

Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia

Edited by

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BRILL

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Appendix III

Boyarin's Interpretation of the Rabbi Aqiva Narratives

In an article published in 1989, Daniel Boyarin analyzed the Yerushalmi and Bavli narratives discussed in the present paper within the context of a study of midrash and its relationship to text and history.⁷¹ While Boyarin's analysis interprets both narratives in the context of other midrashic texts,⁷² the two talmudic narratives are central to a thesis elaborated upon in Boyarin's later work, as will be seen below. These narratives present, in Boyarin's words, "two . . . stages in cultural history—the history of an idea," the idea of "erotic, mystic death."⁷³ Through Rabbi Aqiva's midrashic reading of Deut 6:5 (" 'You shall love the Lord your God with . . . all your soul'—even though He takes your soul"), among other Scriptural passages, the rabbinic figure is portrayed in these narratives as "discovering that dying is the way to fulfill the commandment of loving God."⁷⁴ In the Yerushalmi text, which Boyarin sees as chronologically preceding the Bavli narrative, Rabbi Aqiva is "[caught] in the act, as it were, of discovering" this truth; the Bavli narrative is then a culmination of the "join[ing] of Eros and Thanatos," of transforming martyrdom from what was considered in previous centuries as a "negative commandment" (refusing to worship idolatry) into a "positive commandment," in actively "dying for [the love of] God":

R. Akiva died for the love of God; indeed he died because he held that this was the only way to fulfill the commandment "to love the Lord with all your soul."⁷⁵

71 "Language Inscribed by History on the Bodies of Living Beings': Midrash and Martyrdom," *Representations* 25 (1989) 139–51. The paper later appeared as Chapter 8 in Boyarin's book, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington 1990) 117–129. The chapter in the book, titled "Between Intertextuality and History: The Martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva," is almost a *verbatim* copy of the article; in the following, I will refer to the text according to the page numbers of the chapter in the book. A Hebrew translation (with some changes and additions) was published as "*ha-midrash ve-ha-ma'aseh: 'al ha-heqer ha-histori shel sifrut hazal,*" in: S. Friedman (ed.), *Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume* (New York and Jerusalem 1993) 105–17. At the conclusion of the Hebrew article Boyarin adds comments regarding the variants in the manuscript versions of the Talmudic narratives; see n. 83 below.

72 In particular, *MdRY beshalah* 3, on Exod 15:2 ("this is my God and I will beautify Him").

73 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 127. See below for a discussion concerning the theses presented in Boyarin's later published work in relationship to this analysis, specifically in his books *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford 1999), and *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia 2004).

74 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 127.

75 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 125; cf. 126–7.

Boyarin's reading of these narratives, and in particular the Bavli version, puts them squarely within the genre of martyrology; indeed, they serve as foundation texts for his assumption concerning the creation of a Jewish concept of martyrology showing remarkable similarities to Christian martyrological texts.⁷⁶ Clearly, this thesis runs counter to that suggested in the present study, which was reached through an analysis of these same texts. It is therefore important to address Boyarin's thesis through an exploration of the textual basis upon which it rests.

His text of the Bavli narrative is cited here in full in its English and later Hebrew versions:⁷⁷

In the hour that they took R. Aqiva out [to be executed], his disciples said to him, "Our teacher, so far? [i.e. is this necessary]" He said to them, "All of my life I was troubled by this verse, 'And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul'—even though He takes your soul, and I said, when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it? Now that it is come to my hand, shall I not fulfill it?"

שעה שהוציאו את ר' עקיבא אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן אמר להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה ב ב ל נ ש ש ך אפילו הוא נוטל את נשמתך אמרתי מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד יצתה בת קול ואמרה אשריך ר"ע שיצאה נשמתך באחד אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה זו תורה וזו שכרה מ מ ת י ם וגו (תהלים יז:יד) אמר להם ח ל ק ם ב ח י י ם יצתה בת קול ואמרה אשריך ר"ע שאתה מזומן לחיי העוה"ב

What is particularly significant in this text is the fact that the query of the disciples to Rabbi Aqiva appears directly after the exposition declaring his being taken out for execution; there is no mention of the torture or of Rabbi Aqiva's recital of the *Shema* at this time. This means that the disciples' alarmed question, "Our teacher, so far?," must

76 Boyarin does not make historical claims for either narrative, preferring to view them as cultural products to be understood in the context of other literary texts, providing data for a cultural history of the Jews in the early centuries of the common era.

77 The English passage is found in the article, "Language," on pp. 146–7, and is repeated, in identical form, in *Intertextuality*, on p. 125. The Hebrew text, which includes the "second act" of the narrative (see below), appears in the Hebrew article, "*ha-midrash ve-ha-ma'aseh*," 114. (It should be noted that the passage is referenced in the English article erroneously as "Berakot 66a" [instead of 61b]; in the chapter of the book *Intertextuality* no reference is given. This was corrected in the version presented in the Hebrew article, as well as in the recent Hebrew translation of *Intertextuality* [*Midrash Tannaim: Intertextualiut ukeri'at Mekhilta* (Jerusalem 2011) 196–7]).

be taken to be a challenge to the very act of his impending death, as Boyarin indeed explains in a bracketed addition: ["i.e. is this necessary?"], meaning "is this [acquiescence to your] execution necessary?" Rabbi Aqiva's answer, based upon his midrashic comment to Deut 6:5, thus becomes a forceful argument for the "joining of Eros and Thanatos"; Rabbi Aqiva's message to his students is: "Death is not only required of me at this time ["it is necessary"], but all the more: I have actively sought out just this martyrdom all my life as a fulfillment of the commandment to love God." While in the Bavli narrative, Rabbi Aqiva "already knew from before what it was he had to do, and was just waiting for the opportunity," in the earlier Yerushalmi narrative he "discover[s] that dying is the way to fulfill the commandment of loving God."⁷⁸

We note that Boyarin's text, in the second part of the cited passage at least (from Aqiva's response to his students), follows Version B or that of the printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud (the two versions are identical here).⁷⁹ But whence the strange beginning of the narrative, which, in deleting both the torture and the mention of the recital of the *Shema*, prepares the way for an interesting and novel view of Rabbi Aqiva's interpretation and understanding of Deut 6:5? Is this based on a manuscript version not discussed above?⁸⁰ And what is the meaning of the phrase appearing in square brackets: "[to be executed]"? Is this not part of the narrative (להריגה)? Why is it bracketed?

The answer concerning the origin of Boyarin's text is as simple as it is shocking. As easily demonstrated by a quick perusal of the page from the standard Vilna edition of Tractate *Berakhot* reproduced below,⁸¹ Boyarin's text of the Bavli is culled directly from this version, except that in copying the Hebrew text (from which he made his English translation, and which he presented in the Hebrew version of the study) *he mistakenly skipped a full line*, moving directly from the words אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו, at the end of the sixth full line, to the query of the disciples, רַעֲקִיבָא, at the beginning of the eighth full line.

78 Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 127.

79 The phrases in Boyarin's cited text, "All of my life I was troubled by this verse . . . I said, **when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it,**" reflect both versions; see the synopsis of textual versions in Appendix I, lines 5 and 7.

80 Elsewhere Boyarin shows awareness of the importance of manuscripts, and, indeed, states that he has modified the *Mekhilta* text (see n. 72 above) "where my manuscripts have a better reading" (*Intertextuality*, 156, n. 6).

81 The pagination and lines are precisely the same in all standard editions of the Bavli (based on the 19th-century Vilna edition) to this page.

<p>המסוק ציט נהר הניס : ומזמן שחשמה שניה . שנית המקדש קיים : הנפנה כיהודה לא ישנה מזמנו</p>	<p>משל למה הדבר דומה לשועל שדוה מהלך על גב הנודר וראה דנים שהיו מתקבצים ממקום למקום אמר להם מפני מה אתם בורחים אמרו לו מפני רשות שמביאין עלינו בני אדם אמר להם רצונכם שתעלו ליבשה ונודו אני ואתם בשם שדרו אבותי עם אבותיכם אמרו לו אתה הוא שאומרים עליך פקח שבחיות לא פקח אתה אלא טפש אתה ומה במקום חיותנו או מתיראין במקום מיתנו על אדת כמה וכמה אין אנהנו עבשיו שאנו יושבים ועוסקים בתורה שכתוב בה ^ד כי הוא היך ואורך ימך כך ^ה דנים אם אנו הולכים ומבטלים ממנה עאיזו אמרו לא היו ימים מעטים עד שתפסודו לר"ע וחבשותו בבית האסורים ותפסי לפפוס בן יהודה וחבשותו אצלו אמר לו פפוס מי הביאך לכאן אמר ליה אשריך רבי עקיבא שנתפסת על דברי תורה אוי לו לפפוס שנתפס על דברים בטלים בשעה שהוציאו את ר' עקיבא להריגה זמן ק"ש היה והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקת של ברזל והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן אמר להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך אפילו נוטל את נשמתך אמרתו מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו ועבשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד יצתה ב"ק ואמרה אשריך ר"ע שיצאה נשמתך באחד אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה זו *תורה ו זו שברה *ממתים ירך י"י ממתי וגו' אמר להם חלקם בחיים יצתה ב"ק וזמרה אשריך ר"ע *שארה מוזמן להיו העוה"ב : ילא יקל אדם את ראשו כנגד שער המורה שהוא מבין כנגד בית קדשי הקדשים וכו' : אמר רב יהודה אמר רב לא אמרו אלא מן הצופים ולפנים וברואה איתמר נמי איז אבא בריה דרבי</p>	<p>שנתנו לפני תמוס : לראות אם יקפיד רבו עלך אי סבירא ליהכר"ע להמר בחול' נמי קפידין עלה דמילתא : אחר</p>
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This hiatus accounts for the deletion of the elements of the torture, the mention of the time for the recital of the *Shema* and the recital itself, all of which are found in the seventh full line. The bracketed words in Boyarin's English text, “[to be executed],” leave no doubt as to what has happened in the process of the transcription: these words, of course, are a translation of the word להריגה, which in no text version, manuscript or print, is missing; indeed, the statement בשעה שהוציאו את ר' עקיבא is incomplete without this word. But the word must have been lost in Boyarin's transcribed (Hebrew) text, as it is the first word in that missing seventh full line. Since the phrase “In the hour that they took R. Aqiva out” (the translation of the last five words in the sixth full line) makes little sense, Boyarin was forced to make an editorial “emendation,” adding the words “to be executed” in order to complete the sense of the sentence. Being true to “his text,” he placed the completion of the elliptical phrase in square brackets to note his editorial “addition.”

As can be seen by comparing Boyarin's recorded text of the Bavli narrative in the later Hebrew version of the article as found above, the line is still missing there.⁸² Boyarin provides no ellipsis to mark a possible “jump” in his text; it purports to be the complete and proper Hebrew text of the Bavli narrative.⁸³

82 As noted above, the Hebrew version of this study was published three and four years after the publications of the English versions of the book and article, respectively. As mentioned, the Hebrew version of the narrative is more complete than that of the English version, as it includes the continuation of the narrative (see below); however, it is still missing the seventh full line.

83 In an added note to the Hebrew version of this paper (*ha-midrash ve-ha-ma'aseh*, 116–7, n. 34), Boyarin discusses the textual variants of the Yerushalmi and Bavli texts, citing Safrai's philological analysis in his study in *Zion* 44 (1981) (“Martyrdom in the Teachings of the Tannaim,” 28–42; Safrai's philological discussion is on pp. 37–8 in the version in *Zion*, and on pp. 156–7 of the English version), which agrees basically with my conclusions

This unfortunate and faulty understanding of the Bavli narrative, while serious enough in itself, as it provides a forceful yet erroneous “proof” for Boyarin’s thesis of Rabbi Aqiva’s quest for martyrdom, has had wider ramifications. For, as mentioned above, the understanding of the cultural creation of an idea of martyrdom during the foundational period from the second through the fifth centuries of the Common Era (during which the original Yerushalmi and Bavli narratives must have been formed) lies at the basis of Boyarin’s later studies of a shared cultural outlook between Jewish and Christian cultures of this period. Indeed, the very same texts are presented in Boyarin’s book *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford 1999), published nine years after the publication of *Intertextuality*. This was a seminal work, in which Boyarin disclosed what would become a dominant theory in his own subsequent research, influencing also the studies of other contemporary historians of Judaism and Christianity of the first centuries of the Christian era: namely, that the older paradigm of the “parting of the ways” between the two religions and cultures, previously assumed by historians to have occurred by the second century, did not occur at that time, but was, rather, a significantly later phenomenon, as “borderlines” were actively put in place by proponents of both cultures.⁸⁴ At the culmination

in the present study. He agrees with Safrai’s consideration of the spurious nature of the added passages in the Yerushalmi narrative (found only in the *Berakhot* text but missing in the parallel text from *ySot*), but defends the possibility of an “authentic” aspect of the martyrological additions to the Bavli narrative, where the authenticity is not of Rabbi Aqiva’s historical situation but of the cultural expression of the narrative. This is of course true: as I have noted in my discussion above, the narrative containing the additions indeed expresses a martyrological consciousness, although not necessarily one consonant with Christian martyrologies of the second to fourth centuries. The important issue, discussed above, is precisely at what stage and under which influences these passages were added. Later Byzantine influences, which, as I have suggested in the present study, may have occurred in the later transmission of the Bavli narrative, would add nothing to our understanding of the relationships between the Jewish and Christian cultures during the early centuries of the first millennium.

- 84 The idea of the “blurring” of borders between the Jewish and early Christian cultures is the basis for Boyarin’s later work, *Border Lines*. Although the idea of the commonality of martyrdom is not prominent in this latter work, a clear line of thought concerning the “borderlines,” and the lack thereof, between early Christianity and Judaism can be drawn to this later work from the study of “shared” concepts of martyrology among early Christians and Jews as presented in *Dying for God*. See *Dying for God*, “Introduction: When Christians Were Jews: On Judeo-Christian Origins,” 1–21, and especially pp. 6–7 (“The So-Called ‘Parting of the Ways’”) and pp. 16–9 (“Living on Borderlines”). Note Boyarin’s emphasis there in his summary of the fourth chapter of the book which contains the discussion of the Aqivan narratives (“The Plan of the Essay”): “Since the entire passage that is read in the first three chapters hovers around the fraught question of

of this book, Boyarin reproduces texts and discussions from his earlier research, including the Bavli and Yerushalmi narratives of Rabbi Aqiva's presumed martyrdom.⁸⁵ The Bavli narrative is cited (in English) here, as in the Hebrew version cited above, at greater length, as it includes the second part of the passage concerning the cry of the angels and the *bat qol*.⁸⁶ Although Boyarin notes there that he has produced the text of the Oxford manuscript,⁸⁷ the first part of the narrative is **again copied precisely from the erroneous texts of the previous decade** (reflecting the printed edition's text, *sans* seventh full line), including the bizarre bracketed words, “[to be executed].”⁸⁸

martyrdom, in the fourth chapter, I . . . enter a more directly historiographical mode. The major motif of this chapter is the entanglements of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity with **the discourse of martyrdom and its role in helping them invent themselves as separate entities**” (20, my emphasis). Cf. also n. 89 below. The influence of Boyarin's study in *Dying for God* on other cultural historians is notable, for example, in Judith M. Lieu's work; in particular, see her book *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford 2004—published in the same year as Boyarin's *Border Lines*). In a central chapter of this book (“Boundaries,” 98–146), Lieu discusses, in terms strikingly similar to those of Boyarin, the areas where the “crossing of boundaries” between Jewish and early Christian cultures of the first centuries CE may be found, and similarly questions the adequacy of current conceptions of the early “parting of the ways” between the two cultures. Lieu explicitly expresses her debt to Boyarin in the concluding chapter, 307 n. 19: “My thinking about this [i.e. the separate entities of Judaism and Christianity in the early centuries of the current era and the question of the ‘parting of the ways’] has been stimulated by Daniel Boyarin, both in conversation and in *Dying for God*.” It should be noted that Lieu's expertise is in the early Christian texts, and it is mainly from the perspective of these texts that she draws her conclusions. See also the collection of papers, A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen 2003, Minneapolis 2007²), where Boyarin's discussions in *Dying for God* and related articles are cited numerous times.

85 Chapter 4, “Whose Martyrdom Is This, Anyway?” 93–126. This chapter, as well as other parts of the book, appeared previously as “Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 577–627 (see the asterisked note at the beginning of that paper announcing “the forthcoming monograph, *Dying for God*,” and see there 605, n. 90).

86 Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 106. In the earlier version of this chapter (“Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism,” 605), the text appears precisely as it appeared in the versions of *Intertextuality*, without the additional second “act” (with the exception of a corrected reference to “Berakhot 61b”).

87 The reference to the Oxford manuscript (“Opp. Add. fol. 23”) appears at the end of the citation in *Dying for God*, 106. Some of the features of the manuscript version appear in this translation, but the major part of the beginning of the cited text is **not** from the manuscript version (see following note).

88 As noted above (see n. 86 above), the same faulty text appears in the previously published article, which apparently was then copied directly into the prepared text of the book, to

In sum, Boyarin's study of early Jewish so-called martyrological texts, which not only becomes the pivot for his work on martyrdom⁸⁹ but also lays the foundation for his subsequent research describing the gradual laying down of "borderlines" between the Jewish and Christian religious cultures during the second to fifth centuries CE, is not supported by the rabbinic texts. Borderlines should not be erected on missing lines.⁹⁰

which was then added the passage of the "second act" from the Oxford manuscript, thus causing a hybrid text (see the previous note). In the recent Hebrew translation of the book *Intertextuality (Midrash Tannaim, 196–7)*, the faulty text is finally rectified. However in this edition, where the English text of the book is followed slavishly in translation, Boyarin again reverts to the standard text of the printed versions of the Bavli (and not that of the Oxford manuscript, without including the second "act") without further explanation.

- 89 The centrality of the "shared concept of martyrdom" is emphasized by Boyarin in the Hebrew summary of his thesis of *Dying for God*, published as "*mashehu al toledot ha-marterion be-yisrael*," in: D. Boyarin et al. (eds.), *Atara l'Haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky* (Jerusalem 2000) 3–27 [Hebrew]. See also his recapitulation and summary of the thesis of the book *Dying for God*, in *idem*, "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/'Christianity,'" in: Becker and Reed (eds.), *The Ways That Never Parted*, 74. The Hebrew text of the Bavli narrative presented in the above-mentioned Hebrew article (p. 16 there) faithfully represents the version of the Oxford manuscript (see the reference there on p. 13); nonetheless, Boyarin makes a point of saying that this story is "vital [חייוני] for my thesis in this paper, for it is the clearest expression of the Rabbinic consciousness of martyrology (אצל חז"ל)" (p. 16; my translation, emphasis added). As I have shown above, the text of the narrative in the Oxford manuscript contains no explicit martyrological elements.
- 90 While this is not the place for an extended critique of Boyarin's work, it should be noted (and this is pertinent to the present discussion) that his carelessness is not confined to transcriptions and faulty references, but is evident also in his translation of Hebrew and Aramaic. Thus, in all his English citations of the Yerushalmi narrative, Boyarin erroneously translates the Palestinian Aramaic word שרר as "deaf" (*Intertextuality*, 126; *Dying for God*, 108; similarly in the versions of these chapters previously published as journal articles). The correct translation, as noted in all translations and lexicons of the Yerushalmi passage, is "sorcerer." While this error was corrected in the translation of the passage in the recent Hebrew edition of *Intertextuality (Midrash Tannaim, 198)*, it is unfortunate that this misunderstanding was repeated in English versions of Boyarin's discussions, as it misrepresents what may be construed as a historically significant aspect of Tinieus Rufus' claim against Rabbi Aqiva; see above in my discussion of this text, and cf. Lieberman's comment cited there, n. 15 above.