



D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press: 1990. xiii + 161 pages. *

For those of us who have been wondering just what midrash is, Daniel Boyarin has provided an intelligent and sensitive beginning of an answer: Midrash is *not* poetry, homily, allegory, history, or commentary; rather, midrash is a hermeneutic act, an act of co-reading biblical texts, the purpose of which is to recreate the [religious] experience of redemption at the Reed Sea and/or the experience of revelation at Sinai (110, 114, 128). "For the rabbis of the midrash, the highest reality, other than God Himself [sic], of course, is the Torah ... No wonder, then, that reading on the highest level in midrash is intertextual reading, the connecting of texts to the ultimate Text..." (116).

As a good deconstructionist, Boyarin begins by noting that there is no such thing as an objective, value-free reading; rather, all text is composed of conscious and unconscious previous texts, including the constraints imposed by culture and the "ideological intertextual code" (17). The Bible, including the Torah, is no exception; hence, it is a severely gapped text -- repetitive, self-contradictory, and ambiguous. Higher Criticism ascribes the gapped quality of the Bible to various documents and sources; midrash uses those same gaps as a hermeneutic device to generate new texts.

Boyarin identifies six techniques used by midrash to generate new readings: First, **the paradigmatic form** -- listing biblical passages which have a common feature -- the very catalog generates the effect of the total being greater than the sum of its parts. Second, **the syntagmatic form** -- setting verses into a narrative framework -- This allows for filling the gaps in the biblical text as well as for narratizing non-narrative sections. Third, **cocitation** -- juxtaposing two texts which do not appear related and working out a dialogue between the two texts -- The juxtaposition of two such texts leads to the erasure of boundaries between them; they are not "prooftexts," but "cotexts" or "intertexts," their juxtaposition creating something which is not an explication of either but a new, "third" text. Boyarin gives three extensive examples: the reading of the redemption at the Reed Sea with Psalm 114 (chapter six) and, again, with the Song of Songs (chapter seven), and the reading of the story of the manna in Exodus with that in Numbers (chapter three).

Fourth, **the mashal** -- using a "schematic story," drawn from a common and well-known stock of narratives and characters -- This sets the text into a paradigm by narratizing it into the schematic story, by "fictionalizing" it so that it can signify. Boyarin shows the example of a king-son mashal used to motivate the action of the protective angel just before the Israelites cross the Sea (chapter five). Fifth, **the "dual sign"** -- using one word with two meanings -- This evokes two contexts and generates two equally "valid" readings. And sixth, **reverse demythologization** -- using distinctly anthropomorphic and anthropopathic figures of speech -- This turns metaphor into myth.

Boyarin's identification of these six techniques (and he may have intended to identify more) is bold and certainly correct. Midrash is a "third" text, a new reading. "Meaning" derives from one of the techniques, not from the outside and not from anything implicit in the texts; "meaning" is in the space between the texts, in their intertextuality.

Boyarin goes on to draw several conclusions (unfortunately, not neatly located in one place). Most basic, the biblical texts are gapped and ambiguous and, therefore, plurivocal and polyphonic; so is midrash. Furthermore, the "correct" readings are the ones which the community permits; i.e., there is a consensus which forms the "ideological intertextual code" which allows certain readings and not others. The permitted readings are authorized by Torah and by God; misinterpretation is analogous to violation of a ritual or taboo (16-17, 35-8, 70).

Finally, the main argument of Boyarin's book is that the ambiguity of the texts is "sufficient motivation" for midrash; that the gapped quality of the text, combined with cocitation, is enough to account for midrash; one need not have recourse to a theory which sees midrash as polemical or ideological (22, 39, 45). Put differently, the polyphonic character of the text permits differing intertextual readings; the *choice* of reading is a function of the interpretive possibilities and not of ideological commitment. At best, any ideological issue or personal inclination is secondary (66, 70, 77-9; 147, n. 36; 148, n. 44). The fullest example Boyarin gives is the midrash and legend on the martyr's death of Rabbi Akiva where Boyarin maintains that the hermeneutic of an erotic, mystical death enabled Akiva's martyrdom, not the other way around (chapter eight).

I find myself in full agreement with Boyarin in many matters: that all texts, including the Bible, are intertextual; that midrash is a "third" text whose telos is the recreation of the religious experiences of the Sea and Sinai; that there are clearly defined literary techniques to midrash, especially those he has identified; and that there is always a gap and a cotext which produce a new text in midrash. I find, too, that Boyarin's handling of the Mekilta is superb. His exposition of the midrash on Moses' moving the people (41ff.), the manna-quail stories (49ff.), the Bitter Waters incident (58ff.), the intertextuality of the Exodus and Psalm 114 (95ff.) and the Song of Songs (111ff.; 118ff.) is very nuanced, as is his analysis of the approaches of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar (chapters two and three).

However, I remain unconvinced that the ambiguity of the texts is "sufficient motivation" for midrash and that, therefore, personal inclination and ideological motivation are only incidental. Textual gapping and cocitation are, indeed, deep motivating factors -- this in contrast to previous scholarship which has looked to polemical tendency or historical context as the primary factors generating midrash -- but every text exists within a political, as well as intertextual, context; every interpretation reflects the "ideological intertextual code" of its group; every reading takes place within the permitted parameters and telos of its society. Boyarin admits this himself. Having established intertextuality as one of two primary motivating forces in midrash, rabbinic ideology being the other, we still need to ask: what is the relationship between ideology and intertextuality in the midrashic process? Why *does* one authority read a text in one way and another in another way, granted that a sense for the literary gap and its relationship to other texts is certainly one of the factors that makes for that choice? Boyarin has given us a clear indication of the subtlety of one focus in the midrashic process; the other focus, and its relationship to the first, remains to be explicated. Perhaps a use of M. Kadushin's "value-concepts," "emphatic trends," and "principle of indeterminacy" would be helpful. Boyarin's explication so far has proved very nuanced; I, for one, hope that his further work on the problem of interpreting midrash will address these other issues.

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