect mirror,” as Boyarin describes it, “the Rabbis construct (as it were) Christianity, while the Christian writers, such as Justin, construct (as it were) Judaism.”⁷

According to Boyarin, the Church fathers not only helped to invent Rabbinic Judaism (and vice versa), but in fact originated the concept of religion as we now understand it. Prior to this development religious practice and belief were primarily defined socio-geographically. Since the Rabbis inevitably rejected the label “religion” and refused to define their faith universally and outside ethnic and geographical borders, “Jewish” remained an adjective, describing a far less defined set of beliefs and practices of a particular socio-historic people group.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷ Ibid., 31

⁸ Paul Saal, Book Review: “Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*.” Keshet, Summer 2005, 94-95.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first section, Boyarin attempts to show through selected second and third century texts an engaged process for creating the difference between ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity,’ including the invention of heresy. The first chapter places an emphasis on Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, which Boyarin suggests should be read as a working out in dialogue form “the whatness of Christianity” (at least as Justin would see it). Building on this point, Boyarin then delves into the beginnings of what will be a key component of his thesis, namely Logos theology, which we will explore in further detail in a moment.

2. Parallel Developments

Boyarin’s second chapter explores the relationship and development of a constructed apostolic succession shared by both communities - a clear attempt to establish legitimacy. This is constructed by the rabbis through a “Mishnaic succession list” as seen in *Pirkei Avot*, whereby certain groups (like the Priesthood) are totally left out, while certain influential families are written in. This apostolic succession was simultaneously being established within Christian circles at roughly the same time.

Along with establishing paralleled apostolic successions, the concept of *minut* (a close cognate to Christian heresy) developed within Jewish thinking. Boyarin proposes that this theological discourse served as the primary vehicle for establishing the difference between the two communities.

In the final portions of the book, Boyarin attempts to show how the Rabbis (similar to Justin Martyr) took a significant theological position towards Jews who held versions of Logos theology, rendering them heretics, and thereby excluding ‘Christian Jews’ from Judaism via heresiological means. The culmination of this paralleled heresiological process resulted in both communities “crucifying the Logos,” whereby Logos theology became identified as “Christian,” and rejection of binitarianism (let alone trinitarianism), became the ultimate touchstone of Judaism.

Boyarin finishes the book by presenting an account of what happened to these two new entities, and particularly addresses the development of Rabbinic Judaism. According to Boyarin, Rabbinic Judaism is no longer understood “as a single organic entity that gradually evolved out of biblical religion; nor are its texts understood to be a slow and gradual accretion of earlier ‘sources.’”⁹ Rather, what emerges through rabbinic redaction in the late fifth and sixth centuries, as reflected in the Babylonian Talmud, is a significantly reworked and

⁹ Ibid. Boyarin, 32.

recontextualized Judaism. In the end, the Rabbis refused the label of “religion,” and instead, chose to re-ethnicize their distinction from the now dominant Gentile Church. Whereby, the full distinction between the two communities became solidified.

3. Logos Theology

Building upon points illuminated in Justin’s Dialogue, in the second part of his book, *The Crucifixion of the Logos*, Boyarin introduces various texts demonstrating that Logos theology was a commonly held view by Jews of all stripes (not just “Jewish Christians”). Boyarin describes Logos Theology as:

“A doctrine that between God and the world, there is a second divine entity, God’s Word (Logos) or God’s Wisdom, who mediates between the fully transcendent Godhead and the material world. This doctrine was widely held by Jews in the pre-Christian era and after the beginnings of Christianity was widely held and widely contested in Christian circles. By the fourth century, Jews who held such a doctrine and Christians who rejected it were defined as ‘neither Jews nor Christians’ but heretics.”¹⁰

Throughout the rabbinic period, Boyarin contends there is evidence of a vital form of Judaism that was not only extrarabbinic but which the Rabbis¹¹ explicitly named as a heresy - the belief in ‘Two Powers in Heaven,’ or in our terms, Logos theology. Most Jews possibly resisted Justin’s efforts to appropriate the Logos exclusively for Christianity, and additionally detested the efforts of the Rabbis to corroborate that exclusion. For those Jews, even in Israel, the Logos (referred to as *memra* ‘word’ in Aramaic) remained an important theological being.¹²

Chapter 4 undertakes a close intertextual reading of the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Boyarin does not see in the Logos of John a parthenogenetic birth of a foreign concept. Likening John’s prologue to early Midrash, he proposes that it is “conceivable to see the Prologue, together with its Logos doctrine, as a Jewish text through and through rather than, as it has often been read, a ‘Hellenized corruption’ of Judaism.”¹³

Boyarin argues that if we take into consideration all of their varieties, until the end of the fourth century Judaism and Christianity were phenomenologically indistinguishable as entities. Not just in the sense that Christianity emerged *out of* Judaism, but also in the sense that what was once shared would in the fullness of time constitute the very basis for the distinction between the

¹⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

¹¹ Boyarin emphasizes, “There is no reason to imagine, however, that ‘rabbinic Judaism’ ever became the popular hegemonic form of Jewish religiosity among the ‘People of the Land,’ and there is good reason to believe the opposite” (89). Rather, Yavnean development evolved over time, which he explores further in chapter 7.

¹² Ibid., 89.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

“two religions.”¹⁴ As we know them today, Judaism and Christianity are differentiated primarily by their belief in or denial of “complexity within the godhead.”¹⁵ However, in late antiquity there were plenty of Jews who “firmly held theological doctrines of a second God, variously called Logos, Memra, Sophia, Metatron, or Yahoel; indeed perhaps most Jews did so.”¹⁶

Boyarin argues:

“The Logos of the Prologue [in John 1] – like the theological Logos in general ... is the product of a scriptural reading of Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 together. This reading will bear out my conclusion that nothing in Logos theology as a doctrine of God indicates or even implies a particularly Christian as opposed to generally Jewish, including Christian kerygma ... we must pay attention to the formal characteristics of Midrash as a mode of reading Scripture ... This hermeneutical practice is founded on a theological notion of the oneness of Scripture as a self-interpreting text.”¹⁷

Boyarin emphasizes, “Gaps are not filled with philosophical ideas but with allusions to or citations of other texts. The first five verses of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel fit this form nearly perfectly.”¹⁸ Boyarin points to Wisdom texts and Hymns as aids to exploring this hypothesis further, noting that Philo identifies Sophia and Logos as a single entity. Additionally, within certain Wisdom texts, Proverbs 8 became *topoi* in the Jewish interpretive tradition of Genesis 1.¹⁹ Demonstrating how Sophia (wisdom) became a personified midrashic tool to decipher other passages, he uses an illustration from Baruch 3:37 to illustrate an incarnation of God’s pre-existent Wisdom: “Afterward she appeared upon the earth and lived among men.”

Boyarin argues further that by using such midrashic methods it is not so unusual to arrive at an interpretation of “God’s extraordinary incarnation of his son, the Logos.”²⁰ He spends additional amounts of time expanding on various Jewish Logos theologies, and exploring various types of Logos ‘Christologies,’ with the conclusion that what would become orthodox to Christianity was the “combination of Jewish messianic soteriology with equally Jewish Logos theology in the figure of Jesus.”²¹

In chapter 5, Boyarin then explores how widespread Logos theology was within various streams of Judaism, both preceding and coinciding with the Rabbis, and how rich and vibrant it

¹⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 95.

²⁰ Ibid., 97.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

was. Boyarin begins with Philo, and quoting David Winston, proposes that “Logos theology is the linchpin of Philo’s religious thought.”²² Philo’s writings echo the Alexandrian Jewish community’s pre-Christian concept of *deuteros theos*, a sort of ‘second god’ intimately linked the idea of God’s Word. Boyarin demonstrates that Philo asserted that by means of God’s Word, which was the same as His Wisdom, God created the world and revealed Himself to the prophets.

One of the implications within Philo’s work is the close connection he draws between the Logos, the Word, and light. For Philo, it appears the Logos is both a part of God, and yet a separate being. It is the Word created at the beginning which creates everything else. For Philo, the Word is both God, and *with* God. According to Boyarin, “Philo oscillates about whether the Logos, God’s Son, exists separately or is totally incorporated within the godhead.”²³ What is unique about Philo is that his Logos theology is not just the Wisdom personified in the biblical text, and neither does it completely corroborate with Stoic or Platonic thought on the Logos. Rather, it seems this Word Philo describes is a new synthesis of all of the above. For Boyarin, the Logos as a divine mediator is found only in Jewish (including Christian) theologies, and historically speaking, is “more of a scriptural interpretation rather than a Platonic speculation.”²⁴

Turning to Aramaic texts, Boyarin demonstrates that Logos theology is native to Judaism (and not just for Hellenized Jews, but even among Jews in Israel). He does this by exploring the concept of *memra* – a term used in Aramaic texts similar to the Logos:

“There were other Jews and not just Greek speaking ones who manifested a version of Logos theology. Notions of the second god as the personified Word or Wisdom of God were present among Semitic-speaking Jews, as well ... the Targums as products of the synagogues, in contrast to the House of Study, were *not* rabbinic in their religious ethos. The synagogues, themselves, as has been pointed out in recent scholarship were not under the control of the rabbis probably until the Middle Ages. The leading candidate for the Semitic Logos is of course, the Memra of God.”²⁵

By examining the role of the Targumim, it follows, according to Boyarin, “that the strongest reading of the Memra is that it is not a mere name, but an actual divine entity, or mediator.”²⁶ Boyarin concludes the chapter by returning to John 1, and its implications for understanding Jewish Logos/Memra theologies:

²² Ibid., 113

²³ Ibid., 114.

²⁴ Ibid., 115

²⁵ Ibid., 116.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

“The Gospel of John, according to this view, when taken together with the Logos of Philo and with the targum, provides further important evidence that Logos theology, used here as a general term for various closely related binitarian theologies, was the religious koine of Jews in Palestine and the Diaspora ... In saying this, I am arguing ... that in the doctrine of God there is no essential and crucial difference between Judaism and Christianity.”²⁷

Boyarin does a great job connecting the Logos and Memra, and presenting an understanding of a binitarian theology that is firmly rooted in Jewish soil. However, as Carl Kinbar points out in his paper for this forum, Boyarin is missing a key component in his argument. According to Kinbar:

“Strangely, Boyarin does not introduce the uses of the Hebrew *dibbur*, also meaning “a spoken word.” Since *logos*, *memra*, and *dibbur* share highly overlapping semantic domains. I suggest that Boyarin’s work suffers from this gap, largely eliminating from his work a significant body of rabbinic material written in Hebrew. This is not a minor omission from *Border Lines*, as *dibbur* is used of a hypostatic Word in a number of midrashim attributed to rabbis of the second through fifth centuries C.E.”²⁸

In the following chapter (Chapter 6) Boyarin demonstrates through specific examples from rabbinic literature how the Rabbis eventually took a significant theological position towards Jews who held versions of Logos theology, rendering them heretics, and thereby excluding them along with ‘Christian’ Jews from normative Judaism. The Rabbis agree, as it were, to cede traditional Jewish Logos theology to Christianity, declaring it, and those who held positions of “Two Powers in Heaven” (symbolized by no less than Rabbi Akiva), as outside the parameters of normative Judaism.

Conclusion

Boyarin’s *Border Lines* carries significant relevance and implications for Messianic Judaism, and how we are to understand ourselves. It is also a significant contribution to our efforts to develop a mature Messianic Jewish understanding of the nature of God. Although he builds a strong case, there are also a few weak spots that can, however, be filled by additional support from the Second Temple period. When weighed together with texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and recent inscriptions such as “Gabriel’s Revelation,”²⁹ we can gain an even clearer perspective.

²⁷ Ibid., 126-127.

²⁸ Carl Kinbar, Addendum to “*Israel, Interpretation, and the Knowledge of God.*” Paper to be presented at 2010 Hashivenu forum, Agoura Hills, CA. p. 24.

²⁹ Israel Knohl, “The Messiah Son of Joseph.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September/October 2008.

Boyarin provides a serious proposal for understanding complex unity, and how it developed in Early Judaism. He also provides an analysis for how it was adapted among the earliest followers of Yeshua. Boyarin additionally helps demonstrate how, through artificially constructed means, this once very Jewish understanding of God became defined as “beyond the pale” of normative Judaism.

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