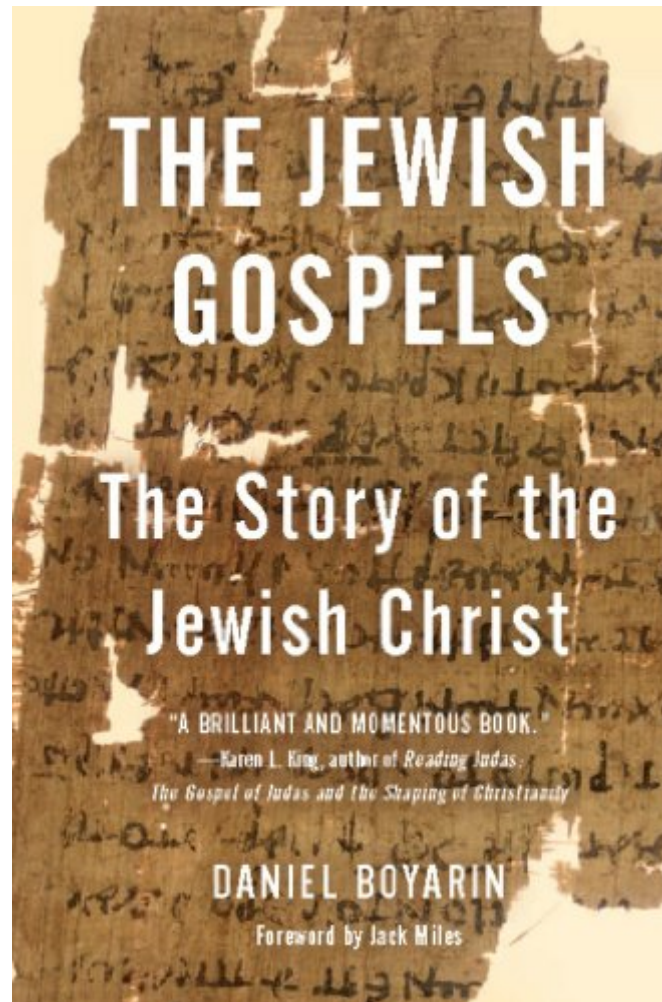


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# The Jewish Gospels



## Synopsis

In July 2008 a front-page story in the New York Times reported on the discovery of an ancient Hebrew tablet, dating from before the birth of Jesus, which predicted a Messiah who would rise from the dead after three days. Commenting on this startling discovery at the time, noted Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin argued that "some Christians will find it shocking"; a challenge to the uniqueness of their theology. •Guiding us through a rich tapestry of new discoveries and ancient scriptures, *The Jewish Gospels* makes the powerful case that our conventional understandings of Jesus and of the origins of Christianity are wrong. In Boyarin's scrupulously illustrated account, the coming of the Messiah was fully imagined in the ancient Jewish texts. Jesus, moreover, was embraced by many Jews as this person, and his core teachings were not at all a break from Jewish beliefs and teachings. Jesus and his followers, Boyarin shows, were simply Jewish. What came to be known as Christianity came much later, as religious and political leaders sought to impose a new religious orthodoxy that was not present at the time of Jesus's life. In the vein of Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels*, here is a brilliant new work that will break open some of our culture's most cherished assumptions.

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## Customer Reviews

Daniel Boyarin has done a great service for the Body of Christ and especially for those who are involved in the study of the Jewish Roots of Christianity. Over the past few decades it has become increasingly clear that to understand more fully the New Testament writings we need to have a greater, more in-depth understanding of the conceptual and cultural world in which these texts were written...and this is primarily the world of Judaism. Understanding the Jewish conceptual and cultural world in which Jesus, the disciples and writers of the New Testament lived and moved in has opened up the richness of Scripture and given it greater clarity in innumerable ways. One area that has now been greatly enriched by understanding the Jewish Background involves the Deity of Jesus. Boyarin's work deftly demonstrates through the use of various streams of Jewish thought and literary works that the idea of a Divine Messiah was not foreign to Jewish thought and belief....and was even expected. He lays out the various beliefs about the Messiah down through the centuries before and during the time of Jesus using texts such as Daniel 7:13-14, the Similitudes of Enoch, First Ezra as well as insights from the Talmud and other rabbinic literature that may reflect earlier Jewish thought on this subject. Boyarin's view is that the seeds of the concept of a divine Messiah were present in Judaism before and during the time of Jesus. This is important for three reasons: 1. It explains how the first century disciples and followers of Jesus could believe that Jesus is God/deity. Boyarin's work demonstrates pretty well that such a belief and concept was NOT outside the scope of Jewish belief within the First century 2.

A conundrum that periodically puzzles me is how easily it seems that the Jewish followers of Jesus accepted "new" gods - or a "new" definition of God that postulated other divine beings sharing the glory of the One God. Think about this - the conventional view of pre-Christian Judaism is that it was rigorously monotheist, and, yet, by the middle to end of the First Christian Century, we see the formula of "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" is being used as the baptismal formula in Matthew. I often think that it is strange that Jews - who only knew of one God - accepting two other divine characters without wondering where they came from and why God hadn't bothered to mention them previously. Boyarin's answer is simple, straightforward and logical; the Jewish tradition included a germ or type of the incarnation and "trinitarianism" long before the First Century C.E., and, in a way, the answer is obvious to anyone who is familiar with the Bible. Boyarin argues that there was a "binitarian" tradition in ancient Judaism that can be found in Daniel 7, notwithstanding the effort of the author to obscure its binitarian implications, which introduces the "Son of man" and the "Ancient of Days." Under Boyarin's guidance, it seems clear that Daniel 7 can be understood as

introducing two divine beings, an older divine being who invests the younger with suzerainty over the world. Boyarin explains that there were several ways in which Israel's messiah was understood. One tradition was that the Messiah who was to be an heir of David who would institute a reign under which all nations would bow to Israel and Israel's God.

This short but sweet book challenges the assumption that Jesus and his earliest Jewish followers had a theology which was completely at odds with the New Testament and orthodox "gentile" Christianity. Daniel Boyarin is a Jewish scholar looking at Christianity from a Jewish perspective. He is not a fundamentalist Christian trying to defend his faith. I would also recommend his other outstanding book, "A Radical Jew, Paul and the Politics of Identity". In this book, he clearly demonstrates that the core doctrines of orthodox Christianity such as the incarnation, the trinity, and the vicarious suffering of the messiah/redeemer were ideas which originated in Judaism and which were firmly rooted in the Jewish faith in the time of Jesus. These doctrines were neither Hellenistic ideas nor were they elements of pagan mystery religions which were foisted upon the Christian faith by the early Greek church fathers or the Romans. This book challenges theories put forth by modern liberal Christian apologists who draw a distinction between a "good Jesus" and a "bad Christ". In other words, we can no longer see the historical figure of Jesus as merely an ethical sage who, under the influence of Hellenism, was promoted to a divine status. The conviction that Jesus was elevated to a divine status as the "Son of Man" goes back to Jesus' earliest Jewish followers and was probably planted in their minds by Jesus himself. The charges of blasphemy leveled against Jesus can only be the result of his identifying himself as the future Son of Man and using the term "I Am" as a self designation. I would add that according to Hegesippus, an early Palestinian Jewish Christian, James was charged with heresy for making the same claims about his brother, Jesus.

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