

The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ

A Review Article

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Berkeley's Daniel Boyarin, well-known for his revision of the understanding of the interactions between nascent Christianity and nascent Judaism in the years 100–500, looks to extend such work to the period of the New Testament in his 2012 book, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*.¹ Here he seeks to challenge the popular understanding of the first-century Jesus movement, and thus the relationship between ancient Jews and Christians. As most, if not all, of recent New Testament scholarship has demonstrated, few would dispute the “Jewishness” of the human figure of Jesus. Many, however, would dispute Boyarin's distinctive thesis in *The Jewish Gospels* that the *divine* Christ is Jewish too. According to Boyarin, Christology is itself a Jewish discourse. Behind this claim lies the most significant argument of his book: the “germs” of both the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation were already present within the thought-world of Second Temple Judaism.

In his first of four chapters, Boyarin addresses the title “Son of Man,” given to Jesus in the gospels. By the time the gospels were written, he writes, the title had already come to signify a divine figure in contemporary Jewish thought, and it is therefore not inconceivable that a group of monotheistic Jews now understood Jesus as the fulfillment of this tradition. To demonstrate this, Boyarin provides a close reading of Dan 7, the apocalyptic text from which the title derives. Daniel's vision features two divine figures, the Ancient of Days and one like a human being (or literally, “one like a son of man”), to whom the

¹ Most notably, see his *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

former gives eternal dominion over all nations. The author of Daniel then has the vision interpreted, and the one like a son of man is said to refer to “the holy ones of the Most High,” who are to be given dominion (Dan 7:27, HCSB). Scholars have long disputed whether the “son of man” in Daniel refers to a divine heavenly figure or to the whole nation of Israel, as the passage provides evidence to support either position.² Most today would side with John J. Collins’s harmonizing interpretation, in which he identifies the Son of Man with the archangel Michael (from Dan 10–12), who represents Israel as its heavenly prince.³ Boyarin, however, finds the text to be divided against itself, and accordingly reads the author’s interpretation of the vision as his discomfort with and suppression of an “updated” version of one of the oldest theological ideas in Israel—that is, duality within God, comparable to the relationship between the Canaanite gods El and Baal.⁴ Dan 7, then, leaves us with two legacies: 1) it is the ultimate source for a heavenly redeemer figure; and 2) it is our best evidence for the continuation of a very ancient binitarian Israelite theology deep into the Second Temple period (52).⁵ His reading of Dan 7 leads him to suggest that first-century Jews would not have disputed the theological statement made by the gospels about a second divine figure (e.g. Mark 2:5–10; 2:23–28), but would simply dispute the claim that *Jesus* is the Son of Man.

In chapter two, Boyarin explores 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, Jewish texts roughly contemporary to the gospels. Like the gospels, both of these texts connect the redeemer king of Dan 7 to the expectation of a Davidic Messiah. In the Similitudes of 1 Enoch, we can observe notions Boyarin claims are often thought to be exclusively Christian, such as the pre-existence of the second divine figure, as well as the idea of a human figure who is exalted to a divine state

² See John J. Collins’s helpful discussion, “The Son of Man and the Saints of the Most High in the Book of Daniel,” *JBL* 93.1 (1974): 50–66.

³ Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel (Hermeneia 27)*; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 318.

⁴ This section is a simplified version of his article “Daniel 7, Intertextuality and the History of Israel’s Cult,” *HTR* 105.2 (2012): 139–162. Whatever one makes of his thesis about the composite nature of Dan 7, he clearly places emphasis on his theory of the author’s discomfort with the myth here in order to argue that dispute over duality within God is a much older phenomenon than that which resulted from early Christian claims about Jesus.

⁵ Boyarin’s argument that we are to find a background for Dan 7 in the Canaanite Baal Cycle is simply assumed by most scholars. See, for example, Collins, “Stirring Up the Great Sea: The Religio-Historical Background of Daniel 7,” in *Seers, Sybils and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 139–155.

and, conversely, a God-like redeemer who comes down to save Israel. Boyarin rehearses here what has become commonplace for the scholarly community, however, with the implication that “all of the elements of Christology are essentially in place” (94).⁶ The same pattern, Boyarin argues, can also be observed in 4 Ezra. Thus, Mark’s gospel, the Similitudes of Enoch, and 4 Ezra are independent witnesses to a thoroughly Jewish pattern of thought at approximately the same time. The great innovation of the gospel writers, Boyarin insists, is only their insistence that the Son of Man is already present in their very midst in the person of Jesus. Boyarin concludes this chapter as he did the first, by stating that all of the *ideas* about Christ are old; the only new development in the gospels is the claim that these expectations have now culminated in Jesus.

In chapter three, Boyarin provides a challenge to conventional readings of Mark 7, a text in which Jesus disputes the Pharisees and scribes’ adherence to the “traditions of the elders,” specifically the practice of handwashing prior to eating. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ inquiry as to why the disciples of Jesus eat with unwashed hands in 7:15 has long puzzled scholars. Traditionally, Christian interpreters have understood Jesus’ words “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (NRSV) as Jesus’ rejection of biblical food laws.⁷ Others dismiss the verse as inauthentic to the historical Jesus because of such blatant contradiction of the food laws.⁸ Boyarin, however, sides with Talmud scholar Yair Furstenberg in his interpretation of Mark 7:15.⁹ Furstenberg argues that the Pharisees had taken

⁶ Boyarin’s work here basically represents what has become the standard discussion on these two texts, such as: Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 75–110.

⁷ For example: Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary (Hermeneia 55)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 356; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26 Word Biblical Commentary; Mark I–VIII (WB 34A)* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 380; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 27)* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 457.

⁸ H. Räisänen, “Jesus and the Food Laws: Reflections on Mark 7:15,” *JNST* 16 (1982): 79–100; cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 264–7.

⁹ Yair Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7.15,” *NTS* 54 (2008): 176–200.

over the Greco-Roman belief and practice surrounding handwashing before meals, and believed that the hands had the capacity to spread contamination derived from certain foods and thus cause the body to become impure. He reads Jesus' words here quite literally, understanding Jesus as condemning the Pharisees' *halakhic* ruling that eating can only be done in a state of ritual purity. According to Mark's Jesus, Furstenberg argues, correct interpretation of the biblical law envisions the self, and not the food that enters the body, as the source of impurity. In 7:15, then, Jesus does not abrogate Torah by rendering the Jewish food laws irrelevant for his followers. Instead, correct interpretation of this controversy must take into account the distinction between biblical dietary and purity laws and the entirely separate system of purity developed by the Pharisees, as evidenced in later rabbinic traditions that likely date to the time in which Mark wrote.¹⁰ Jesus charges the Pharisees with an incorrect interpretation of the biblical laws within an *inner Jewish* dispute. Boyarin, however, makes one of the most novel and significant contributions of the book as he goes even beyond Furstenberg with his interpretation of Mark 7:19, the editorial comment which reads, "thus he declared all foods clean." This verse has traditionally been cited as evidence of the so-called "parting of the ways" between Jews and Christians.¹¹ While Furstenberg cannot be placed in that group of scholars, he does read the verse as Mark's misunderstanding of the historical Jesus' statement in 7:15 as Jesus' rejection of the biblical food and purity laws.¹² For Boyarin, however, Mark—along with his Jesus—was a Jew, and at odds with the Pharisaic laws of defiled foods, not kosher rules. He did not write, "thus he permitted all foods," but that "he purified all foods" (121), a direct challenge to Pharisaic interpretation of the biblical food and purity laws. From here Boyarin moves on to say that the Gospel of Mark is therefore best read as a Jewish text, "even in its most Christological moments" (127).¹³

In his fourth and final chapter, Boyarin examines the Christian messianic interpretation of Isa 53 in Mark 8:38; 9:12; and 14:62, observing that each passage also refers to Jesus as the Danielic "son of man." The influence of Isa 53 on the gospel writers' (and Jesus') conviction that the Messiah Jesus must

¹⁰ For example, *Zabim* 5.12.

¹¹ While such an interpretation is less and less common today, a recent example includes R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 277.

¹² Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body," 179.

¹³ It is not immediately clear, however, what the "most Christological moments" are and what exactly Jesus and Mark's observance of Jewish food laws contributes to Christology.

suffer and die has long been noted by scholars, although Boyarin does not submit that here.¹⁴ He repudiates those who would view the early Christian messianic interpretation of Isa 53 as an “after-the-fact” explanation of Jesus’ suffering and death.¹⁵ Such scholars hold this view, he argues, for fear of eschewing what they believe to be the traditional Jewish reading, namely, that the suffering servant refers to the whole people of Israel.¹⁶ Boyarin, however, argues that the early Christian reading is not an innovation, as evidenced by the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah found within later Jewish sources such as the Talmudim, various medieval Jewish commentaries, and the Spanish rabbi Moses ben Nahman’s writings.¹⁷ How did it happen, he asks, that just centuries later, rabbinic Jews of the Talmud and midrash had no qualms about discovering the Messiah in Isa 53, just as early Christ-followers had done (134)? Again, for Boyarin, it is only the early Christian ascription of the passage to Jesus that is new.

Unfortunately, as noted throughout this review, much of what he does in *The Jewish Gospels* is gather together evidence that has been worked on in recent years by others as support for his rather controversial thesis. He gives due credit to some, but not to others. He is right to point to the messianic nature of most early Jewish interpretations of Dan 7, just as he correctly draws our attention to 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra’s parallels with the gospels, though he fails to submit that these particular observations are now standard in current Son of

¹⁴ For example, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 335. See also his earlier work: *Jesus and the OT: His Application of OT Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Chapman, 1971), 110–132.

¹⁵ As an example, he refers to the classical statements of Joseph Klausner in his “The Jewish and Christian Messiah” in *The Messianic Idea in Israel, from its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* (trans. W. F. Stinespring; New York: Macmillan, 1955), 519–531.

¹⁶ Certainly, this reading does have its supporters. A helpful discussion can be found in R. N. Whybray, “Who is the Servant?,” *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 65–82.

¹⁷ A similar argument was made by Torleif Elgvin in his 2005 article “The Individual Interpretation of the Servant” *Mishkan* 43 (2005): 25–33. Elgvin, however, consulted a number of early Jewish sources, such as Jer 30:20–22, Zech 13:7–10, and 4Q541 Apocryphon of Levi, all of which are much more contemporary to Mark’s gospel than those to which Boyarin points. This allows Elgvin to assert that the New Testament writers were not being innovative in understanding the Suffering Servant as an individual.

Man discussions.¹⁸ Boyarin's treatment of Isa 53 is less than convincing, particularly as it relates to the Jewish examples he provides. His evidence for Jewish messianic readings of this passage is scant indeed, even if we grant that many of the traditions found in the rabbinic sources he draws upon could have pre-dated the texts in which we now find them.

Despite Boyarin's controversial argument that the "germs" of Trinitarian theology were already present in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus, what he actually demonstrates to us is a Jewish *binitarian* theology, with which few would disagree. For example, many today are on board with Larry W. Hurtado's work in *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, in which he demonstrates that early Judaism provided early Christianity with the conceptual categories for accommodating the exaltation of Jesus to God's right hand. One of the more unfortunate aspects, then, of Boyarin's work is the absence of any interaction at all with this scholar. Hurtado argues that while the earliest Christians were provided with a conceptual framework for accommodating the exaltation of Jesus in the Jewish notion of divine agency, their *religious experiences* produced a distinctive modification of these traditions. That Christ became an object of devotional attention so shortly after his execution led to their redefinition of Jewish monotheistic devotion. Whatever one makes of Hurtado's thesis, an argument that the *only* innovation of early Christians was their application of already prevalent binitarian notions of God to Jesus should address Hurtado's work on early Christian pietistic practice and its implications in some manner.

More generally, although Boyarin named his book *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*, what we actually encounter is a collection of close readings of Dan 7 and Isa 53 from the perspective of *one* gospel, Mark. Certainly the Son of Man theology found in Mark is not replicated exactly in the other gospels, nor is it as significant for the other three gospel writers. Thus, Boyarin's frequent claims such as "in the gospels . . ." tend to be overstated and generalized, as he does not include extensive discussion in the book to support his conclusions based on gospels other than Mark. Perhaps his choice to focus on Mark was intentional, being that it is so often assumed to be of Gentile provenance. To prove Mark's thorough "Jewishness" would, then, be most devastating to traditional interpretations. However, we are not told if this is Boyarin's rationale.

¹⁸ For Collins's specific treatment of 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, see: Collins, *Daniel*, 79–84. Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 51–70.

Chapter three, in which he interprets Mark 7, provides us with the type of study we would most expect given the title of the work, and is Boyarin's most helpful contribution here. However, this chapter ends up seeming out of place in relation to his main thesis. To my mind, the book has two main arguments: 1) both the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation are already at play within the thought-world into which Jesus was born; and 2) the only innovation of early Christ-followers was their application of already-developed Jewish traditions to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. It is not clear how Jesus (and Mark's) Torah observance contributes to early Christian *Christology*, a term he fails to define from the outset.

Boyarin's claim that two of Christianity's most defining doctrines, namely, those of the triune God and the Incarnation, were not "Christian" innovations, but rather ideas that already existed, however preliminarily, in Jewish thought, is certainly provocative. However, the Christian tradition's third member of the trinity, the Holy Spirit, makes not one appearance within the discussion. In this regard it seems Boyarin has overstated his case. Similarly, in the epilogue, Boyarin introduces a new thought to the book with statements that deserve to have much more space dedicated to them. Of the Resurrection, he says:

The exaltation and resurrection experiences of his followers are a product of the narrative, not a cause of it. This is not to deny any creativity on the part of Jesus or his early or later followers, but only to suggest strongly that such creativity is most richly and compellingly read within the Jewish textual and intertextual world, the echo chamber of a Jewish soundscape of the first century. (160)

It seems that in this work, Boyarin views the resurrection of Jesus in the same light as the Trinity and the Incarnation. However, this he does not make clear, nor does he demonstrate just how Jesus' followers used the "Jewish textual and intertextual world" as a framework for the resurrection of Jesus. His case would have been made much more strongly had he developed the "Jewishness" of this idea through an exploration of contemporary Second Temple Jewish texts that feature such beliefs.¹⁹

¹⁹ While there is much dispute as to whether or not each of these passages contains an unambiguous reference to resurrection, such texts are available. See 1 Enoch 51:1-5; 2

The Jewish Gospels does have its merits in that it is, for the most part, an accessible read for its intended “lay” audience. It is not overly technical, and the ecumenical aims he clearly has are evident and indeed laudable. With a capable guide, this book has the potential to make a good introductory textbook for university courses on the nascent period of early Christianity, as well as to provide provocative food for thought in religious settings, both Jewish and Christian. That being said, even a careful and inquisitive “lay” reader or undergraduate student would wonder just which strands of the early Jesus movement held that Easter was a form of the Jewish Passover and which ones “vigorously denied it” (11).²⁰ Likewise, readers will ask which Christ-believing groups were written out of Christianity through the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople (14).²¹ Similarly, which Jews and which Christians expected a human to be exalted to the state of divinity and which expected a divinity to come down to earth (34)? For students in particular, simple references to the texts from which he derives these ideas would have been most useful.²²

Finally, Boyarin’s work in *The Jewish Gospels* provides a type of springboard for further exploration of these issues. First, while he has focused primarily on the treatment of Dan 7 in Mark’s gospel, much more work could be done on the remaining three canonical gospels and their use of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. This may allow for a challenge to many Jews, lay and scholarly alike, who have historically accused Christians of distorting the Hebrew Bible by appropriating it for “non-Jewish” purposes (157). Conversely, his claim that the gospels are Jewish issues the implicit challenge to non-Jewish Christians, who have appropriated not only the Hebrew Bible but also, as

Macc 7; 1QH 19:12–14; 4Q 385 fr. 2 2–3. For helpful discussions of the belief in the resurrection in Second Temple Judaism, see Ed Sanders’s discussion in *Judaism: Practice and Belief* 63 B.C.E.–66 C.E. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 298–303. He points to such texts as Josephus, War 2.154f; 2.164; 1QH 6.29f. See also George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (exp. ed.; HTS 56; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Most recently, see Daniel W. Hayter, “How Are the Dead Raised?: The Bodily Nature of Resurrection in Second Temple Jewish Texts” in *The Body in Biblical, Christian and Jewish Texts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2014), 123–143.

²⁰ The Christians of Asia Minor, led by Melito of Sardis, observed Easter at the same time as and in connection with the Jewish Passover, whereas Roman Christians, led by Pope Victor, denied this, and eventually won the dispute.

²¹ Does he refer here to such “Judaizing” groups as the Ebionites? The Nazarenes? Docetists more generally? Arians?

²² His discussion of each of the above examples can be found in his introduction.

Boyarin argues, the gospels. Second, Boyarin's work on Mark 7 should encourage us to return afresh to Matthew's "Jewish" redaction of Mark's gospel if Mark too is a "Jewish" text, a task which could have important implications for Matthean studies. Third, Boyarin's thesis about the earliest Christian doctrines, often perceived as later Christian innovations, should be explored in regard to the Resurrection. Similarly, someone really ought to re-explore his thesis in regard to the Trinity, as he has left much to be developed in that area. Beyond whatever other notable strengths of the book, the mere fact that *The Jewish Gospels* can be said to elicit these areas of further study suggests, at the very least, the heuristic value of his contribution here.