Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion
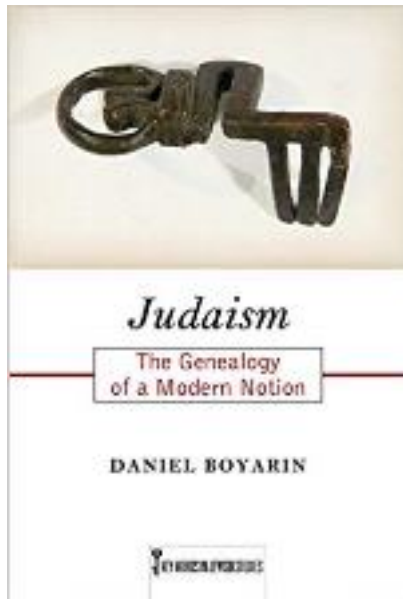
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Daniel Boyarin: Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion.New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. 234 pp. $29.95 (paper).

For those who read scholarly works on Judaica, especially but not limited to Jewish and Christian antiquity, the name Daniel Boyarin is ubiquitous. From the early 1980s until the present, Boyarin has written extensively on everything from grammatical forms in Babylonia Aramaic to Bertha O. Pappenheim. Of late his books have become more synthetic, taking on larger issues such as gender and sexuality, rhetoric, the Judeo-Christian divide, and identity. His new book *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* is perhaps the most synthetic of all. Part of a series called Keywords in Jewish Studies with Rutgers University Press, this book investigates the origins and genealogy of the term "Judaism," when it was first used, what it meant then, and what it meant throughout subsequent Jewish history. It is a monumental task to investigate a term so seemingly understood, and the modestly sized book (under 250 pages) takes the reader from antiquity through the Christian and Muslim Middle Ages, examining terms that others used to refer to what we know as Judaism. It is thus at its core a philological study, in some way taking Boyrain back to his earlier grammatical work now integrated into a well-honed theoretical frame.

Before entering into the body of the argument, it is worth noting that this book is an illustration of Boyarin textually coming full circle. That is, the theoretical frame that so often informs Boyarin's later work is now situated in chapter 1 to enable us to look more closely at his earlier methodology; that is, the exercise of philology. And part of the purpose of this book—as I read it—is to revive philology as a scholarly enterprise, suggesting that philology performs a function that other forms of textual analysis cannot achieve; what I will call the difference between reception history and genealogy. It seems to me that one of the meta-objectives of this book, then, is to make an argument for philology as something—perhaps the only thing—that we can use to get at the knotty problem of origins: in this case the origin of the term "Judaism" as a "religion," or "Judaism" as it is used today. It is important to note that the very question of the genealogy of a term, any term, but certainly one that carries as much weight as "Judaism," is fraught with numerous challenges,

philosophical, historical, and philological. But critics of the very enterprise of trying to trace the genealogy of a term should voice protest against the series editors and not its authors. This was the task the series set for them.

Any genealogy of the abstract noun "Judaism" requires us to begin with the Hebrew Bible, where the term *mityahadim* is used as a verb in reference to frightened Persians in the book of Esther, then turn to the ostensible Greek and Latin cognates used (if not actually invented) primarily by Christians, the Arabic terminology differentiating between law and the *sunna*, the Hebrew meaning of the term *yahadut* in the Middle Ages, the Yiddish *yadus*, the German *Judentum*—all in order to get to our sense of "Judaism." The path is of course circuitous and not linear, and the English term is not the final stage of the trajectory but one of its many iterations. But what is the word "Judaism"? Is it simply an Anglicized form of various former iterations, or are we talking about something categorically, or at least significantly, different? Is "Judaism" an exception, or part of a multilingual mix? Many others have weighed in on this, especially in relation to antiquity and late antiquity, and Boyarin's chapter on that period is structured as a salon of sorts where he engages, takes issue, agrees, and disagrees—sometimes to a dizzying degree—with a circle of scholars all of whom are convinced that the Greek and Latin terminology is not cognate to "Judaism" as we know it. You can feel that Boyarin here is certainly in his comfort zone, less so in subsequent chapters. But if there is no Judaism in antiquity, what is there, and by extension, when is there Judaism?

Here the question of "religion" is paramount, and Boyarin takes us back to his earlier essay "Semantic Differences of 'Judaism'/'Christianity'" published in *The Ways that Never Parted* in 2003. In that essay, a kind of prolegomenon to this book with some significant alterations, Boyarin argues that such terminology first requires a stable category of "religion," which he believed did not exist in antiquity until it was invented by Christians to distinguish themselves from the various other ancestral practices in their midst. If Boyarin is right that Christianity invented the category "religion" as it is used today, and if Judaism, as we know it, is a religion, then Christianity must have invented Judaism. And it was only much later that Jews appropriated this Christian invention as a label of self-definition. The irony here is that much of the substance of what is called Christianity that, according to Boyarin, helped invent religion, which is then adopted by Judaism, actually comes from … Judaism. So there may be a "Judaism" before Christianity (Boyarin prefers to call it the "doings" of Jews) and before religion, and a Judaism as religion that comes only through Christianity.

In this new book, *Judaism*, Boyarin nuances his point somewhat by arguing that "there is not the slightest bit of evidence for 'religion' or 'politics' as separate spheres in ancient Judea, it is impossible to engage in an argument of whether something is religion or politics within that cultural moment" (p. 46). He argues further, and he here leans on David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (2013), that "Judaism" was a term invented by Christians as the anti-version of itself. That is, there is no intrinsic difference between "Judaism" and "anti-Judaism," as "Judaism" itself is an "anti" category; it is always the "wrong religion" that highlights Christianity, which is the "correct religion." One sees this not only in the highly polemical Middle Ages but already in anti-Jewish polemics of the Church Fathers in late antiquity. So the medieval use of the term "to Judaize" is not to engage in Jewish acts but rather to deviate from the truth, whatever the truth is. Here Nirenberg shows us that the term "Judaizer" is often used not in relation to Jews or gentiles who practice Judaism, but rather to those, mostly Christians, who engage in any thought or practice deemed erroneous. Thus the term "Judaism" helps Christianity self-identify as the truth, and thus as "religion." "Judaism" as a term is thus part of—perhaps the very center of—Christian heresiology and later, simply error. Or, as Boyarin put it more bluntly, "Nirenberg's 'Anti-Judaism' simply becomes 'Judaism'" (p. 106).

When does this begin? Although it is difficult to say, Boyarin suggests the derivation of labeling what Jews do as more than simply their "doings" may begin quite early in the history of Christianity with Ignatius. Writing of Ignatius, Boyarin claims that "*Ioudaismos* no longer means

observance of the law as it did in Paul but a broader sense of Jewish 'doings' including verbal ones. In other words, for him *Christanismos* and *Ioudaismos* are two *doxas*, two theological positons, a wrong one, and a right one, a wrong interpretation of the legacy of the prophets, and a right one" (p. 115). Jews do what they do, but those doings are not an expression of "Judaism" until they are viewed as errors juxtaposed to Christianity.

Of course Jews did things long before there was Judaism. Or Christianity. The "-ism" of those doings takes quite a long time to develop as self-definition, into modernity in fact, as others have argued as well. But because Boyarin reaches his conclusion through philology, tracing this modern derivation of "doings" into an "-ism," he yields more nuanced results and shows that the birth of Judaism, or Judaism as a religion, is not the product of modern constructs, but rather a long process of linguistic moves that reflect Christianity's view of the Jews more than the Jews' view of themselves. And thus this project is a defense of philology to say that there is an intrinsic difference between the reception of a term and the genealogy of a term. The former shows how a term gets bandied about through historical time and geographical space and how it lands at a particular moment in time; the latter is a language game (thus he deploys Wittgenstein). Genealogy traces a birth process whereby a term, traveling through imprecise cognates and linguistic space, finally is born in ways that often counter its previous incarnations.

A good illustration of this is a series of texts Boyarin reads by the fifteenth-century exegete Don Yizhak Abravanel. Living at a time of increased *converso* activity, Abravanel often uses his biblical commentary to criticize the actions of his converted brethren. He uses the term *yahadut* in a verbal form as an attack on *conversos*, suggesting that they behave as Jews (*mityahadim*) but, citing Ezekiel 20, "they will be burned in fire" (p. 93). Ironically, Boyarin suggests, "as Jewish authors become more and more involved with Christians, the likelihood of *yahadut* will at least tend partly, and later fully, to match fully the usage of *Iodaismos* (and its cognates) in Christian usage" (p. 93). On this reading, at least some iterations of *yahadut* in the late Middle Ages refer not to what Jews do but rather what errant Jews do. The usage, in other words, is not far from the earlier Christian uses of *Ioudaismos* to define Christianity by labeling its errant other. Abravanel perhaps unwittingly mirrors Ignatius's use of *Ioudaismos* in his use of *yahadut*. And it is only via philology, Boyarin argues, that we can see that.

Boyarin argues that the real birth, as it were, of "Judaism" or the positive attribution of *yahadut*, comes through the portal of the German *Judentum*. The problem here is that *Judentum* is not a term that defines normative religion per se but rather a mix of national or collective identity. The binary often described in modern German discourse is not *Judentum* vs. *Christentum* but rather *Judentum* vs. *Deutschtum*. *Judentum* is perhaps more a political term than a "religious" one. It is thus an expansive amalgam of Jewry, Jewishness, and the practices and beliefs of Jews. But if even this inchoate modern sense of "Judaism" seems to encompass all of that, where are there limits to define what it is, and is not? Put otherwise, where are the normative boundaries that would define "Judaism" as "religion"? Or is "Judaism" simply everything and anything Jews do?

Most would have difficulty with such an expansive definition and would prefer to narrow things down. But once the winnowing begins one quickly becomes mired in an incredibly complex set of historical and terminological issues. The notion that Judaism itself is a modern, and perhaps even Christianized term, forged in the era of emancipation when Jews had to define themselves, and their "doings," to others, is not new. What Boyarin does in *Judaism* is offer us a complex map, a detailed topography, of how *the term* Judaism came to be used to define Jewish "doings," and for some, to define Jews. Given the breadth and scope of the work, historically, methodologically, and conceptually, readers and scholars will take issue with various stops along the way that engage their areas of expertise. And this is a good thing. A book like this should be generative rather than definitive. One of the greatest things a scholar of Boyarin's stature can do is make arguments that create the requisite space for future scholars to do their work. A book of this scope can never, and should never, close a conversation, but rather open one. Judaism is a term we all use reflexively

but do not quite know what it actually means. Boyarin's contribution to that reflexivity is a major contribution to scholarship.

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