

JORDAN OSSERMAN
University College London

"REAL CIRCUMCISION IS A MATTER OF THE HEART":
ON BADIOU'S PAUL AND BOYARIN'S JEWISH
QUESTION

In 1997, two books were published on Saint Paul: *A Radical Jew: St. Paul and the Politics of Identity*, by the eminent Jewish studies scholar Daniel Boyarin, and Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme*.¹ Though the two authors would not encounter each other's work until many years later,² their arguments appear as if on opposite ends of the same pole. Both mobilize Paul and Pauline theology in order to investigate the idea of universalism and its place within philosophy and politics. Badiou's *Saint Paul* is a loving exploration of the saint which also functions as a sort of précis of Badiou's own embrace of universalism and its relation to the "event"; Paul's letters are made to serve as the historically situated demonstration par excellence of Badiou's universalist philosophy. Boyarin, on the other hand, turns a skeptical eye on Paul, arguing that his practice and advocacy of universalism form an originary source of a logocentric tradition that seeks to eliminate difference and that denigrates the feminine as the wellspring of impure particularity.

In a certain sense, the different perspectives of Badiou and Boyarin on Paul function as a homology for a much larger philosophical divide: between those who advocate an unapologetic, anti-identitarian universalism (for whom Badiou represents a poster child) and those who prioritize cultural and historical specificity, wary of what such universalisms may exclude (a seemingly axiomatic stance in cultural studies and allied fields). In this instance at least, the boundaries between the theological, the political and the philosophical are extremely porous.

How can we make sense of this divide? I believe that the key to understanding the difference between Badiou and Boyarin lies in their respective interpretations of Paul's stance on circumcision. In extending the new movement of Jesus followers to Jew and Pagan alike, Paul stated that "a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart — it is spiritual and not literal."³ The import of

¹ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Badiou's book was subsequently translated, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Subsequent references for these books are given in text.

² See John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff, eds., *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³ Rom. 2:29 NRSV

this was not lost on Freud, who prefigured our current authors when he argued in *Moses and Monotheism*, "Paul, who carried Judaism on, also destroyed it. ... He abandoned the 'chosen' character of his people and its visible mark—circumcision—so that the new religion could be a universal one, embracing all men."⁴ Whereas Badiou unreservedly embraces Paul's "indifference" towards the Jewish circumcision rite, arguing that it enabled a rupture from within the Pagan-Jewish divide of Paul's time, Boyarin views it as emblematic of a Platonic vision of transcendence premised on the rejection of the corporeal and the erasure of difference, paving the way for anti-Semitism and other forms of persecution. Circumcision functions here as a placeholder condensing a series of oppositions: between Badiou vs. Boyarin, (Pauline) Christianity vs. Judaism, and the "universalists" vs. the "particularists." By examining Badiou and Boyarin's respective positions on (Paul's abrogation of) the Jewish rite, I hope to shed some light on these oppositions, illuminating their productive tensions and the possibility of rapprochement. For despite the two thinkers' important disagreements, both share a desire to articulate and valorize a form of inclusive collectivity that rejects "totalization" and the subsumption of individuals into a transcendent ideology.

Badiou on Paul

"Paul's unprecedented gesture," writes Badiou, "consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class" (5). For Badiou, the everyday order of things consists of a matrix of differential relations. Commodities, nationalities, races, and so on, function as "groupings" or "sets" of terms that demonstrate meaning or value in opposition to their different neighboring terms. These terms can be infinitely exchanged, re-grouped, and re-related in a kaleidoscopic manner. Such an infinity constitutes, for Badiou, a "false universality" (7). Communitarianism is a way of reifying and making visible this matrix of differences, by attempting to subsume all possible forms of existence into positive identities opposed to one another.

However, the field of being is not exhausted by positive articulations of difference. For Badiou, universal truth involves a moment of "subtraction" from a positive social order. A truth makes visible, and draws its vitality from, the failure of the social order to circumscribe the entirety of existence. Via this act of subtraction, something emerges that does not "fit" into the ordinary network of relations, that cannot be categorized or properly circumscribed. Such a moment constitutes an "event," and requires subjects to name and declare their fidelity to it — despite the fact that its nature renders it meaningless within the terms of ordinary existence. It is a wager on nothing, a leap of faith; though Badiou

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 22:88.

declares himself a staunch atheist, the idea is unmistakably inflected with theological overtones.

If our normal conception of the universal involves elevating some particular thing into a master ideal, capable of containing and organizing the rest of the particulars, Badiou's universal attempts to do the inverse: it represents a point that no existing relation has yet incorporated, something that touches or borders on a void. This has both a negative and positive dimension to it. Universal truth is negative in the sense that it traverses and negates all of the extant forms of relation in a given order; it is positive in the sense that, via this process, it produces something new and open to all. As Hallward puts it, summarizing Badiou, "Truth is nothing other than the local production of a freedom from all relation, a situated production of radical autonomy or self-determination."⁵

In Paul's time, argues Badiou, the Jew and the Greek (i.e. pagan) represented the major axis along which the pre-Christian social order was divided. One side depended on its difference from the other in order to exist, and neither side could conceive of a form of belonging that included all, a truth that cut through communitarian differences. Declaring salvation through Christ was the means through which Paul subtracted from the Jew-Greek totality something that neither side could lay claim to – that was in fact senseless to both sides – and could therefore stand for universality.

Paul states, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."⁶ For Badiou, this Jew-Greek opposition is not just between two historical groups, but "subjective dispositions ... or what could be called *regimes of discourse*" (41, emphasis his). "Greek discourse," he claims, stands for a way of relating to the world and the things within it as an organic, natural totality. "Greek wisdom," which refers to the Greek philosophical tradition, represents the impetus to understand and legislate one's place within the natural order; to study each particular as part of a greater, self-enclosed, ultimately harmonious Whole, "the matching of logos to being" (41). "Jewish discourse," on the other hand, represents the inverse of Greek discourse, what Badiou calls its "constitutive exception" (ibid.). Jewish discourse is predicated on "that which lies beyond the natural totality" (ibid.): the miracle, the election, the prophecy, and, of course, the covenant of circumcision. What connects all these central concepts in Judaism is their exceptionality to Nature; Judaism refuses the logic of Greek wisdom with its exact opposite:

In the eyes of Paul the Jew, the weakness of Jewish discourse is that its logic of the exceptional sign is only valid for the Greek cosmic totality. The Jew is in exception to the

⁵ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxxi.

⁶ 1 Cor. 1:22-23

Greek. The result is, firstly, that neither of the two discourses can be universal, because each supposes the persistence of the other; and secondly, that the two discourses share the presupposition that the key to salvation is given to us within the universe, whether it be through direct mastery of the totality (Greek wisdom) or through mastery of a literal tradition and the deciphering of signs (Jewish ritualism and prophetism). (42)

Both Jewish signs and Greek wisdom rely on the unifying principle of mastery. For Paul, “Christ crucified” is “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”; it is universal not because it masters either the Jewish or Greek discourse, but because it refuses both sides’ terms of legitimation, opening up a previously unforeseen form of belonging, in which, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁷

Paul appears to illustrate and harness Badiou’s notion of subtractive universalism by repeatedly invoking the power of weakness, foolishness, and absence, against strength, wisdom, and presence. For example:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one may boast in the presence of God.⁸

Paul’s point seems to be that, in lieu of Christ, we must no longer rely on the ordinary means we have of sustaining identities and of separating truth from falsehood — i.e., on that which is visible and available to us in society or our community’s traditions. The qualities that are normally devalued across society, as markers of poverty, impotence, or ignorance, are now counter-intuitively valued as the very location of divine truth. Truth and salvation emerge not from what is given or discernible in the everyday world, nor from the impressive constructions of the wise, but from “what is low and despised in the world, things that are not”; we might say, from that which is “nearest” to the void, insofar as what is most despised is also unrepresented. The point is political as much as it is philosophical/theological: the unseen wretched of the earth (of which the suffering Christ is exemplar) become, ontologically, the site of universal truth. Participants in this truth have nothing on which to ground their convictions but a leap of faith — belief in the resurrection. Thus, Paul links truth and universalism by claiming that what is true/salvific is simultaneously what is universally rejected, devalued, or obscured.

⁷ Gal. 3:28

⁸ 1 Cor. 1:27-29

For Badiou, Paul's universalism occurs on multiple levels: he generated not just a social/religious movement, but a blueprint for universalism as such. Paul existed in a particular time and place, a "situation" in Badiou's terminology: he was a Jew living in the Roman Empire, in the time shortly following the death of Jesus. Declaring belief in the resurrection of Christ was a solution specific to his situation. The point, for Badiou, is not that we should believe in the "fable" of Jesus's resurrection. Rather, the way Paul harnessed the power of this fable, allowing it to transform him into a messenger of anti-communitarian universalism, involved an expertly deployed, formal logic of subtraction that we can put to the situation of our own time. The formal quality of Paul's epistles is as valuable as the content:

When one reads Paul, one is stupefied by the paucity of traces left in his prose by the era, genres, and circumstances. There is in his prose ... something solid and timeless, something that, precisely because it is a question of orienting a thought towards the universal *in its suddenly emerging singularity*, but independently of all anecdote, is intelligible to us without having to resort to cumbersome historical mediations. (36, emphasis his)

This quote proposes a paradoxical relation between materiality/historicity and the universal. Universal truth is "independent" of "anecdote" and "historical mediation," yet simultaneously occurs via the emergence of singularity, which suggests embodied, historical experience; one of the challenges of fidelity to an event lies in sustaining "the twofold principle of opening and historicity" (25).

If Paul's message emerged, in a singular way, from his local circumstances, how did he relate to his community's central corporeal practice – circumcision? Recall that Paul argued for universal brotherhood in Christ not in opposition to, but from the position of his Jewish faith. Paul reminds us that he was "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, a Hebrew born of Hebrews"⁹; in other words, a good first century Jew. After meeting with church leaders in Jerusalem, he was "entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised."¹⁰ His mission, in other words, was to bring non-Jews into the fold of the new Jesus movement. This, it seems, was not an uncontroversial move among the early followers of Jesus, most of whom were practicing Jews. Although an unreliable source, the book of Acts portrays Jewish Christ-followers as divided over whether to preach the gospel to Gentiles. Adamantly in favor of spreading the gospel to all, Paul fought tooth-and-nail against those Jewish followers of Jesus who wanted Gentiles to undergo circumcision and conversion to Judaism in order

⁹ Phil 3:5-6

¹⁰ Gal 2:7-8

to gain entry into their movement.¹¹ Jews were free to continue observing Jewish laws and rituals, but Gentiles must be welcomed without the requirement to submit to these, Paul insisted.¹² To make the case, he deployed his extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. Far from opposing Judaism, Paul saw himself as its true adherent.

Badiou does not address the meaning of the Jewish circumcision rite as such. Rather, he is interested in the reason that Paul opposed those Jews who wanted Gentiles to undergo ritual conversion/circumcision. Within this context, Badiou claims, circumcision "indexes its function as a form of branding, of primary initiation" (19). The Jewish proselytizers required circumcision in order to symbolically demarcate themselves from Gentiles, solidifying their difference. (As Paul says to the Galatians, "Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh."¹³) As such, Badiou is highly admiring of Paul's claim that "circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing."¹⁴ He understands this as a form of "indifference to difference," of refusing to allow symbolic markers of difference — of which circumcision is paradigmatic — to "count." "It is not that communitarian marking ... is indefensible or erroneous," writes Badiou (23). "It is that the postevental imperative of truth renders [it] indifferent (which is worse)" (ibid.). Those participating in the new universality cannot constitute themselves on the basis of their symbolic difference from others, circumcised or uncircumcised. As Kenneth Reinhard puts it, "Paul's theorization of a sameness ... is not meant, according to Badiou, to eradicate differences, but to avoid the polarizing differences that breed absolute antagonism."¹⁵

Although Badiou thinks Paul's "indifference" to circumcision is intended to dissolve the ordinary criteria for insider/outsider, a new outsider does nevertheless emerge: those who fail to fully adhere to Paul's notion of universality and continue to believe in the importance of circumcision. "For [Paul] (and we shall grant him this point)," writes Badiou, "a truth procedure does not comprise degrees. Either

¹¹ Mark Nanos convincingly argues that these Jewish Jesus followers likely felt marginalized in the eyes of their fellow Jews, and may have worried about further endangering their status by welcoming Gentiles into their highly unorthodox sect — without at least formally joining them to the Abrahamic covenant via conversion/circumcision. "The Myth of the 'Law-Free' Paul Standing between Christians and Jews," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4, no. 1 (April 21, 2011).

¹² Paul's view on the status Jewish law after Christ has been a longstanding subject of debate among theologians and philosophers, to which Boyarin and Badiou have contributed. See Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004); and Caputo and Alcott, *St. Paul among the Philosophers*.

¹³ Gal. 6:13

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 7:19

¹⁵ Kenneth Reinhard, "Universalism and the Jewish Exception: Lacan, Badiou, Rosenzweig," *Umbr(a)*, no. 1 (2005): 53.

one participates in it, declaring the founding event and drawing its consequences, or one remains foreign to it" (21). Witness Paul's wrath towards the Jewish proselytizers:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.¹⁶

Following from this, I would propose that in Badiou's Pauline logic, circumcision functions as a symbol of regression into communal particularism. More dramatically, we can say that, after Paul, circumcision *indexes the failure of the event*. It is the dialectical antithesis to Pauline universalism; something which emerges as a problem only after the event, yet on which, in a negative way, the whole universal project rests. This raises two questions, unanswered by Badiou: First, what place is left for the particular, historical circumstances from which a universal truth emerges? Second, how might one respond to those Jews who said, and continue to say, "No" to Paul – who continued to follow Jewish law, and practice circumcision, both before and long after Christianity transformed the Roman Empire?

Boyarin on Paul

For Daniel Boyarin, the key to understanding Paul's universalism lies in the dichotomy Paul establishes between the flesh and the spirit, epitomized by Paul's claim that "real circumcision ... is spiritual and not literal." Boyarin understands this as an allegorical reading of the Hebrew Scriptures that positions the (Jewish) letter as the particular, concrete signifier of an abstract, universal signified, (Christian) spirit:

Paul was motivated by a Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy. This universal humanity, however, was predicated (and still is) on the dualism of the flesh and the spirit, such that while the body is particular, marked through practice as Jew or Greek, and through anatomy as male or female, the spirit is universal. (7)

Christ made the spirit available to all, but the consequence, in Boyarin's reading, is that the letter of the Torah, and its many associated terms – all connected to the particularity of the embodied Jew – are transcended or superseded. As Paul says, "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."¹⁷ Instead of cutting the flesh, literally inscribing Jewish identity onto the body of the male Jew, post-Pauline Christianity turned to baptism, forgoing the bodily ritual in favor of a simple,

¹⁶ Phil. 3:2-3

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 3:6

figurative rite – bloodless and without physical trace. "In one stroke," writes Boyarin, resembling Freud's point in *Moses and Monotheism*, "by interpreting circumcision as referring to a spiritual and not corporeal reality, Paul made it possible for Judaism to become a world religion" (230).

Boyarin is skeptical of this project (as he understands it) and its political implications. "For Paul," he writes, "the only possibility for human equality involved human sameness. ... If Paul is not the origin of anti-Semitism (and I hold that he is not), it may certainly be fairly said that he is the origin of the 'Jewish Question'" (156). He argues that the Rabbinical tradition of Judaism, which emerged largely in the wake of Christianity, "is in part a reaction formation ... or, at the very least, a typological antithesis" to Pauline universalism (8), and deserves special consideration for how it returns to questions of materiality, the body, and sexuality allegedly denigrated by Pauline Christianity.

Unlike Badiou, who understands Paul's discourse as a radical break from everything that preceded it, Boyarin situates Paul within a longer philosophical tradition. Paul, he contends, emerged from a lineage of Jewish thinkers inspired by Hellenistic, and specifically Platonic thought. These pre-Pauline Jews were also concerned with universalism, as they wanted to demonstrate that Judaism made a worthy contribution to cosmopolitan Hellenic society. Before Paul, Hellenic Jews already practiced an allegorical reading of the Torah, "founded on ... a dualistic system in which spirit precedes and is primary over body" (14). For them, the "text" of the Torah, like the material body, was the means through which the transcendental spirit could be discerned and experienced. As imperfect humans, tainted by the passions of the flesh, we cannot escape the substandard realm of corporeal life, but, they reasoned, the Torah provides the key to channeling our flesh into spirituality. Read allegorically, the Torah became a compendium of metaphors gifted by God to help man transcend the flesh.

The Hellenic Jew Philo of Alexandria, for example, wrote that he was interested in "the hidden and inward meaning which appeals to the few who study soul characteristics rather than bodily forms" (cited in Boyarin, 79).¹⁸ He attempted to lay bare universal truths hidden underneath the particular practices commanded by Jewish law. For instance, he claimed that the excision of the foreskin during circumcision corresponded to "the excision of pleasures which bewitch the mind"¹⁹; the bodily act pointed to the spiritual transcendence of the body. He wrote approvingly of the fact that the ancient Egyptians, "abounding in all kinds of wisdom,"²⁰ also

¹⁸ Philo's work would eventually become more significant to Christian theologians than to Jews. Given Boyarin's arguments about Rabbinical Judaism (discussed below), this is unsurprising.

¹⁹ Philo of Alexandria, "Of the Special Laws," in *Works of Philo*, trans. F. H. Colson, vol. VII (Loeb Classical Library, 1937), 105.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

practiced circumcision, seeing it as further proof of the universal value of Jewish law.

There was also a misogynistic hue to this allegorical technique, familiar to today's feminist critics: for Philo, man stood for pure mind and woman for impure matter, "For just as the man shows himself in activity and woman in passivity, so the province of the mind is activity and that of the perceptive sense passivity, as in the woman" (cited in Boyarin, 21). In his reading of Genesis, Philo interprets the birth of Adam prior to Eve as linked to the priority of "Mind" over "Sense-perception." Eve was created from Adam's rib "to be a helper and ally" to Adam, who was formerly pure Mind – yet the union of the two also signaled the lamentable breakdown of man's spiritual purity: "For when that which is superior, namely Mind, becomes one with that which is inferior, namely Sense-perception, it resolves itself into the order of the flesh which is inferior." "It is here," writes Boyarin "that a historical vector begins that will ultimately end up in phallogocentric versus as-a-woman reading."²¹

Though Philo and other Hellenic Jews saw the material practices of Judaism as necessary starting points for accessing spirit, Paul, argues Boyarin, went a step further. Whereas Hellenic Jews saw "circumcision of the flesh" as a way towards "circumcision of the heart,"²² Paul would argue that, thanks to Christ, we now can "skip" the former: circumcision of the heart, the spiritual signified, is available sans fleshly signifier:

For the less radical Philo, the body remained significant but was significantly downgraded vis-a-vis the spirit, both the body of sexuality and the body of language/history. Both the carnal and the spiritual were meaningful, but in a severely hierarchical way. For the more radical Paul and most of the Fathers, the body was devalued much more completely, retaining significance primarily as a pointer to spirit and the spiritual/universal sense.²³

Earlier Platonic Jews would never abandon Jewish law, but "Paul came to oppose the Law because of the way that it literally – that is, carnally – insisted on the priority and importance of the flesh, of procreation and kinship, symbolized by the mark in the flesh, par excellence, the penis" (Boyarin, 68-9). Paul may not have advocated asceticism, but his radical allegorical project opened the door for corporeal renunciation. He may have "tolerated" the physical practice of circumcision, but his tolerance "deprives differences of the right to be different, dissolving all others into a single essence

²¹ Daniel Boyarin, "'This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel': Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 477

²² Indeed, it is often forgotten that Paul borrows the latter phrase from the Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah 4:4: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts."

²³ Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," 482-83.

in which matters of cultural practice are irrelevant and only faith in Christ is significant" (Boyarin, 9).

Boyarin versus Badiou

Let us look at a selection from Romans in order to examine Paul's position on flesh/spirit, and Badiou and Boyarin's differing interpretations of it:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.²⁴

For Boyarin, this passage exemplifies Paul's Platonic stance towards Jewish observance. Jewish law (principally, the law of circumcision) is "weakened by the flesh"; man is bound to commit sin even as he attempts to follow the "just requirement of the law," because legal observance takes place within the corporeal domain, where the sinful ways of the flesh reign. The sacrifice of Christ has rescued man from this predicament, providing the opportunity to relinquish investment in the particular, and particularizing, bodily practices of Judaism and access the universal spirit.

Badiou offers a very different take, imploring us to "forget the Platonic apparatus of the soul and the body. ... Paul's thought ignores these parameters" (68). Whereas Boyarin interprets the flesh/spirit, death/life dichotomy in precisely these terms, Badiou argues that they refer rather to two "way[s] of being in the world" (ibid.). The flesh, he claims, corresponds to ordinary relationality, participation in the everyday matrix of differences. Spirit, on the other hand, corresponds not to the transcendence of one's socio-symbolic situation, but rather to the universal void within any "fleshly" situation that has the potential to fundamentally disrupt and reconfigure it. The division is thus not between the "pure" subject and her "impure" physical body, but a division within the embodied subject as such:

The death about which Paul tells us, which is ours as much as Christ's, has nothing biological about it, no more so for that matter than life. Death and life are thoughts, interwoven dimensions of the global subject, wherein

²⁴ Rom. 8:3-8

"body" and "soul" are indiscernible (which is why, for Paul, the Resurrection is necessarily resurrection of the body – that is to say, resurrection of the divided subject in its entirety). Grasped as thought, as subjective path, as way of being in the world, death is that part of the divided subject that must, again and always, say "no" to the flesh and maintain itself in the precarious becoming of the spirit's "but."
(68)

It is not a matter of abandoning flesh for spirit, but of experiencing spirit as an immanent, universal potential, an excess *inherent* to the flesh. Badiou interprets Paul's phrase "walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit" as a call for the subject to "maintain itself in the precarious becoming of spirit's but," refusing to delimit oneself within particularity by actively participating in the excess of the event.

It is interesting that, though they have such divergent readings of Paul, Badiou and Boyarin end up sharing an opposition to Platonic dualisms. Badiou writes, "It is John who, by turning the logos into a principle, will synthetically inscribe Christianity within the space of the Greek logos, thereby subordinating it to anti-Judaism. This is certainly not the way that Paul precedes" (43). Just like Boyarin, Badiou argues that Greek logocentrism provides the ideological frame for anti-Semitism. They "merely" disagree on whether one should ascribe this philosophy to Paul.

Contra Boyarin, Badiou thinks that Paul's critique of the law is not rooted in any notion of corporeal transcendence, but is rather an attack on the "closed particularities (whose name is 'law')" (64). Is this, we might ask, a fair assessment of the significance of the law in Judaism? Does circumcision function solely as a form of communitarian bondage, or might it serve other purposes, perhaps unforeseen by Paul?

The Rabbinical Alternative

Regardless of whether Boyarin is correct to locate Paul within a Platonic allegorical approach to Torah, he persuasively argues that Rabbinical Judaism constitutes a unique non-allegorical alternative, emblemized in the Midrash, one of the major sources of Rabbinical thought. Midrash is the name for a diverse collection of narrative, exegetical and legal texts dating throughout the centuries that addresses various intricacies, paradoxes and contradictions in the Torah. Midrashic authors connect seemingly disparate sections of scripture to generate new narratives, apocryphal stories and interpretations that fill in apparent gaps. In sharp contrast to Platonism, argues Boyarin, Midrash refuses the dualisms of "inner-outer, visible-invisible, body-soul."²⁵ "Accordingly," he writes:

²⁵ Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," 477.

if Philo's allegory is the restoration of the visible text (body) to its source and origin, to its spiritual, invisible meaning (spirit), midrash is the linking up of text to text to release meaning – without any doctrine of an originary spirit that precedes the body of the language of the Torah.²⁶

In Paul's time, the Rabbinical movement had not yet consolidated, and Greek-allegorical versus proto-Rabbinical approaches to Torah existed side-by-side. However, as the "border lines" between Judaism and Christianity were drawn in the centuries after Paul, Platonic allegory would become increasingly foreign to Judaism, and Rabbinical Judaism would eventually become synonymous with Judaism as such. Boyarin does not think this was an accident: the Rabbis, he argues, crafted a Judaism that is at least in part a response, a developed alternative, to (their interpretation of) Paul and the religion he helped generate. Contemporary Judaism, in other words, is the theological "No" to Paul and Christianity. While Philo's gloss on the Scriptures read the feminine as the bodily supplement to the masculine spirit, and Paul's approach allegedly relied on a division between the literal Torah text and its greater spiritual truth, Rabbinical Judaism:

thematizes neither a supplementarity for the woman nor for its own materiality and physicality as text. Man and woman, body and spirit, language and meaning are inseparably bound together in it from the beginning. It escapes the logic of the supplement entirely because the culture resists the Platonic metaphysics of signification.

Key to understanding the difference between Rabbinical Judaism and other approaches to the Hebrew Bible is the significance that the former attributes to circumcision. For the Rabbis, circumcision is not (or at least not solely) an identitarian marker of affiliation, Boyarin claims. Rather, the rite becomes a complex, non-allegorical "technique of the body," that literally joins the Jew's body to God, in the bloody, historical moment of the act. "The cut in the penis completes" – note, Boyarin doesn't use the word symbolize – "the inscription of God's name on the body" (37). Not a "pointer" to a greater signified, circumcision is intricately interwoven in practices of reading and religious observance that knot together the Jew, the law, sexuality, kinship, history, the body, and divinity. Thus, while Paul may have understood the practice in the context of Hellenic Jewish allegory (in Boyarin's reading) – or advocated "indifference" towards it based on its "function as a form of branding" (in Badiou's reading) – the Rabbinical approach invested the practice with an entirely different meaning, concerned less with identity than with an embodied approach to spiritual practice.

²⁶ Ibid., 480.

Boyarin develops his argument from Rabbinical texts on circumcision, especially those inflected by mysticism, which spend significant time elaborating on the physicality of the rite. One midrashic text, for example, refers to circumcision as the inscription of the divine Hebrew letter, *yod*, onto the flesh.²⁷ The actual shape of the head of the circumcised penis is thought to resemble – or more literally, reveal – this letter. Here, the body is not transcended, but sanctified, transformed into a holy object. The Jewish studies scholar Elliot Wolfson, whom Boyarin draws on, shows how in the Kabbalah, the act of physical opening that imprints the *yod* onto the flesh is understood in a theurgical sense, corresponding to an opening in the divine realm itself.²⁸ This opening, according to the Zohar (the definitive midrashic text of Jewish mysticism), allows the circumcised Jew to experience visions of God.²⁹ The opening/inscription of circumcision also brings together, as Derrida would notice,³⁰ the sacred and the text. The opening of the penis, and the opening of God, take place via the letter. The sacred is thus experienced, or disclosed, through a process of reading/writing that blurs together the physical, the textual, and the holy, elegantly communicating Judaism's unique emphasis on Biblical study. Particularity (as opposed to grand universality) matters here, but not in an exclusionary sense; the opening to something "other" is not defended against but rather incorporated into the founding act of Jewish constitution.

Interestingly, there is also a feminine – or feminizing – aspect of the Rabbinical approach to circumcision. Boyarin examines a midrash on the Song of Songs that, via gender bending word plays, implies that the male Jew must be feminized by circumcision in order to receive a vision of the divine. The author of the midrash performs an exegesis of the verse "O, Daughters of Zion, go forth, and gaze upon King Solomon."³¹ The author understands the "Daughters of Zion" to represent the nation of Israel, and "King Solomon" to represent God.³² In order for the Daughters of Zion to include the male members of Israel, he deploys a series of puns on the Hebrew words. King Solomon becomes one who "requires perfection" (the Hebrew *Schelomoh* = Solomon, *Schelemut* = perfection), and the Daughters of Zion become the circumcised members of Israel (*Tsiyyon* = Zion, *ts/y/n* = "to be marked," i.e. circumcised). Circumcision removes the male Jew's imperfection, turning him into a daughter of Zion in order for him to view God (cited in Boyarin, 128).

²⁷ Elliot Wolfson, "Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 78, no. 1/2 (1987).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See "Circumfession," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³¹ Song of Sol., 3.11

³² Although such an interpretation involves a kind of "decoding," Boyarin does not view it as allegorical; the Rabbis understood the poem to refer to real, historical events, not abstract spiritual ideals.

Boyarin further substantiates his argument by reference to a blessing recited in traditional Jewish circumcision rituals. The blessing is taken from Ezekiel 16:6, where God discovers Israel – explicitly figured as female child – “wallowing in [her] blood.” God says to her, “Live in your [feminine] blood.” This phrase is repeated verbatim by the ritual circumciser to the male newborn, suggesting a powerful link between femininity – perhaps menstrual blood – and the act of circumcision.³³ These examples suggest to Boyarin that the Rabbinical tradition of circumcision is “counter phallic, cutting an image of manhood that is distinctive and contrary to dominant notions of male identity by incorporating desirable qualities associated with women into an ideal of masculinity.”³⁴

To summarize: in Boyarin’s exposition of Rabbinical Judaism, circumcision becomes, firstly, the paradigmatic representative of a tradition that values the living corporeal body and its connection to material history and procreation; and secondly, it involves a practice of receiving (visually, physically and textually), and submitting to, divine penetration – with all the gendered implications that this phrasing invokes.

Sexual Difference and the Judeo-Christian Neighbor

Is this "feminine" Rabbinical approach to Judaism outlined by Boyarin strictly in opposition to Badiou's theory of universalism, or is there a possibility for rapprochement between Badiou's-Pauline and Jewish thought? Lacan's theory of sexual difference may help us answer this question. Although intended primarily for the clinic, Lacan's concept of "sexuation" been taken up by post-Lacanian thinkers to help understand the libidinal economy of social structures.³⁵ Here, I would like to suggest that Badiou's vision of Pauline universalism can be understood as a proposal for a "feminine" mode of collectivity, and a critique of the dominant, masculine form of social organization, implied in Paul's anti-communitarian critique of Jewish legal observance.³⁶ At the same time, I believe that Boyarin's embrace of Rabbinical Judaism – particularly his emphasis on the feminizing aspects of the circumcision rite – also locates, within Jewish collectivity, a feminine alternative to the masculine paradigm, which addresses some of the pitfalls of a Badiou's-Pauline

³³ Boyarin, “This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel,” 495-96

³⁴ Eric K. Silverman, “Anthropology and Circumcision,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (October 2004): 425

³⁵ See, for example, Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); and Slavoj Žižek, Eric Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

³⁶ Alenka Zupančič shares this perspective on the relation between Badiou's universalism and Lacan's theory of feminine sexuation, with a different emphasis, in “The Case of the Perforated Sheet,” in *Sexuation: SIC 3*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 282–96.

approach without falling into the communitarianism Badiou rightly laments.³⁷

In his "formulae of sexuation," Lacan distinguishes between masculine and feminine modes of enjoyment in terms of their different relations to the "outside" of language, to that which exceeds the domain of representation.³⁸ Recall that for Lacan, language cannot function without castration, the constitutive incompleteness that prevents the signifier from ever coinciding with the signified. For masculinity, this "outside" of signification figures as the realm of the prohibited, the exception to the law of castration. All men are castrated, barred access to this realm; it therefore appears, in masculine fantasy, as that which is tantalizingly forbidden, the possibility of an unlimited jouissance. Masculinity is thus closely connected to the problem of the superego, the agency that, in Lacan's account, does not simply prohibit enjoyment, but constantly demonstrates one's distance from it. As Zupančič writes, for masculinity, "the inaccessibility of [full] enjoyment is the very mode of enjoyment."³⁹ For femininity, on the other hand, the outside of language is not so much prohibited as it is impossible. It is not that there exists an exception to castration, a promised land of phallic completion, from which women are barred. Rather, a feminine subject confronts the lack inherent to language without (the promise of) exception. Her enjoyment is determined not by its relation to a fantasied, inaccessible fullness, but contingently, in the vicissitudes of her individual experience of lack. If masculine enjoyment is about the possibility of (an always deferred) gratification, feminine enjoyment is about its impossibility.

Lacan's theory of masculinity, it has been argued, illuminates the libidinal economy of communitarian or nationalistic social bonds. In such situations, people function "as a unified group ... with the imaginary integrity of mutual love precisely in order to deny the castration that each individual ... suffers."⁴⁰ A positive identity marks one as belonging to others, obscuring the traumatic lack that underwrites the desire for identification. Shared laws, to which all members are bound, constitute the borders of the community; transgression symbolically represents the prohibited "outside." Inevitably, this denial of castration comes to haunt the group, presenting itself as a reminder of "mythical lost plenitude."⁴¹ The community may react by scapegoating those deemed to possess an "excessive, traumatic enjoyment,"⁴² projecting their fantasy of forbidden jouissance onto others; alternately,

³⁷ Kenneth Reinhard develops a notion of a Badiouian Jewish universalism, also linked to feminine sexuation, in "Universalism and the Jewish Exception." However, the role of circumcision does not significantly factor into his analysis.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (1972-1973), ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 1999).

³⁹ Zupančič, "The Case of the Perforated Sheet," 291.

⁴⁰ Reinhard, "Universalism and the Jewish Exception," 50.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

they may feel induced to violate the law in order to access the greater pleasures they presume to lie on the other side. Žižek's work is largely concerned with the ways that postmodern societies mobilize shared transgressions that, far from undermining the social bond, constitute the libidinal basis of communal identification.⁴³ We are most under the spell of the law not when we obey its prohibitions, but when we participate in the carnivalesque "escape vales" to which the police (in whatever form they take) turn a blind eye. Note that, in this reading, the terms "masculine" and "feminine" do not pertain to individuals, but to a certain organizational logic, the way that a social structure (potentially comprised of both men and women) constitutes and regulates its identity in relation to lack.

Badiou's Pauline opposition to communitarianism, I believe, is implicitly a critique of this masculine form of social bond, of identities that function to disavow castration (in Badiou's terminology, the void of being) and otherness. Paul's opposition between Greeks and Jews constitutes a Lacanian imaginary rivalry – the "two aspects of the same figure of mastery" (42) locked in a perpetual antagonism in order to deny their shared castration and the porousness of their respective boundaries. Žižek (drawing on Lacan) has sharpened this line of thought by calling attention to the superegoic dynamic outlined in Paul's critique of the law in Romans:⁴⁴

If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.⁴⁵

Identification with communal law produces the desire to transgress, trapping the subject in a restrictive, guilt-ridden, and unagential mode of enjoyment: "Now if I do what I do not want, it is not longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."⁴⁶ Circumcision, in Badiou's logic, comes to represent the mark of one's entrapment within this identitarian program. The ritual removal of the foreskin situates man within the discourse of the Jewish Signs. Far from castrating him, it pacifies the trauma of castration, offering the Jew a positive identity to assert against the uncircumcised other and the promise that one's alienation in language can be mitigated

⁴³ See Jodi Dean's helpful discussion of this in *Zizek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012), 135-77.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London: Verso Books, 2009), 148-151; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), ch. 7. For a helpful comparison of Žižek and Badiou's positions on Paul, see Adam Kotsko, "Politics and Perversion: Situating Žižek's Paul," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9 (2008): 43-52.

⁴⁵ Rom. 7:7-8

⁴⁶ Rom. 7:20

by the observance of Jewish law. A pound of flesh becomes a relatively small price to pay.

A feminine approach to social structure, on the other hand, does not organize itself around the denial of castration, sidestepping the fantasy of completion and the identitarian enmities this generates. Rather than preoccupying itself with the problem of having (an identity, gratification, wholeness) and the barriers to it, feminine collectivity is paradoxically constituted along the shared and potentially universal experience of not-having. Consequently, there can be no fantasied outside to "glue" together a feminine social bond:

Rather than viewing the social order in terms of friend and enemy, inside and outside, or rule and exception, the logic of [feminine structure] posits that there are only enemies, only outsiders, and only exceptions. According to this idea ... we can't erect a firm distinction between inside and outside because those inside – friends – are defined solely in terms of what they don't have, and this renders them indistinct from those outside – enemies.⁴⁷

Badiou's interpretation of Paul imagines him, I believe, as an advocate of such a feminine collective. What holds together a universalist collective, in Badiou's thought, are not any shared positive properties (laws, ritual markings, philosophical positions) but a commitment to the name of a void – a not-having – that traverses a given situation, something that renders "indifferent" the common differences that mark inside and outside, friend and enemy. As we saw earlier, Paul's notion of "Christ crucified" unified his followers not because of anything positive that it offered, but because it was "a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles"; it stood for a lack that neither side was able to avow.

However, though he conceives of it in opposition to the Pauline collective, Boyarin's exposition of Rabbinical Judaism also presents what I understand to be a feminine – even universalist – approach to social structure, made evident in his theorization of the significance of circumcision. For, in Boyarin's version, the ritual is not so much about "branding" the Jew in opposition to the Gentile as it is a matter of ritually embodying one's constitutive relation to otherness. Circumcision becomes itself an act of subtraction, the opening of a void within the organic body. An intimate part of the self is marked by a lack, subjected to an originary wound imposed by the Other. Whereas the typical masculine strategy is to disavow or try to fill in this void, in circumcision it becomes the ineradicable origin-point of the (Jewish) self, linking man to a divinity beyond him. That the Rabbinical approach to the rite invokes symbolic signifiers of femininity – menstrual blood, sexual receptiveness, and so on – suggests an attunement to this feminine relation to castration, releasing

⁴⁷ McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have*, 159.

the logic of feminine subjectivity from an exclusively anatomical referent.⁴⁸

Boyarin's remarks on the diaspora underscore this feminine and potentially universalistic Jewish approach to collectivity:

Diaspora cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from 'mixing' but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing. All cultures, and identities, are constantly being remade. Diaspora Jewish culture, however, lays this process bare, because of the impossibility of a natural association between this people and a particular land, thus the impossibility of seeing Jewish culture as a self-enclosed, bounded phenomenon. (243)

The Rabbinical Jewish culture that took shape after the rise of Christianity (and crucially, before the emergence of the Israeli state), when Jews no longer asserted collective control over a physical territory, while wedded to particular forms of self-representation, nevertheless remained profoundly open to otherness, to the "neighbor."

Referring to the Hebrew Bible's injunction in Leviticus, Paul says to his followers, "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁹ In a famous passage of the Talmud, the Rabbi Hillel offers a similar interpretation of the commandment to an aspiring convert, but with a Jewish twist: "That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Now go and study it."⁵⁰ The universalist injunction "love thy neighbor" is indeed the essence of Judaism, but it is not enough to simply be told this; it must be grounded in study and praxis. The stance towards the Torah advocated here is not about the masculine fantasy of eventual gratification tied to superegoic legal observance, nor a communitarianism predicated on the shoring up of boundaries (the stance that Paul, and Badiou, vehemently

⁴⁸ It must be mentioned that Boyarin's "feminine" interpretation of circumcision could be read in the opposite way. Rather than marking the collective with a feminine, "counter phallic" logic, the rite, which applies only to men, may be understood as an attempt to appropriate and thereby control femininity within a masculinist ideology. The boy is circumcised in order for the Father to assert complete mastery over the process of generation; man compensates for his inability to bear children (a form of lack and therefore a reminder of castration) through a type of ritualized masculine parturition that excludes women and thereby wards off the threat of feminine otherness. Rather than decide in favor of one reading over the other, I would suggest we consider both possibilities as ambivalently encoded within the rite. Circumcision may ultimately represent the moment of division, in which both the masculine denial, and the feminine confrontation of castration are foregrounded. See Eric Silverman, *From Abraham to America: A History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006) for a similar perspective.

⁴⁹ Gal. 5:14

⁵⁰ B.T. Shabbat 31a

critique). Rather, study of Torah is presented as the particular means through which a Jew is able to participate in the universalism of neighbor-love. If the Rabbis were wary of Christianity's anti-Jewish logocentrism, they did not respond by entrenching identitarian difference, but by generating a more complex notion of Jewish subjectivity grounded in a fundamental relation to otherness.

Boyarin's own account of this process lacks a theorization of its universalist dimension. The final chapter of his book, "Answering the Mail: Towards a Radical Jewishness," contains an anemic defense of cultural pluralism, understood as an antidote simultaneously to the erasures enacted by Platonic universalism as well as the racisms perpetuated by ethnic exclusivism. His vision of "A Diasporized (Multicultural) Israel" ultimately rests on an all-embracing Whole: the multicultural, politically correct Nation, able to subsume the foreskinned and foreskinless alike. Convinced that universalism can only mean the coercive production of sameness in the service of a particular, universalized ideology, Boyarin winds up endorsing a sanitized version of the very thing he critiques: a universalist ideology of Humanity, or Tolerance.

Badiou offers a much more robust theory of universalism, which does not involve the idealization of a particular term, but a moment of subtraction from all the terms that circulate in a given situation, leading to the invention of something new and open to all. Within this theorization, the possibility for such a subtraction, for an encounter with the void, is the constitutive condition of universality. Boyarin's analysis of the circumcision rite can therefore be understood, in Badiou's logic, as a ritualized enactment of the moment when universality becomes a potential for the (Jewish) subject.

One may question whether Badiou's exposition of universalism via Paul achieves its purported aims, or merely sneaks a totalitarian anti-difference ideology through the backdoor. The two authors' respective interpretations of Paul present us both options. For Badiou, Paul opened up a previously unforeseen mode of thought and radically inclusive form of belonging; for Boyarin, this universality was predicated on the suppression of Jewish difference.

Regardless of whether his interpretation is entirely correct, Badiou's gloss on the saint seems to more authentically represent Paul's motivations. For Boyarin, Paul is basically a smart political philosopher, who manipulates the theoretical tools at his disposal to craft a universalist ideology applicable to his surroundings. "Paul was a Jew who read the Torah in a particular way, a way prepared for him by his culture and the perceived requirements of his time," writes Boyarin. "The culture was the culture of allegory, and the requirement was to produce Judaism as a universalizable religion."⁵¹ Badiou,

⁵¹ Boyarin, "This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel," 503, note 83.

on the other hand, understands Paul as the subject of a transformative event, who did not rationally and self-consciously manipulate his discourse, but was overcome by an irrepressible, paradigm-shattering truth; his experience forced him to reject the various modalities of thought (which would include Jewish Platonism) that dominated his situation.

Any reader of Paul cannot help but notice something in him that exceeds intellectual prowess: his uncompromising stance, his sudden abandonment of his former life to take up that of an itinerant preacher, his willingness to risk persecution and death from his own kinsmen, not to mention his immense staying power among believers centuries later. Furthermore, Paul himself tells us that he was suddenly overcome by a vision of God that transformed his relation to the world; he preached the gospel not to share his philosophical "wisdom" (a term he explicitly rejects), but because he simply could not contain the glory of revelation. This is the stuff of religious experience, and the phrase "fidelity to an event" feels intuitively more applicable than, say, "ancient cultural critic." Christianity domesticated Paul, argues Badiou, turning him into a revised vector of Greek anti-Judaism, precisely because it incorporated him into the extant ideology and philosophical trend. To integrate Paul into intellectual history, as Boyarin may be accused of doing, is to lose the *sui generis* rupture that his discourse effects.

Yet the question remains whether Badiou's Pauline "indifference" to Judaism, and narrow reading of the circumcision rite, is symptomatic of a failure to engage with the role of embodied representation in a universalist cause. Badiou claims that his universalism does not avow the destruction of particularity but openly relies on difference to "verify" itself. As he puts it, "Only by recognizing in differences their capacity for carrying the universal that comes upon them can the universal itself verify its own reality" (106). Yet he seems to contradict this claim when fails to recognize any place for the particular, historical origins of Paul's movement: "In [Paul's] eyes," he writes approvingly, "the event renders prior markings obsolete, and the new universality bears no privileged relation to the Jewish community" (23).⁵² As Hallward asks, "What kind of despecification does [Badiou's universalism] involve?"⁵³ In this regard, Boyarin's development of the feminine Rabbinical "alternative" can be seen, contrary to his own exposition, as not exactly opposed to Badiou/Paul so much as a dialectical advancement, addressing the universalist collective's necessary grounding in the particularity of subjective life.

Jordan Osserman is a PhD candidate in gender studies and psychoanalysis at University College London. His dissertation examines the significance of male circumcision from a

⁵² Of course, it is possible that Paul's relationship to Judaism is more complex than Badiou (or Boyarin) allow.

⁵³ Hallward, *Badiou*, 28.

psychoanalytic perspective. A summary of his research, entitled "On the Foreskin Question," appeared in Blunderbuss Magazine.