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extent, from the texts themselves” (p. 313 n. 109, citing an insightful discussion of this issue by Stephen Greenblatt). This statement, however, opens up an entire research project. What is the relation between these three elements – the Talmudic texts themselves, the culture transmitted over the centuries, and our subjective views? At a less abstract level, we are left to ponder: how does Rubenstein’s re-reading of these narratives lead to possibilities for re-thinking Jewish thought today?

Rubenstein writes that his book is for, “scholars of the Talmud, rabbinic literature, and late antiquity, as well as for the general audience interested in prominent tales of the sages” (p. ix). I would recommend this excellent book to Rubenstein’s intended audience as well as anyone who is interested in the literary analysis of religious narratives.

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The phenomenon of martyrdom has always been perceived as an important, if not indispensable, factor along the winding, blood-stained path of Christianity on its way to hegemony in the Roman world. In the words of the North African church father Tertullian that became a classic aphorism, “The blood of the martyrs was the seed (of the Church).” The accepted historical formulation is that the increased numbers of converts to Christianity in the second and third centuries led the authorities, whether local or imperial, to act forcefully against those who were suspected of belonging to this “antisocial and anti-Roman group” (as it was described by Tacitus). In a series of persecutions stretching from the days of Nero (54–68 C.E.), increasing in the second century, and reaching a peak in the second half of the third century, to end only with Constantine’s rise to power, thousands of suspects were executed, many of them slaughter in the amphitheaters by lions and other big cats. Among the members of their own religion the executed Christians were considered holy “witnesses of the faith”; the name given to them, μάρτυς, is the Greek for “witness.” Over the years an elaborated system of rituals developed around these
martyrs, including pilgrimages to their graves, remembrance days, prayers, and a ramified literature.

Many scholars have been engaged with the phenomenology of martyrdom, striving to decipher its historical origin and cultural sources. It was only natural to examine the Jewish aspect of this phenomenon as well, considering the number of stories about "Jewish" figures who were also prepared to die for their faith. It was widely believed that the early Christians modeled the image of martyrdom on scenes such as that of Daniel and his colleagues in the fiery furnace, or the account of the mother and her seven sons in II Maccabees, as well as on the heroics of Kiddush ha-shem as reflected in the story about R. Akiva, who happily died for his beliefs while his body was being raked with iron combs. Some scholars rejected this prototype, however, suggesting other inspirations within the cultural context of the Graeco-Roman world.

Boyarin's enterprise focuses on the relationship between Jews and Christians as reflected in their literary discourse about martyrs. The heart of the book is his claim that the phenomenon of martyrdom should be seen as a "shared 'historical' invention of Judaism and Christianity," which was used by both religions to create themselves as distinct entities (p. 20). The introduction (pp. 1–21) sets the methodological foundation for Boyarin's new look at the topic. The traditional paradigm considers "Judaism" and "Christianity" in antiquity to have been two separate, distinct entities, each having gone its own way as soon as Christianity had split from Judaism, with not much in common except their intense hostility to each other. By contrast, Boyarin joins a group of scholars from various fields who recently rejected this outlook. The alternative position, in Boyarin's words, claims that there were "shared and crisscrossing lines of history and religious development" (p. 8) and that therefore "one could travel, metaphorically, from rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one would hardly know where one stopped and the other began" (p. 9). His reading of both the sources and the historical reality in antiquity is derived from this view, and makes up the remaining four chapters of the book. Chapter 1 (pp. 22–41) is a set of close readings of some talmudic passages dealing with rabbis encountering various aspects of early Christianity. In a virtuoso literary analysis, Boyarin claims to unveil dual, and rather conflicting, standpoints in these traditions, which reflect at the same time a rebuffing of and an adherence to the "Christian" views. Chapter 2 (pp. 42–66) uses sociological typology of oppressed groups to classify and analyze the responses in rabbinic literature to questions about the permissibility of martyring oneself, and to compare them with the ones in Christian literature. Chapter 3 (pp. 67–92) moves to the field of gender studies, constructing the claim that both Judaism and Christianity reshaped the ideal
image of the male as presented in the discourse about martyrdom, endow-
ing it with a feminine aspect. In Boyarin’s view the goal behind this trans-
formation was that “identification with the female virgin was a mode for
both Rabbis and Fathers of disidentification with a ‘Rome’ whose power
was stereotyped as a highly sexualized male” (p. 79). In the last chapter
(pp. 93–126) Boyarin amalgamates his previous readings into a more
crystallized historical picture. He analyzes and rejects the prevalent notions
about the formation of martyrdom—both the position that argues for an
ancient Jewish root that was nurtured by the Christians and the view that
considers it a Christian act with no connection to Judaism. Instead, he pre-
sents his own view that the discourse about martyrdom is a new creation,
but one that is based on primeval foundations. He claims that the phenome-
on should not be seen as one with two opposite poles (Jewish and Chris-
tian), but rather as a developing dialogue within a complex situation with
blurred boundaries. Even if the ideas were developed in parallel in the two
religions, Boyarin’s model presents these two “parallel” lines as inter-
twined. The book ends with an appendix (pp. 127–130), which critically
examines the historiographic methods of the leading contemporary scholar
of martyrology, William Frend, as well as eighty pages of notes, which can
be seen as an essay requiring its own review. There are also a bibliography
and several indices.

The two main assets of the book are its contributions to the historical
understanding of late antique Judaism and to the hermeneutics of rabbinic
texts. For far too many years the study of Jewish history in the Roman-
Byzantine period, as well as the study of Christianity at that time, have suf-
f ered from the notion of ‘am levadad yishkon (a nation that dwells apart).
Even though it was widely acknowledged that the Jews were integral to the
cultural setting of the eastern Roman Empire, scholars continued to study
them as if they were an isolated group, describing the Jewish world as dis-
tinct from this milieu and indeed hostile to it. Boyarin’s discussion, al-
though focused on one specific topic, joins other recent studies that are
attempting to undermine this artificial dichotomy.

As a reader of rabbinic texts, Boyarin is at his best, in terms of both
competence and audacity, and even if his explications are not always con-
vincing, they are enthralling, revolutionary and thought provoking. Al-
though the sources at the core of his discussion are part of the “bread and
butter” of rabbinic literature, which are examined repeatedly at every level
of study and research, he still finds fresh ways of looking at them. This
freshness emanates from his bold willingness—or, one might say,
baldness—to listen to the reedy and oppressed voices of the text and to sug-
gest what other scholars refrained from saying. Thus, for example, in his
analysis of the story of R. Eliezer’s arrest and trial for the crime of apos-
tasy (i.e., in rabbinic terminology, joining a Christian group), Boyarin claims (pp. 26ff.) that the narrator did not have R. Eliezer express explicit and forceful condemnation of the “heretics” and their leader, Jesus, because he thought that R. Eliezer was (clandestinely) somewhat inclined in their direction. In a later discussion of the same passage (p. 99), Boyarin shows that the question asked by the “heretic” James of R. Eliezer about the acceptability of a prostitute’s fee for the Temple was actually a sensitive topic that was widely debated in Egyptian monastic circles at more or less the same time that the story was formulated. Here Boyarin is applying the well-known imperative that so many others refrain from implementing—namely, that rabbinic literature should be studied in the broad cultural context within which it was written. The book is full of such pearls of interpretation, and even if these were his only contribution, it would have been worth writing.

The main weaknesses of the book are also in the areas of history and the elucidation of rabbinic sources. This is a book dealing with historical phenomena (which took place at certain times in certain places) written by a non-historian. When he attempts to present historical patterns, Boyarin repeatedly fails to recognize elementary requirements of the discipline of history. For example, in his eagerness to present Judaism and Christianity of the early centuries C.E. as entities that re-created themselves, he depicts them as “having arisen more or less together historically out of the old Biblical religion of ancient Israel” (p. 3; my emphasis). This portrays the development of Judaism as if Second Temple Judaism, with all its linguistic, religious and cultural uniqueness, which played a key role in forming the religious entities that developed later, had not existed at all. A similar fallacy occurs when Boyarin claims (on the basis of an unpublished doctoral thesis about Origen, of all people) that rabbinic Judaism had not been fully consolidated until the time it reacted to the rise of Christian ascendency in the fourth century (pp. 18–19). Both of these assertions are much too simplistic in their historical perspective, as historical processes are certainly no less complex than those Boyarin reveals in his studies of literary discourse.

But the most problematic from the historical point of view are Boyarin’s rapid, almost immediate, leaps from texts to historical reality, which ironically undermines his venture. The fact that some passages in rabbinic literature allude to the challenges of martyrdom, reflecting both literary and epistemological proximity to the Christian world, does not necessarily indicate that we are dealing with two identical phenomena in the historical sense, with the two evolving side by side as “twins” (to use Boyarin’s terminology). Martyrdom in particular is one of the areas about which we have enough information to acknowledge with certainty the major historical disparities between the Jewish and the Christian versions.
After all, as far as we can tell from the sources, the Jews of antiquity, including the rabbis, never incorporated their "martyrs" into a ritual. Unlike Christianity, they did not make pilgrimages to their burial or death sites; neither did they celebrate the anniversaries of their death, nor did they produce a martyrological literary corpus or engage in endless debates about the status of such figures. This asymmetry does not play a role in Boyarin's discussion; even though he seems to be aware of it (e.g., p. 118), it does not prevent him from making doubtful assertions, such as the peculiar claim that R. Akiva was the Jewish version of Polycarp, the second-century Christian martyr from Smyrna (p. 105). This is the pitfall of a textual scholar who envisions reality as emerging from the writings he studies; ironically, it reiterates the blunder of the positivist approach in the field of rabbinic literature, which Boyarin rightly opposes.

In the Boyarinian model a book's strengths can also be its weaknesses. These reservations should nevertheless not be construed as detracting from the significance of Boyarin's essay. This is a rich, stimulating and compelling work. Boyarin's writing is complex and full of irony and humor (consider, for example, the way he momentarily adopts the viewpoint of the lions in the gladiatorial arena, p. 95). It is fascinating and, like a good drama, draws the reader in as if to solve a mystery. The thesis Boyarin presents, even if not complete in all its elements, adds an important layer to a deeper understanding of antiquity. Even those who are not in the field of ancient Judaism, with all its branches and "heretics," will find much of interest in this book.

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