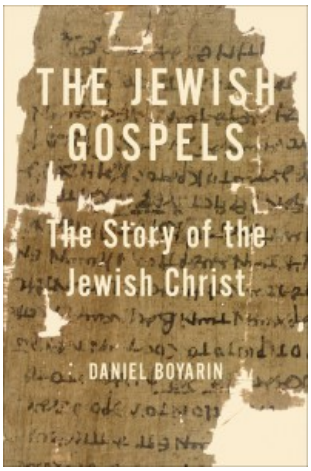
Review: The Jewish Gospels



I have an ongoing interest in the interaction between first-century rabbinical Judaism and Christianity. On each exploration I find increased depth and colour to my reading of the New Testament. I picked up Boyarin's book *The Jewish Gospels* on something of a whim and for the title alone.

Boyarin's project is to reduce the divide between what are classically considered as the distinctives of Christianity over against Judaism: the *divinity* of Christ, and the necessity of *suffering* in the messianic expectation. He seeks to demonstrate that these distinctives are present (although not always widely accepted) within pre-Christian Jewish thought and expectation; they are not novelties invented in the light of Christ, but pre-existing understandings that are re-appraised in the light of a kosher, crucified and risen Messiah.

In this he is aiding the increasing mutual affirmation that is currently apparent in Judaeo-Christian relations. I follow Romans 11 enough to see this as a good thing: Gentile humility and Jewish messianic faith leaves my heart strangely warmed. Boyarin's location of classic Christian theology in Jewish messianic expectation serves both.

Of particular interest, however, is Boyarin's hermeneutic. This informs exegesis more broadly and I have added it to my toolchest:

Firstly, the title "Son of Man" was not code, or a dimunition of "Son of God" (a clearly messianic term, drawing on the image of the human Davidic kings); it is a deliberate

connection with the one with the Ancient of Days in Daniel, and has always connoted *divinity.*

> *The occupant of one throne was an ancient, the occupant of the other a young figure in human form. The older one invests the younger one with His own authority on earth forever and ever, passing the scepter to him. What could be more natural, then, than to adopt the older usage "Son of God," already ascribed to the Messiah in his role as the Davidic king of Israel, and understanding it more literally as the sign of the equal divinity of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man? Thus the Son of Man became the Son of God, and "Son of God" became the name of Jesus' divine nature – and all without any break with ancient of Jewish tradition. (pp 46-47)*

Secondly, much of the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees relates to the *Pharisee's* novel approach to the manifestation of their Jewish identity. Jesus represents a *conservative* and *traditional* view, resisting the legalistic and narrow innovations of the Pharisees.

> *Jesus' Judaism was a conservative reaction against some radical innovations in the Law stemming from the Pharisees and Scribes of Jerusalem. (p104)*

> *Jesus… was fighting not against Judaism but within it – an entirely different matter. Far from being a marginal Jew, Jesus was a leader of one type of Judaism that was being marginalized by another group, the Pharisees, and he was fighting against them as dangerous innovators. (p105)*

Thirdly, the messianic expectation of the Jews was not triumphalism, (vicarious) suffering was expected.

> *The notion of the humiliated and suffering Messiah was not at all alien within Judaism before Jesus' advent, and it*

> *remained current among Jews well into the future following that – indeed, well into the early modern period. The fascinating (and to some, no doubt, uncomfortable) fact is that this tradition was well documented by modern Messianic Jews, who are concerned to demonstrate that their belief in Jesus does not make them un-Jewish. (pp132-133)*

I do not have the wherewithal to properly and academically test this framework. I can only consider the internal logic, and the sense in which they help me to tell the gospel story faithfully to Scripture. To that extent it is helpful.

I have a few concerned questions about his analytical framework. His redactional analysis of Daniel presupposes an "intra-Jewish controversy" in which "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" (p43). He therefore doesn't present to us an Old Testament witness to Triune thought as a clear proclamation of Scripture, but as a tension within Scripture, a rejection of one part in order to express the emphasis of another part.

This willingness to divide Scripture does not strengthen his argument. I don't want him to stand outside and objectify Scripture, I want him to tell the covenant, gospel story. He gives the material for it, but doesn't narrate it. This is a book of intriguing insights but it us readers who have the the task of assessing, applying and proclaiming them.