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Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity

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REVIEW

Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*

(Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), paper, 373 pp.

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Daniel Boyarin's latest book explores the beginnings of Christianity and Judaism and the formation of Judaism and Christianity as two distinct cultural-religious systems. The book is structured in three main parts: Part I – Making a Difference: The Heresiological Beginnings of Christianity and Judaism; Part II – The Crucifixion of Logos: How Logos Theology Became Christian; and Part III – Sparks of the Logos: Historicising Rabbinic Religion.

In the preface, entitled "Interrogating my Love," he explains how he as a Jew is "in love with some manifestations" of Christianity and his book shows indeed this loving approach to both Judaism and Christianity. In summary, he declares that this is a book about "desires for the different other," about constructed borders, identities and affiliations.

The chronological scope of the study covers the period of the Late Antiquity up to the fourth century. The main argument of the book is that Judaism and Christianity were not yet fully separated in that period. The blurred borders between Judaism and Christianity during that time can be exemplified in a notice found in Jerome on the sect of the Nazoreans, who "are to be found 'in all the synagogues of the East among the Jews', and who consider themselves both Christians and Jews but are really 'neither Christians nor Jews'" (p. 25).

Analysing patristic and rabbinic texts from that period he proceeds to investigate under what ideological imperatives the separation took place and how it influenced respectively the formation of Christianity and Judaism as two separate entities.

He claims that the borders between the two were "constructed," "imposed," "artificial," and "political" and finally enforced by religious experts. In the Christian context, these experts were the heresiologists. According to Boyarin, the heresiologists produced a totally new form of identity, religion. Therefore, he maintains that religion in the modern sense is not a "transhistorical" or "transcultural" phenomenon but an invention of Early Christianity.

A major part of Boyarin's argumentation is based on the works by heresiologists such as Justin and Irenaeus. He ascribes especially to Justin the invention of this new form of identity, which became the Christian religion. Undoubtedly his argument would have been more compelling if he would have used a wider range of patristic sources of that period and if he would have paid more attention to the diversity of Great Church Christianity in that historical period.

According to Boyarin, the pressure from the Christians led Judaism also to form itself as "a church with orthodoxy and heresy" and even succession authority. The succession in rabbinic authority was constructed on the invention of rabbinic orthodoxy as opposed to the heresy of "Two Powers in Heaven." The Rabbis defined themselves as the sole heirs of the Torah's authority as presented in the Mishnah at the end of the second century.

While Christian borders were constructed in order to define a new identity and religion and to exclude all heretics, including the Jews, Judaism constructed borders in order to exclude Christians.

Boyarin explains how Judaism eventually rejected for its own understanding of identity the category of religion in the Christian sense and re-ethnicized its difference from the Christians, classifying the Christians under the generic “ethnic” label: “Gentiles,” thus denying to Christians their own acclaimed religious identity. He concludes: “There is now virtually no way that a Jew can stop being a Jew, since the very notion of heresy was finally rejected and refused to be, in the end, a religion” (p. 224). Therefore, according to Boyarin, Judaism and Christianity cannot be studied on the basis of a difference between two religions.

Although he claims that his approach is primarily historical and not methodological, one of the most interesting aspects of this book is his use of modern theory, such as post-colonial theory (Homi Bhaba), semantics, discourse as well as post-modern theory, to approach and analyse Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity.

Especially Homi Bhaba’s theory about the hybridity of cultural identification proves to be intriguing for the understanding of Early Christian orthodoxy in its struggle against heretical groups or of “the other” in general.

Ultimately, Boyarin focuses his argument on Logos theology, a pre-Christian Jewish doctrine that was later appropriated by Christian theology and was eventually rejected by the Rabbis by the fourth century.

Boyarin stresses that rabbinic Judaism as a historical entity developed in the Christian ideological discourse of the Byzantine Empire. Against this background Babylonian rabbinic literature rejected the central for Byzantine cultural notion of “*homonioia*” and advocated pluralism.

The development of rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity as two distinct systems was founded in great part on what Boyarin calls – following Isaac Heinemann – the “Shattering of the Logos.” In rabbinic literature, the Oral Torah acquired a normative authority, while dissensus became the norm.

The textual representation of rabbinic theology was based on the principle that “any verse can have multiple meanings.” Accordingly, the postulated monovocality of Christian orthodoxy in Late Antiquity was opposed to the multivalence of rabbinic dialectics as a “representation of the polynioia of the divine Word and the divine mind” (p. 191). Boyarin argues that this was a development within Judaism and “not a transcendental essence” as it is usually seen.

In spite of some provocative ideas that would have deserved a more careful study, Boyarin’s book presents us with new insights for the study of Christianity and Judaism in Late Antiquity and of their interrelationship. Admittedly some of his arguments are not new for modern scholarship but still he succeeds in discussing them in an intriguing and challenging way. This book, written in a masterly prose, is in many ways an illuminating study on the interdependence between Judaism and Christianity in their mutual development as distinct cultural entities.

As he concludes: “Among various emblems of this different difference remains the fact that there are Christians who are Jews, or perhaps better put, Jews, who are Christians, even up to this very day.” (p. 225).