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Boyarin, Daniel.
A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity

Contraversions

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Galatians 3:28 appropriately stands in bold print on the dust jacket. Daniel Boyarin takes that "baptismal declaration of the new humanity of no difference" as the hermeneutical key for interpreting Paul as a Hellenistic Jew, "motivated by a Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy" (pp. 5-7). Convinced that Paul "has set the agenda" for modern Christian and Jewish thought alike on ethnicity and gender (p. 4), Boyarin, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of California at Berkeley, writes as "a postmodern Jewish cultural critic," seeking to wrestle with Paul's texts as they evoke questions of identity today.

In chapter 1 Boyarin sketches the background for Paul's thought, a "Hellenistic Jewish cultural koine" characterized by "a dualistic system in which spirit precedes and is primary over body" (p. 14). The more pernicious aspects of Western gender theory and the ideal of the "universal male" have their origins, he argues, in first-century allegorical readings of Genesis 1-2 by Hellenistic Jews, of whom Philo and Paul are representative. The unique contribution of Pauline thought, as represented in the baptismal formula in Gal 3:28, was to replace "the individual body itself" (as Jewish or Gentile) "by its allegorical referent, the body of Christ of which the baptized are part" (p. 24): thus the "universal male" becomes *Christian*, and as a consequence, continued Jewish existence is deprived "of any reality or significance in the Christian economies of history" (p. 32).

In Boyarin's eyes, Paul was centrally obsessed with "the relation of all of the other people of the world to the God of Israel" (p. 57), that is, with the tension between universalism (which Boyarin occasionally attributes to the biblical tradition as well as to Hellenism) and the embodied particularity of Jewish identity. This dilemma was the "plight," though now read as a crisis of identity rather than (as in Reformation dogmatics) as a soteriological crisis, for which the Christ-epiphany provided the "solution."

Boyarin's choice of Galatians as a starting-point is hardly arbitrary, as some of his earlier critics have charged: he picks it precisely because it "embarrasses" the attempt to read Paul apocalyptically (p. 4). Paul's apocalypticism is but a dimension of the allegorical structure of his thought. "The fundamental insight of Paul's apocalypse was the realization that the dual nature of Jesus," i.e., as circumcised Jew, "according to the flesh," *and* as universal Man, "according to the spirit," "provided a hermeneutic key to the resolution of that enormous tension" between universalism and ethnicity that he felt as a Jew (p. 29).

"A platonic hermeneutic . . . energizes Paul's gospel" (p. 76). Boyarin argues that "Paul came to oppose the Law because of the way that it literally--that is, carnally--insisted on the priority and importance of the flesh, of procreation and kinship," symbolized by circumcision (pp. 68-69). Against such literalism, the "major concern throughout [Paul's] ministry [was] producing a new, single human essence, one of 'true Jews' whose 'circumcision' does not mark off their bodies as ethnically distinct from any other human bodies" (p. 94). Thus "the vision and the gospel are one, because the vision of the risen Christ is what enabled Paul to understand the allegorical structure of the entire cosmos as the solution to the problem of the Other" (p. 111). Within that overarching vision, Paul was willing to allow Jews to continue observing circumcision, kashrut, etc. "*until such observance conflicted with the fundamental meaning and message of the gospel as Paul understood it, namely, the constitution of all of the Peoples of the world as the new Israel*" (p. 112, emphasis in original).

This reading of Paul, unfolded in chapters 1-6, is coherent, elegantly presented, and often compelling. One occasionally wonders, nevertheless, to what extent traditional Protestant interpretation has predetermined some of Boyarin's questions. To be sure, he advocates "the movement to thoroughly discredit the Reformation interpretation of Paul and particularly the description of Judaism on which it is based" (p. 11); his critiques of the "moral monstrosity" of pitting Paul against Judaism as a "system of sacred violence" (Robert Hamerton-Kelly; pp. 22, 214-19) and of the pernicious allegorization of the "secret Jew in all of us" (Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann; pp. 209-14) are brilliant. Nevertheless, the conventional assumption that Paul's theology is to be explicated in opposition to (Boyarin would say "in critique of") Judaism or "Jewish-Christianity" still occasionally overshadows exegetical precision.

Thus "Paul's theme in Galatians is his dissent from the notion that one particular people could ever be the children of God to the exclusion of other peoples," a notion Boyarin attributes to Jewish Christianity (p. 23); yet he admits much later that "Paul's opponents are not actually Jewish Christians," but are people who "do not keep the Law, nor do they intend that their converts will keep the Law--they are essentially in agreement with Paul--but they cave in to pressure from the conservative wing of the Jerusalem church" (p. 116). Nothing else is said about the motives of these Gentile-Christian opponents: instead, on the very next page Paul is set against "his Jewish-Christian opponents" again!

Similarly, in Romans 2--a crucial text for Boyarin, since it grounds his analysis of Paul's dualistic thinking about circumcision and the Torah--Paul is "attacking Jews who think that works are not necessary for salvation, since God saves Israel, and only Israel, by grace alone" (p. 87). Yet Boyarin admits such views were "hardly widespread" in Paul's environment (p. 94), and he never offers an explanation of why such views should be addressed in *this* letter. Stanley Stowers's important work on the diatribe in Romans 1--2, which has decisively laid to rest some of the conventions still at work here, is unfortunately never mentioned.

Also missing here is any measure of the weight of the Roman empire on Jewish identity, particularly Paul's. In contrast, for example, to N. T. Wright's interpretation, in which the crucifixion of Israel's messiah by the evil imperial power is the scandal that generated much of Paul's thought, one has the impression that Boyarin's Paul would have been more scandalized by the messiah's circumcision than by his crucifixion. This again may be the effect of so close a focus on Galatians, where circumcision is the preeminent issue.

Boyarin takes up Paul's sexual politics in chapter 7. Arguing that first-century Judaism had become "thoroughly anxiety-ridden" about sexuality (p. 159), he finds at the heart of Romans 7 the "double bind" that any reflective Jew in this period might have encountered in the Torah: the commands to procreate, yet also to avoid sexual desire (pp. 164-65). Paul's solution is to spiritualize the commandment to procreate: he "looks forward to the becoming-one-flesh of Genesis being entirely replaced by an allegorical becoming- one-spirit with Christ" (p. 171). The consequence for subsequent Christianity of the dualism expressed here would be to reinforce the fundamental "metaphysics of substance, the split between Universal Mind and Disavowed Body," according to which real gender equality might be lived out only in virginity as the expression of "disembodied spiritual existence" (p. 199). Paul himself did not draw that conclusion, however. Since he "held that *wives are/were slaves* and that their liberation would have meant an end to marriage," and since he was unwilling to condemn marriage as such, "something like the pronouncements of 1 Corinthians 11 and the *Haustafeln* became almost a necessary superstructure" (pp. 199-200, emphasis in original). Here Boyarin echoes older explanations of Paul's conservative posture on gender in terms of "eschatological reserve": although Paul agitated for a new humanity in which all difference would be effaced, "he did not think that this new creation could be entirely achieved on the social level *yet*" (p. 187; see p. 193). Boyarin is nevertheless something of an apologist for the apostle: If his letters appear inconsistent on social issues, "the failure of consistency . . . involves not Paul's aspirations but his achievements" (p. 323 n. 53).

In a final chapter Boyarin moves "Toward a Radical Jewishness," posing the alternatives of Pauline universalism and the rabbinic emphasis on particular, embodied identity as poles within which identity, especially Jewish identity, may be sought today. The (rabbinic) emphasis on embodied difference resists the hegemony of Christian pseudo-universalism in the United States and Europe; on the other hand, Paul's universalism,

critically freed from its inclination to disembodiment and impulses to a coercive homogeneity, can become a "critical challenge" to the coercive aspects of a Jewish state (pp. 256-57). Boyarin argues for a deterritorialized Diaspora Jewish identity, "for stubborn hanging on to ethnic, cultural specificity but in a context of deeply felt and enacted human solidarity" (p. 257).

In Boyarin's hands Paul has become a powerful resource for cultural critique and renewal. His analysis is careful, elegant, and passionate, and will command attention from Paul's students--Christian, Jewish, and others--for years to come.