

Socrates And The Fat Rabbis

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~~Faithfull Place, off Lower Tyrone Street, where this chapter is located. Image via The National Archives of Ireland. CIRCE TIME: 12.00 midnight. SCENE: Bella Cohen's Brothel... Read More ...~~

Ulysses (Chap. 15 - Circe)

Urgently, we should set out to rescue those Afghans who worked with Canada's diplomats and soldiers before Taliban assassins find them and kill them The last thing any party wants is for its ...

What kind of literature is the Talmud? To answer this question, Daniel Boyarin looks to an unlikely source: the dialogues of Plato. In these ancient texts he finds similarities, both in their combination of various genres and topics and in their dialogic structure. But Boyarin goes beyond these structural similarities, arguing also for a cultural relationship. In *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, Boyarin suggests that both the Platonic and the talmudic dialogues are not dialogic at all. Using Michael Bakhtin's notion of represented dialogue and real dialogism, Boyarin demonstrates, through multiple close readings, that the give-and-take in these texts is actually much closer to a monologue in spirit. At the same time, he shows that there is a dialogism in both texts on a deeper structural level between a voice of philosophical or religious dead seriousness and a voice from within that mocks that very high solemnity at the same time. Boyarin ultimately singles out Menippean satire as the most important genre through which to understand both the Talmud and Plato, emphasizing their seriocomic peculiarity. An innovative advancement in rabbinic studies, as well as a bold and controversial new way of reading Plato, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* makes a major contribution to scholarship on thought and culture of the ancient Mediterranean.

"[A] fascinating recasting of the story of Jesus." —Elliot Wolfson, New York University 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. "A brilliant and momentous book." —Karen L. King, Harvard Divinity School "Raises profound questions . . . This provocative book will change the way we think of the Gospels in their Jewish context." —John J. Collins, Yale Divinity School "It's certainly noteworthy when one of the world's leading Jewish scholars publishes a book about Jesus . . . Extremely stimulating." —Daniel C. Peterson, *The Deseret News*

A word conventionally imbued with melancholy meanings, "diaspora" has been used variously to describe the cataclysmic historical event of displacement, the subsequent geographical scattering of peoples, or the conditions of alienation abroad and yearning for an ancestral home. But as Daniel Boyarin writes, diaspora may be more constructively

construed as a form of cultural hybridity or a mode of analysis. In *A Traveling Homeland*, he makes the case that a shared homeland or past and traumatic dissociation are not necessary conditions for diaspora and that Jews carry their homeland with them in diaspora, in the form of textual, interpretive communities built around talmudic study. For Boyarin, the Babylonian Talmud is a diasporist manifesto, a text that produces and defines the practices that constitute Jewish diasporic identity. Boyarin examines the ways the Babylonian Talmud imagines its own community and sense of homeland, and he shows how talmudic commentaries from the medieval and early modern periods also produce a doubled cultural identity. He links the ongoing productivity of this bifocal cultural vision to the nature of the book: as the physical text moved between different times and places, the methods of its study developed through contact with surrounding cultures. Ultimately, *A Traveling Homeland* envisions talmudic study as the center of a shared Jewish identity and a distinctive feature of the Jewish diaspora that defines it as a thing apart from other cultural migrations.

In *Talmudic Transgressions*, scholars offer new perspectives on rabbinic literature and related areas, in essays which respond to the work of Daniel Boyarin.

This work covers the typological relation of rabbinic Judaism to Christianity, and provides a re-examination, by going back to the roots, of a rabbinic Judaism that would not manifest some of the deleterious social ideologies and practices that modern orthodox Judaism generally does.

Beginning with a startling endorsement of the patristic view of Judaism—that it was a "carnal" religion, in contrast to the spiritual vision of the Church—Daniel Boyarin argues that rabbinic Judaism was based on a set of assumptions about the human body that were profoundly different from those of Christianity. The body—specifically, the sexualized body—could not be renounced, for the Rabbis believed as a religious principle in the generation of offspring and hence in intercourse sanctioned by marriage. This belief bound men and women together and made impossible the various modes of gender separation practiced by early Christians. The commitment to coupling did not imply a resolution of the unequal distribution of power that characterized relations between the sexes in all late-antique societies. But Boyarin argues strenuously that the male construction and treatment of women in rabbinic Judaism did not rest on a loathing of the female body. Thus, without ignoring the currents of sexual domination that course through the Talmudic texts, Boyarin insists that the rabbinic account of human sexuality, different from that of the Hellenistic Judaisms and Pauline Christianity, has something important and empowering to teach us today.

The historical separation between Judaism and Christianity is often figured as a clearly defined break of a single entity into two separate religions. Following this model, there would have been one religion known as Judaism before the birth of Christ, which then took on a hybrid identity. Even before its subsequent division, certain beliefs and practices of this composite would have been identifiable as Christian or Jewish. In *Border Lines*, however, Daniel Boyarin makes a striking case for a very different way of thinking about the historical development that is the partition of Judaeo-Christianity. There were no characteristics or features that could be described as uniquely Jewish or Christian in late antiquity, Boyarin argues. Rather, Jesus-following Jews and Jews who did not follow Jesus lived on a cultural map in which beliefs, such as that in a second divine being, and practices, such as keeping kosher or maintaining the Sabbath, were widely and variably distributed. The ultimate distinctions between Judaism and Christianity were imposed from above by "border-makers," heresiologists anxious to construct a discrete identity for Christianity. By defining some beliefs and practices as Christian and others as Jewish or heretical, they moved ideas, behaviors, and people to one side or another of an artificial border—and, Boyarin significantly contends, invented the very notion of religion.

Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin turns to the Epistles of Paul as the spiritual autobiography of a first-century Jewish cultural critic and explores what led Paul—in his dramatic conversion to Christianity—to such a radical critique of Jewish culture. "Boyarin's incisive questioning is relevant to cultural clashes in many parts of the world."—Robin Scroggs, *PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN*.

In a book that will both enlighten and provoke, Daniel Boyarin offers an alternative to the prevailing Euroamerican warrior/patriarch model of masculinity and recovers the Jewish ideal of the gentle, receptive male. The Western notion of the aggressive, sexually dominant male and the passive female reaches back through Freud to Roman times, but as Boyarin makes clear, such gender roles are not universal. Analyzing ancient and modern texts, he reveals early rabbis—studious, family-oriented—as exemplars of manhood and the prime objects of female desire in traditional Jewish society. Challenging those who view the "feminized Jew" as a pathological product of the Diaspora or a figment of anti-Semitic imagination, Boyarin argues that the Diaspora produced valuable alternatives to the dominant cultures' overriding gender norms. He finds the origins of the rabbinic model of masculinity in the Talmud, and though unrelentingly critical of rabbinic society's oppressive aspects, he shows how it could provide greater happiness for women than the passive gentility required by bourgeois European standards. Boyarin also analyzes the self-transformation of three iconic Viennese modern Jews: Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis; Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism; and Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.), the first psychoanalytic patient and founder of Jewish feminism in Germany. Pappenheim is Boyarin's hero: it is she who provides him with a model for a militant feminist, anti-homophobic transformation of Orthodox Jewish society today. Like his groundbreaking *Carnal Israel*, this book is talmudic scholarship in a whole new light, with a vitality that will command attention from readers in feminist studies, history of sexuality, Jewish culture, and the history of psychoanalysis.

Faced with the difficult task of discerning Plato's true ideas from the contradictory voices he used to express them, scholars have never fully made sense of the many incompatibilities within and between the dialogues. In the magisterial *Plato's Philosophers*, Catherine Zuckert explains for the first time how these prose dramas cohere to reveal a comprehensive Platonic understanding of philosophy. To expose this coherence, Zuckert examines the dialogues not in their supposed order of composition but according to the

dramatic order in which Plato indicates they took place. This unconventional arrangement lays bare a narrative of the rise, development, and limitations of Socratic philosophy. In the drama's earliest dialogues, for example, non-Socratic philosophers introduce the political and philosophical problems to which Socrates tries to respond. A second dramatic group shows how Socrates develops his distinctive philosophical style. And, finally, the later dialogues feature interlocutors who reveal his philosophy's limitations. Despite these limitations, Zuckert concludes, Plato made Socrates the dialogues' central figure because Socrates raises the fundamental human question: what is the best way to live? Plato's dramatization of Socratic imperfections suggests, moreover, that he recognized the apparently unbridgeable gap between our understandings of human life and the nonhuman world. At a time when this gap continues to raise questions—about the division between sciences and the humanities and the potentially dehumanizing effects of scientific progress—Zuckert's brilliant interpretation of the entire Platonic corpus offers genuinely new insights into worlds past and present.

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