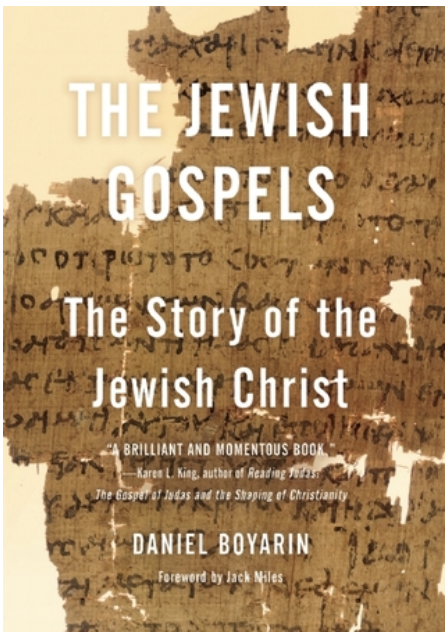

The Jewish Gospels

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In July 2008 a front-page story in the *New York Times* reported on the discovery of an ancient Hebrew tablet, dating from before the birth of Jesus, which predicted a Messiah who would rise from the dead after three days. Commenting on this startling discovery at the time, noted Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin argued that “some Christians will find it shocking—a challenge to the uniqueness of their theology.”

Guiding us through a rich tapestry of new discoveries and ancient scriptures, *The Jewish Gospels* makes the powerful case that our conventional understandings of Jesus and of the origins of Christianity are wrong. In Boyarin’s scrupulously illustrated account, the coming of the Messiah was fully imagined in the ancient Jewish texts. Jesus, moreover, was embraced by many Jews as this person, and his core teachings were not at all a break from Jewish beliefs and teachings. Jesus and his followers, Boyarin shows, were simply Jewish. What came to be known as Christianity came much later, as religious and political leaders sought to impose a new religious orthodoxy that was not present at the time of Jesus’s life.

In the vein of Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels*, here is a brilliant new work that will break open some of our culture’s most cherished assumptions.

The Jewish Gospels Details

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From Reader Review The Jewish Gospels for online ebook

Kelly Head says

Boyarin, who teaches at UC Berkeley and has written previously on Paul from a Jewish perspective, makes a very compelling case that Jesus saw himself as the embodiment of common Jewish notions of the Messiah/Son of Man contrary to what much of contemporary biblical scholarship has established as a supposed consensus, namely, that much of the "high" Christology of Christianity originated after the death of Jesus in a purely Gentile environment. Using texts like Daniel 7, Isaiah 53, the Similitudes of Enoch, and various portions of the Torah, Boyarin shows that a notion of a divine, suffering, second person of the Godhead fit within the expectations of Jewish theology long before, and long after the birth of Christianity. One of the most interesting chapters is titled Jesus Kept Kosher and argues for an extremely nuanced reading of Mark in which many commentators have assumed that Jesus abrogates the dietary laws. On the contrary, Boyarin demonstrates that Jesus is reacting in a conservative manner to deny the extra burdens of the PURITY laws (not dietary) placed on Jews by Pharisees promoting the Tradition of the Elders, which was considered a type of oral Torah. Without getting in to the technicalities, the details ushered in to make this argument really show why many consider Boyarin the world's leading Talmudic scholar.

Marge Prohofsky says

I have always thought that Jesus lived his life as a devout Jew. If the only argument is in Mark, that Jesus allowed "any" (unKosher) food to be eaten (which I agree with the Rabbi, the argument seems to be more about purity laws, than about kashrut) then, in my opinion, it still wouldn't make sense for Jesus to break with traditional Judaism over "just" kashrut. You could argue that he had to start somewhere, yet, he doesn't start breaking from Jewish tradition in the gospels and just keep explaining away his differences. That's not what Jesus was about and Rabbi Boyarin uses texts of Daniel and Ezra to point out how in-line with Judaism that Jesus' ideas are. The ideas of "Son of Man", "trinity" and rising "on the third day"; all from Jewish texts. Hats off to Rabbi Boyarin, whether you agree with him, or not, I believe that publicizing our religious similarities (Judaism and Christianity) is important to note.

Lee Harmon says

Just when you think you’ve got it all figured out, along comes Daniel Boyarin, a professor of Talmudic Culture and Rhetoric at the University of California.

You think Christianity’s unique contribution to Judaism was the introduction of a god-man? Wrong. Could it be the idea of a suffering savior? Wrong again. Maybe that Jesus rejected Jewish dietary laws and Sabbath restrictions, freeing us from the Law? Hardly; Boyarin paints a very Jewish Jesus in his reading of the Gospels, certainly a Jesus who keeps kosher.

Christianity’s one claim to fame may be the insistence that the Messiah had already arrived, but that’s about the extent of its uniqueness. Otherwise, Christianity is a very Jewish offshoot of a Jewish religion. Boyarin draws from texts like the Book of Daniel and 1st Enoch to explain the title Son of Man (which, it turns out, is a much more exalted title than Son of God) and in turn to expose the expectation of many first-century Jews

of just such a divine savior.

This is a fascinating, controversial book presenting a very different look at Jesus as one who defended Torah from wayward Judaic sects (the Pharisees), rather than vice versa. I don't think the arguments are fully developed yet, but certainly Boyarin introduces "reasonable doubt" against traditional scholarship. Let the arguing begin.

Henry Sturcke says

Daniel Boyarin is one of the most original and provocative rabbinic scholars, the author of many valuable books exploring the matrix in which both orthodox Judaism and Christianity arose. He is one of the many scholars who have challenged the assumption that there was, at an early point, a "parting of the ways" between these two movements. In The Jewish Gospels, he sets out to show that the New Testament is "more deeply embedded within Second Temple Jewish life and thought than many have imagined" (pp. 157–8). This is even true, he contends, in the beliefs about Jesus often termed Christology. In other words, it is not just that Jesus lived and died a Jew, but even the concept of "Christ" was not a foreign element, cobbled together from non-Jewish sources. Boyarin explicitly offers his reconstruction as an alternative narrative of how Christology arose. These motifs—the notion of a dual godhead with father and son, the notion of a Redeemer who himself will be both God and man, and the notion that this Redeemer would suffer and die as part of the process of salvation—are often seen as Christian as opposed to Jewish.

These topics are explored in chapters 1, 2 and 4, using a close reading of Dan 7, the Enoch literature, 4 Ezra, and Isa 53. The results are not controversial in today's scholarly world. More controversial is the imagined dichotomy behind his thesis: that the group of ideas we think of as Christology were either developed by his followers after his crucifixion, or were present in Jewish thought prior to Jesus. Since, as Boyarin demonstrates, these ideas were there, he concludes that Jesus saw himself in these terms and openly shared his self-understanding with his followers.

Here, I believe, he does not display the same differentiated reading of the gospels and other New Testament texts that he shows with Old Testament, intertestamental, and rabbinic literature. There is ample evidence in the New Testament, to me, of an intermediate possibility, namely, the view that the raw materials for later Christology were indeed available in the first century Jewish world, but coalesced around Jesus after his crucifixion. On this view, as well, it is not necessary to posit the adoption of concepts from the wider, pagan world to explain Christian beliefs about Jesus. On this point, I agree with Boyarin.

Falling outside of this discussion of the sources of Christology is chapter 3, entitled "Jesus Kept Kosher." Although a separate topic, there are continuities with the other three chapters of the book, and it shares their strengths and weaknesses. In this chapter, he focuses on a conflict between some Pharisees from Jerusalem and Jesus in Mark 7. The traditional reading of this account is that it shows "the total rejection by Mark's Jesus of Jewish dietary practices, the kosher rules" (p. 103). Boyarin makes the contrary assertion: according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus kept kosher, which is to say (this is a crucial step in his argument) that he saw himself not as abrogating the Torah but as defending it. He defended it against what he perceived to be threats to it from the Pharisees: "Jesus' Judaism was a conservative reaction against some radical innovations in the Law stemming from the Pharisees and Scribes of Jerusalem" (p. 105).

Accepting Markan priority, Boyarin views this Gospel as representative of the "earliest" Christians. If Mark were Jewish, "then the beginnings of the Jewish movement can be considered in a very different light" (106). In this view, Jesus was fighting not against Judaism, but within it.

To support his contention, Boyarin points out that the distinction made in Jewish thought between clean/unclean and permitted/not-permitted, with the first pair dealing with the body and other matters, is

ignored in scholarly discussion of the passage Only the second category is applied in the question of whether foods are kosher or not. He concedes, though, that animals not kosher are called impure in the Torah (112). When one consults the author's end notes, one finds the interesting remark that this is a "terminological glitch." I would submit that, while knowledge of this distinction in rabbinic thought is helpful in interpreting this passage, scholars who fail to can be excused.

Nevertheless, Boyarin succeeds, in my view, in showing that the passage carefully records a debate that is, ironically, the earliest witness to the innovative practice of hand-washing to avoid ritual impurity. To him, this is evidence that the evangelist Mark was Jewish. It may however prove nothing more than that he carefully transmitted traditional material in his possession. Whether this is enough to place the entire passage in the world of the "earliest" Christians, therefore in direct continuity with Jesus and his practices, is another matter. For one thing, the fact that the Pharisees complain to Jesus about what the disciples do, not about what Jesus does (Mark 7:5) suggests a possible diachronic dimension. For another, the evangelist's detailed explanation of the custom of hand-washing is a certain indication that his implied reader is not Jewish and has no certain knowledge of Jewish customs.

Another way in which Boyarin makes sense of the passage is in pointing out that the nature of Jesus' explanation to the disciples (verses 18–23) treats the matter of impurity as a parable. What comes out of a person defiles, which Jesus then interprets not as bodily emissions, but as characteristics that come out of the heart.

Boyarin concludes that the editorial comment "he purified all foods" (verse 19) means that Jesus rejected the stringent laws of defiled foods (p. 121). I'm not sure this follows. Following Boyarin's logic, these foods never were impure, meaning there was nothing for Jesus to do except uphold this. There was no "purifying" for him to do.

Boyarin goes further: "It is highly unlikely that in its original context [just what does he imagine this to be?], Mark was read as meaning that Jesus had abrogated the rules of forbidden and permitted animals" (ibid.). Yet to me, the revisions that the Gospel of Matthew makes to this passage shows that its author was, at the very least, concerned that it could very well be read this way. Even more likely: that he understood the Gospel of Mark to mean this.

For Boyarin, the entire passage makes sense, and Jesus' saying can be seen within a Jewish spiritual world (p. 124). May well be, but Matthew clearly thought otherwise. He deals with this in endnote 24 (p. 184): "The Matthean text makes explicit that which might be ambiguous in Mark as we've read it." This leads him to question whether Matthew is a "Judaizing" revision of Mark, a "temporizing voice that actually serves to neutralize the authentic Christian message on the Law as represented by Mark and Paul, namely, that Christianity is a whole new religion, an entirely different way of serving God from the way that the Israelites and Jews have understood it?" Once again, he reduces the argument to either/or terms that miss the point. The question is not Law yes or no, but which law (or, which aspects of the law) for whom? Either way, I would agree with his conclusion: "Torah-abiding Jesus folks are not aberrant; they simply are the earliest Church," but not with the way he reaches it.

Regrettably, this book is not up to the high standard of some of Boyarin's other books, such as Border Lines or A Radical Jew. In addition to the problems I have mentioned, the text feels padded and repetitive, surprising in such a slim volume. Nevertheless, I feel it is a good read, as reflected in my rating. For those who are still laboring under the impression that Judaism and Christianity early diverged into two discrete religions, or that mainstream views of the nature of God and Christ were the result of Hellenistic syncretism, I would recommend this as a good starting point. But not as the last word.

Dennis Fischman says

Boyarin argues that when Jesus claimed to be a divine being as well as the anointed king, he was saying

something other Jews would understand and find normal. From Boyarin's perspective, the difference between Jesus' followers and other Jews was not that he claimed to be the unique Son of God but that most Jews didn't think he was that guy.

I'm not a biblical scholar. I'm a Jew, immersed in the Judaism of the 21st century CE. So, the challenge for me reading this book was to try to imagine myself in the 1st century, before most of what I know as Judaism had taken firm shape.

Unlike some of the other reviewers, I had no problem with the idea that Jesus kept kosher (the title of chapter three). It even made sense to me that he might have been aghast at the new ways of keeping kosher that the P'rushim (later called Pharisees by people who couldn't read Hebrew) introduced. These forerunners of the rabbinic movement had the radical idea that all Jews could live in a state of ritual purity--not just the priests--and that ordinary activities like cooking and eating could be made holy. On Boyarin's reading, Jesus was a conservative, saying "Don't add new rules to what the Torah already prescribes." I can't verify his reasons for saying that, but it seems plausible to me, perhaps because to my mind it makes the rabbis look as revolutionary as I think they were.

The idea that there were a lot of different ways of being Jewish at the time, and that Christianity was just one of them for centuries, also makes sense with what history I know.

Given that, there *may* even have been Jews who think what Boyarin thinks they thought: that the Messiah, son of David, would also be a divine figure. Boyarin uses ingenious readings of Jewish texts that are minor (Daniel) or totally obscure (First Enoch, Fourth Ezra) today, to back up this point.

According to his reading of these texts, "Son of Man" (ben adam, in the Hebrew) actually means a figure shaped like a man who sits on a throne at the right of God and then descends in the clouds to earth, to rule. "Son of God" actually means the divinely chosen ruler, who is a son of God the same way a bar mitzvah is literally a son of the commandment: he's under God's authority. (That is my comparison, not Boyarin's.) At some point, the two became identified.

Boyarin argues that these texts set up the expectation of a divine Messiah, that Jesus said he was that person, and that the Jews who rejected him understood what he was saying--it wasn't an innovation to them--but denied his claim to be The One.

This is completely intriguing, but I am dubious, for several reasons.

1. Boyarin cherry-picks the verses that support his argument.

2. When he comes across verses that seem to contradict his thesis, he writes them off as an editor trying to bring an unruly original text back into line. You can do anything with a text that way!

3. That picture of an orthodox editor implies that the view that the Messiah was NOT a divine figure **was always the dominant one**. The Christological idea that Boyarin says is "Jewish" may always have been as strange to most Jews as "Jews for Jesus" are to most Jews today.

4. Boyarin gives no evidence that Daniel (which was eventually included in the Jewish canon, or Tanach, but has no role in the liturgy) was widely read at the time. (A stray part of me wonders if Boyarin wants "Daniel" to be important because it's his first name.) Some of the other books he cites are only extant in the literature of the Ethiopian Jews. It may be just my ignorance, but I have no way of knowing whether those books were

circulating in first-century Palestine or not--and Boyarin doesn't tell me. So is he making an argument that people in that time and place would find recognizable?

Finally, let's say for the sake of argument that Boyarin is right in every respect. I can understand why that would be important to a historian. But why in the world would it be important to the rest of us?

Judaism and Christianity may have parted ways later and over different issues than we used to think--but they did part. They have been separate religions for at least 1800 years now. Since the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, Jews have been persecuted in the name of Christianity. (I hasten to say that there have also been individual Christians who were great friends of Jews, even putting themselves at risk to do so.)

Harking back to a time when followers of Jesus were a recognized but minor Jewish sect does nothing to bring us closer together. Understanding where we are and how we differ today is a more productive path for Jews, Christians, and (I would add) the other children of Abraham, the Muslims, too.

Franz says

The arguments in this book by Boyarin, a rabbinic scholar at UC Berkeley, will be shocking to many Christians and Jews, but they may be more easily accepted by readers of Bart Ehrman's and James Tabor's books of the history of Christianity in its first couple of centuries. Boyarin reads the Gospels, especially Mark, as textual evidence for regarding Christianity as originally a minor offshoot of Judaism. The Jesus and his immediate followers were wholeheartedly Jewish. Jesus' teachings were solidly within the Hebrew tradition. Indeed, his teachings adhered to a conservative interpretation of that tradition. The separation into a different religion took a couple of centuries to complete, and Judaism and Christianity were not completely unyoked from each other until the Council of Nicaea.

One of his surprising claims is that Jesus, for example, defended traditional Jewish dietary and purity rules established in the Torah from the radical reforms of the Pharisees. (By the way, current rabbinic Judaism apparently traces its roots to the Pharisees.) Another claim is that the term "the Son of Man" in the Gospels refers to Jesus' divine nature, not his human one. That same term appears in the Hebrew Bible, especially in Daniel, to refer to a young man endowed with divine qualities who stands with the Ancient One, YHVH. Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the Messianic strands in the Hebrew Bible, and thereby appropriated the Son of Man image in Daniel for himself.

Boyarin does not simply grab these and other claims out of the blue. He reads the texts closely and justifies his arguments by teasing out the real meanings of the passages he cites. Whether his interpretation is accurate I am not qualified to say. But his account is provocative and I would not be surprised if his claims have more legitimacy than not.

Tamara Jaffe-Notier says

Whew. I'm a little bit in love with Daniel Boyarin's mind. I'm not fully recovered from this book yet, and I'd like to hear Boyarin talk about the gospel of Mark. I plan to pick up his book on Paul soon so that I can continue to hear Boyarin's voice. The Jewish Gospels asserts that Jesus of Nazareth was making a clear claim

to divinity when he referred to himself as "the son of man." Boyarin explicates Mark passages verse by verse, linking them to Daniel 7 and other apocalyptic texts. He cites texts in Greek and Aramaic, as well as Hebrew. I bought a copy of the apocalyptic Ethiopian Orthodox scriptures Boyarin references, so that when I re-read this book I'll be able to check out his sources from 4 Ezra (2 Esdras). Anyone interested in 1st c. Judaism would find this fascinating.

Edward says

Boyarin, a Jewish rabbi, has written an enlightening book about the historical relationship between Christian and Judaism. His position is that rather than seeing Christianity as a new religion, it makes a lot more sense to see it as "one of the paths that Judaism took," and a path that has its roots in ancient Jewish sources. He points out that for several centuries after Christ, there were a lot of different groups and individuals, some calling themselves "Christians", some "Jews" and even quite a few who thought they were both.

There was a need to sort out what and clarify what these followers believed. Gradually the Christ-followers developed, mainly through various councils, a"checklist" of what constituted the beliefs of Christians, most of which can be found in the Nicaean Creed which was agreed on in the early 4th century.

All of these core beliefs, though, go back to Jewish sources. For example, the idea of God being split into "father" and "son" is found in ancient Jewish myths of a dual deity, an arrangement which has one god responsible for eternal matters, and a second who handles earthly concerns. Not so clear is the connection between them, and here is where the metaphor of a "holy spirit" began to develop. Evidence of this ancient tradition, Boyarin says, can be seen in the Jewish book of Enoch and in the Book of Daniel.

The idea of a resurrected savior figure such as Christ is not a novel idea either. It grows out of Jewish beliefs in a messiah, but the form that messiah would take was varied and even contradictory. While not disputing the beliefs of Christians in a savior and his impact on his followers, he argues that the details of Christ's life, his powers, his teachings, his suffering, death, and triumphant resurrection, only make sense when seen in a context of many and varied Jewish midrashic commentaries. In other words, the New Testament gospels only emerge from an extensive Jewish environment and in that sense can be called "Jewish Gospels."

Reading this book makes it clear that anti-Jewish prejudice, carried on for two millennia, was a tragically stupid mistake, rooted in historical ignorance that insisted that Christianity had little in common with Judaism and that it had completely supplanted their common roots.

Erik Graff says

The thesis of this essay is that pre-Nicene Christianity may rightfully be considered within the Jewish tradition, its notions having been present within that community prior to the birth of Jesus. The proofs offered are intertextually midrashic, with much weight given to Daniel 7's description of two divine figures.

What's notably lacking in this study is any consideration of what we know about the earliest community of the followers of Jesus, James and Peter, or of those commonly termed Ebionites, or of the communities associated with Paul. Acts, the Pauline Letters, the Clementine Homilies, the works of Josephus--these are

not discussed. All the author establishes--and all he might be able to establish in such a short work--is that it is plausible to regard Jesus and his immediate followers as well-rooted in Jewish traditions. This, of course, is hardly news to any serious student of the earliest ekklesia not wed to the conceits of the post-councilar Church.

David says

A vital read, at least if you consider yourself some form of Christian. Boyarin is a Talmud scholar, and this short book is packed with strong, well-researched insights. He is careful in his arguments, cites his sources, provides caveats, all while remaining very readable. His overarching point is that Jesus must be understood within his context. One hopes that this, at least, is not controversial.

What is truly great about this book, though, is that moving on from this, Boyarin not only fleshes out much of that context, he also provides re-framing of several New Testament passages that are otherwise (and have always been for me, all the way back) somewhat mystifying. This is what truly elevates this book. It's one thing to have a strong, bold re-framing. To then have that re-framing lock several problem passages into more explicable form? Excellent work.

[Edit to add: you can probably skip the Foreword. It's not bad, but it seems to be mostly there to convince Christians that it's okay to read a Talmud scholar. I hope that's not necessary. But if you're someone who does need such reassurance? Well, I guess it's there for you.]

Michale says

This was tough. I'm no Bible scholar, but I found myself less than convinced by Boyarin that the concepts of apotheosis and theophany were mainstream Jewish ideas at the end of the Second Temple period. His basing so much of his argument on non-canonical books, such as Enoch I and II and Fourth Ezra didn't reassure me in this regard, although I well know that the canon was not codified until quite later, and by those who did not share these approaches. He also draws a direct link between these books and Isaiah 53 and Daniel 7. Perhaps. I found his other books much more approachable.

Anne says

Not impressed by his "brilliancy" at all. Actually, I'm surprised that he thinks he's got something new here at all? I don't know why I even picked this one up. I recommend to read better works by Marvin R Wilson, the legendary David Flusser, Ron Moseley, David H Stern, Elaine Pagels, Brad Young, speaker Ray Van der Laan, ETC. (IF you don't believe me, RVL is on Youtube; Flusser was writing in the 50's and 60s or earlier) who all share enlightenment about the jewishness of Jesus and the jewishness of the early Christian church. This is NOT new information for biblical scholars. Perhaps for Boyarin's readers. His interpretation is pretty short & flimsy. But I appreciated the short part.

Greg says

A Review of Daniel Boyarin's book,
The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ
By Greg Cusack
January 10, 2015

I came across this recent book (published in 2012) by reading James Carroll's book, Jesus Actually. After reading it I better understand its pivotal importance to Mr. Carroll's arguments in his own book.
Dr. Boyarin is the Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture and rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley and argues, in essence, that the coming of the Messiah was fully imagined and expected in Judaism's ancient texts, and that the core teachings of Jesus were part of the beliefs of many Jews during the time of Jesus.
Thus, this book builds on many recent scholars who have argued that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, that his teachings were firmly rooted in his Scriptures (the Hebrew bible), that he shared the belief – common to many in his day – that the kingdom of God was about to begin, and that he never intended to initiate a faith tradition other than that of Judaism, let alone found a church separate from it.
Dr. Boyarin's writing is fluent, persuasive and not at all harsh or polemical. He is not out to "prove" anyone else "wrong," rather, his intent is to present his case for his understanding in as clear a manner as possible.
As I mentioned in my review of Carroll's book, my own understanding of Jesus' use of the term Son of Man rather than Son of God had previously been that Jesus had clearly not been making any claim to divinity. However, as Carroll and Boyarin argue, he opposite seems to be true.
How can this be so? The central argument for this interpretation lies in key passages from the Book of Daniel where Daniel sees the following:
I was gazing into the visions of the night, when I saw coming on the clouds of heaven, as it were a son of man. He came to the One most venerable and was led into his presence. On him was conferred rule, honor and kingship, and all peoples, nations and languages became his servants. His rule is an everlasting rule which will never pass away, and his kingship will never come to an end.

The "One most venerable" is thought to represent YHWH, while many Jews saw the figure of the Son of Man as a representation of another divine figure, the long-awaited one. Dr. Boyarin argues that Jesus saw it that way, too, and that when he spoke of himself as the son of man Jesus was using language that other Jews would understand in this context.
All of this at a time in my life where I had convinced myself that Jesus had not understood himself to be divine. Back to square one!
For the rest of this review, I will just quote directly from Dr. Boyarin's book in order that you may hear his own words.

Being religiously Jewish then was a much more complicated affair than it is even now. There were no Rabbis yet, and even the priests in Jerusalem and around the countryside were divided among themselves… Some believed that in order to be a kosher Jew you had to believe in a single divine figure and any other belief was simply idol worship. Others believed that God had a divine deputy or emissary or even son, exalted above all the angels, who functioned as an intermediary between God and the world in creation, revelation, and redemption. Many Jews believed that redemption was going to be effected by a human being, an actual hidden scion of the house of David…who at a certain point would take up the scepter and the sword, defeat Israel's enemies, and return her to her former glory. Others believed that the redemption was going to be effected by that same divine figure mentioned above and not a human being at all. And still others believed that these two were one and the same, that the Messiah of David would be the divine Redeemer. As I said, a

complicated affair. [p. 5]

For quite a number of generations after the coming of Christ, different followers and groups of followers of Jesus held many different theological views and engaged in a great variety of practices with respect to the Jewish law of their ancestors… Many Christians believed that the Son or the Word (Logos) was subordinate to God the Father and even created by him; others believed that while the Son was uncreated and had existed from before the beginning of time, he nonetheless was only of a similar substance to the Father; a third group believed that there was no different at all in substance between the Father and the Son… Until early in the fourth century, all of these different groups and diverse individuals called themselves Christians, and quite a few called themselves both Jews and Christians as well. [Pp. 10-11]

There is also a growing recognition that the Gospels themselves and even the letters of Paul are part and parcel of the religion of the People of Israel in the first century A.D. What is less recognized is to what extent the ideas surrounding what we call Christology, the story of Jesus as the divine-human Messiah, were also part (if not parcel) of Jewish diversity at this time.
The Gospels themselves, when read in the context of other Jewish texts of their times, reveal this very complex diversity and attachment to other variants of "Judaism" at the time. [p. 22]

There are thus two legacies left us by Daniel 7: it is the ultimate source of "Son of Man" terminology for a heavenly Redeemer figure, and it is also the best evidence we have for the continuation of a very ancient binitarian Israelite theology deep into the Second Temple period… the continued vitality of worship of an old God and a young God in Israel… I see it as very much a living part of Israel's religion both before and long after, explaining both the form of Judaism we call Christianity and also much in non-Christian later Judaism as well. If Daniel is the prophecy, the Gospels are the fulfillment. [p. 52]

If all the Jews – or even a substantial number – expected that the Messiah would be divine as well as human, then the belief in Jesus as God is not the point of departure on which some new religion came into being but simply another variant (and not a deviant one) of Judaism… [p. 53]

I submit that it is possible to understand the Gospel only if both Jesus and the Jews around him held to a high Christology whereby the claim to Messiahship was also a claim to being a divine man. [p. 55]

The reason that many Jews came to believe that Jesus was divine was because they were already expecting that the Messiah/Christ would be a god-man. This expectation was part and parcel of Jewish tradition. The Jews had learned this by careful reading of the Book of Daniel… I want to show that Jesus saw himself as the divine Son of Man, and I will do so by explaining a couple of difficult pages in the second chapter of the Gospel of Mark.
[He then cites Mark 2: 5-11, the curing of the paralytic, which ends with Jesus saying to the many scribes present, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sings are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – he said to the paralytic – "I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher and go off home."]
The Son of Man has authority (obviously delegated by God) to do God's work of the forgiving of sins on earth. This claim is derived from Daniel 7:14… [Pp. 56-57]

Jews at the same time of Jesus had been waiting for a Messiah who was both human and divine and who was the Son of Man, an idea they derived from the passage from Daniel 7… Jesus for his followers fulfilled the idea of the Christ; the Christ was not invented to explain Jesus' life and death… Jesus entered into a role that existed prior to his birth, and this is why so many Jews were prepared to accept him as the Christ, as the Messiah, Son of Man.

The single most exciting document for understanding this aspect of the early history of the Christ idea is to be found in a book known as the Similitudes (or Parables) of Enoch. This marvelous text (which seems to have been produced at just about the same time as the earliest of the Gospels) shows that there were other Palestinian Jews who expected a Redeemer known as the Son of Man, who would be a divine figure embodied in an exalted human. Because it is unconnected with the Gospels in any direct way, this text is thus an independent witness to the presence of this religious idea among Palestinian Jews of the time and not only among the Jewish groups within which Jesus was active. [Pp. 72-73]

First of all, we find [in the Book of Enoch] the doctrine of the preexistence of the Son of Ma. He was named even before the universe came into being. Second, the Son of Man will be worshipped on earth… Third, and perhaps most important of all, in v. 10 he is named as the Anointed One, which is precisely the Messiah (Hebrew mashiah) or Christ (Greek Christos). It seems quite clear, therefore, that many of the religious ideas that were held about the Christ who was identified as Jesus were already present in the Judaism from which both the Enoch circle and the circles around Jesus emerged. [p. 80]

The Pharisees were a kind of reform movement within the Jewish people that was centered on Jerusalem and Judaea. The Pharisees sought to convert other Jews to their way of thinking about God and the Torah, a way of thinking that incorporated seeming changes in the written Torah's practices that were mandated by what the Pharisees called "the tradition of the Elders." The justification of these reforms in the name of an oral Torah, a tradition passed down by the Elders from Sinai on, would have been experienced by many traditional Jews as a radical change, especially when it involved changing the traditional ways that they and their ancestors had kept the Torah for generations immemorial…. It is quite plausible, therefore, that other Jews, such as the Galilean Jesus, would reject angrily such ideas as an affront to the Torah and as sacrilege. Jesus' Judaism was a conservative reaction against some radical innovations in the Law stemming from the Pharisees and Scribes of Jerusalem.
…Far from being a marginalized 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. This view of Christianity as but a variation within Judaism, and even a highly conservative and traditionalist one, goes to the heart of our description of the relations in the second, third, and fourth centuries between so-called Jewish Christianity and its early rival, the so-called Gentile Christianity that was eventually (after some centuries) to win the day. [Pp. 103-06]

Mark is best read as a Jewish text, even in its most radical Christological moments. Nothing that Mark's Jesus proposes or argues for or enacts would have been inappropriate for a thoroughly Jewish Messiah, the Son of Man, and what would later be called Christianity is a brilliantly successful – the most brilliantly successful – Jewish apocalyptic and messianic movement. [p. 127]

[Even] 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 in the future following that – indeed, well into the early modern period… Jews, it seems, had no difficulty whatever in with understanding a Messiah who would vicariously suffer to redeem the world. Once again, what has been allegedly ascribed to Jesus after the fact is, in fact, a piece of entrenched messianic speculation and expectation that was current before Jesus came into the world at all… Let me make clear that I am not claiming that Jesus and his followers contributed nothing new to the story of a suffering and dying Messiah… I am claiming that even this innovation, if indeed they innovated, was entirely within the spirit and hermeneutical method of ancient Judaism, and not a scandalous departure from it. [Pp. 132-34]

Jesus had a very clear sense of his messianic role and fate, and that this role and fate were what had been predicted for the Son of Man in Daniel 7. Jesus first is identified as Messiah by others and then refers to

himself as the Son of Man, thus establishing the identity of the Messiah and his ultimate fate as that of the Danielic Son of Man. Jesus is also clearly claiming that identity for himself. [p. 137]

Dr. Boyarin then gives a fascinating reflection upon the moment in Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin when the High Priest confronts him. (See Mark 14: 61-64) The High Priest asks him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus answers very clearly: "'I am,' said Jesus, 'and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' The high priest tore his robes and said, 'What need of witnesses have we now? You heard the blasphemy.'"

In this amazing passage, Jesus has admitted to being "the Christ" (the Messiah), has called himself the "Son of the Blessed One" (YHWH), and identified himself with the Son of man found in Daniel who is "seated at the right hand of the Power," Daniel's "ancient of days." Furthermore, in his "I am" the high priest heard, and Dr. Boyarin contends his perception was accurate, that Jesus was deliberately echoing the Holy One's self-description, "I AM WHO AM."

Any person seriously interested in Jesus and his place among his people should read this amazing book. Dr. Boyarin's style of writing is very accessible and not in the least intimidating. And, if you also then take the time to read the relevant passages of Scripture cited by him, you can understand – if not necessarily agree with – his arguments.

A truly eye-opening, and most welcome, book!

Elliot Ratzman says

Christians and Jews have been misreading the Gospels as signaling a definite break between the two religions for centuries. Jews claim that the Gospels advocate heretical ideas about a divine messiah—a bi-theism— alien to Israelite religion; Christians have been reading Jesus as a radical innovator leaving his Jewish context and hostile to Jewish Law. Both readings, Boyarin argues, are wrong. Boyarin helped spread the framework that Christianity was a version of Judaism for its first few centuries, not a new religion--that the ways didn't "part" so definitively. Here he shows how passages in Daniel, Mark and Enoch explain each other—an Israelite tradition of a divine "Son of Man" and suffering Messiah. Some Jews thought Jesus was that divine Messiah. Going against much received scholarship and tradition, he shows that Jesus's arguments against the Pharisee in Mark's Gospel are conservative, defending Torah Law and Kosher practices against the innovating Elders. A category-bending book!

Charlene Mathe says

This is a brief book (200 small pages including index) that examines the literature of second temple Judaism, especially the Books of Daniel, First Enoch and Fourth Ezra, to reconceptualize the meaning of the Son of Man persona and Messiah expectation. All this leads Boyarin to conclude that, "If Daniel is the prophecy the Gospels are the fulfillment" (p.52).
Boyarin exploits his extensive knowledge of Talmud to tease out disguised references to the historical Jesus. I was very interested in his discussion of Isaiah 53, traditionally understood (according to Boyarin) as a song of the Messiah, and not applied to the suffering of kol Israel until recent centuries.

I appreciated the footnotes and sources that provide leads to further study and make the book a good reference text. Despite the brevity of the book, it was to some degree repetitive and made some intuitive leaps or assertions that seemed a stretch to me.
