REVIEW ESSAY

DANIEL BOYARIN’S BORDER LINES. THE PARTITION OF JUDAEO-CHRISTIANITY

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From the very beginnings of the Rabbinic system in its preserved writings border lines distinguished Rabbinic Judaism from all other systemic responses to the same Scriptures that the ancient rabbis invoked. Not only so, but those same main lines of those norms consistently surface in every document of Rabbinic Judaism. Whether we turn to the Mishnah, ca. 200, or Abot, variously dated as early in the canonical process and as late, or Song of Songs Rabbah and Lamentations Rabbah, by consensus situated at an indeterminate point but probably toward the end of that same continuous process, the outcome is the same. Monotheism has imposed its logic, which has imparted cogency throughout. The symbolic structure of Rabbinic Judaism, with its mythic framing of monotheism, pervades, whether in the invocation of the Torah or in its account of God’s participation in Israel’s life. We discern a single cogent construction—the monotheist conception yielded by Scripture and systematized by the Rabbinic canon—at the foundations of every document. Then each compilation in sequence takes up its particular burden within the composition of a complete and cogent statement.

And we have no problem imagining the opposed position, a negotiation that yields less than the monotheist logic of the Rabbinic system: the rejectionist and heretical one. That is so even though we can hardly match the Rabbinic system founded in the bedrock of mythic monotheism with a single contrary system, whether Christian or pagan, resting on other foundations altogether, e.g., two powers.


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in heaven against the datum of Pesiqta deRab Kahana. The upshot is, from its earliest documentary evidence to the latest of late antiquity, a single system of myth and symbol, law and theology, defined Rabbinic Judaism and distinguished that Judaism from all other religious systems, originating in communities of Judaic, Christian, or pagan venues, whether resting on Scripture or rejecting Scripture altogether. We need hardly ask for the testimony, as to the norms, of articulate sayings, e.g., concerning the unity of God, the justice and mercy of God, the origin with God of the Torah and the origin in the Torah of the critical doctrine of resurrection, judgment, and the restoration of Eden and life eternal. The entire statements of successive composites attest to those same definitive norms of conviction.

Accordingly, Rabbinic Judaism defined itself and designated its opposition. It accomplished the partition of its system from all other, competing ones, whether near at hand or remote, and this it did from its earliest writings to the latest ones of late antiquity. What shifted from the Mishnah to the concluding Midrash-compilations is not the theological norm, the paramount dogma, but only its expression in ever more human terms.

This emergent view of a fully-exposed Judaic religious system, distinct from the very start to the indeterminate finish from all other Judaisms and Christianities and paganisms of late antiquity, bears implications not to be missed. It portrays Rabbinic Judaism as completely realized but for secondary articulation in the Mishnah and present in all subsequent writings. And it yields the presence of both orthodoxy and heresy in the context of formative Rabbinic Judaism. That Judaic system emerges as an inclusionary and exclusionary construction of implicit norms constituting the bedrock of what became normative Judaism. The system says as much in so many words at its critical moment, the declaration of eternal life as the fate of all Israel with few but important exceptions—e.g., those that deny the Torah is from heaven. But we have seen that the system forms the bedrock of the classical writings of that same Judaism. The ancient Rabbis knew who belonged and who did not belong to the Israel that would rise from the grave for eternal life. It goes without saying that Rabbinic Judaism by the canonical writings surveyed here drew border lines between the Torah, which we call in more secular language “Judaism” and the communities of Christianity, with whom it shared some sacred Scriptures.