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I will start with a disclaimer: this is not in any way my field of expertise. Before reading this book, I was not familiar with the stories about miracles attributed to Mary. And yet, I was drawn to this book as soon as I read its title. I am very interested in interdisciplinarity, mutuality, crossovers between religions, ways in which one influences the other, and this promised to be an excellent example: Mary and Judaism together with England in the Middle Ages! That is certainly what the book is indeed about. But, unfortunately, it is written primarily for people who are already familiar with the subject. Boyarin is adding her voice into an ongoing discussion among scholars of this particular subject. The rest of us do not seem to be her intended audience. Although we may find the material interesting, this does not make for easy reading. My greatest difficulty was with some of the textual passages: while she does translate the Latin (thank goodness), she does not do the same with the Old (Middle?) English, some of which I was really not able to decipher.

That being said, I was able to understand most of the text and Boyarin’s argument and points. Her study is situated in an England in which feelings towards Jews were ambiguous at best. Her texts are the stories in which Mary performs miracles to save devotees: the Miracles of the Virgin. These stories are found throughout Christian countries in Latin and vernacular versions, and were particularly popular in the 12th to 15th centuries. The versions from England are from the earlier part of this period, especially the 12th century. This is particularly significant because of the Jewish presence/absence: Jews were banished entirely in 1290 and did not reappear until the 1500s. The English texts are also substantively different from their continental counterparts: they portray Mary as particularly concerned with both Jewish and legal issues.

The reason for this is Mary’s own status as a character situated betwixt and between, both Jewish and Christian. Even within the least Jewish-friendly Christian a tradition, Mary is considered to have been wholly Jewish until the Annunciation, the moment when she became pregnant with the Christ, when she converted to Christianity. In other texts that show Jesus as a Jewish itinerant preacher during his own lifetime, Mary is portrayed as one of his followers. Thus she is always both Jewish and Christian;
in fact, she is a bridge between the two. It is due to this hybrid status that she is such an effective intermediary.

This also seems to account for Mary’s relationship with legal concerns. Judaism has always been concerned with the law; the Hebrew word often used for the Bible (the major text) is Torah, literally, the law. Mary understood Jewish laws because that was her heritage.

Some of the Miracle stories bring both elements together. Boyarin spends a chapter discussing an early text in which a Christian, Theophilus, is ruined by a Jewish sorcerer and saved by Mary. The Jew convinces the hapless Christian to sell his soul to the devil. Mary brings about his redemption through her legal expertise in contract law. Her straddling of the religious categories allows her to save a Christian whose downfall was caused by a Jew. Besides being a story of individual sin and redemption, it is also a story about Jewish-Christian relations, with intimations of the anti-Jewish sentiment of the time.

Besides analyzing the written texts, Boyarin also uses visual-textual evidence and, in fact, the 13th century illustration on the book jacket shows Mary holding a legal charter in a confrontation with the devil: she is taking Theophilis’ contract back. This picture is one of ten plates included in the book, and the illustrations are very effective in conveying her points. Perhaps even more effective for amateurs like me! The illustrations also highlight the way in which Mary’s legal expertise is tied to her maternal nature. In “A dialogue concerning the fate of the soul” (Plate 6), the characters involved in the dialogue are all shown with scrolls representing their words. Mary’s scroll flows from her exposed nipple. In Boyarin’s words, “[t]he symbolic power of what emanates from the breast turning into the substance of what is written in the book [of God’s judgment] cannot be overemphasized: Mary’s maternal nature is in this case not separate from her legal and literate power, but is rather crucial to what creates that power” (p. 124).

As I read this, I was struck by the similarity to the Hindu deity Durgā. One of the most widely worshipped Hindu deities, Durgā is a warrior and a mother, both loving and fierce. She is not a legal scholar, but rather a successful warrior. She battles demons on behalf of the other deities and to maintain order in the universe as well as providing personal comfort and intervention to her devotees. Although Mary is primarily a mother and Durgā only a mother in the later texts, yet in both we find the image of a strong, fierce, powerful female who fights demons and goes to extraordinary lengths for the sake of her dependents and devotees.
Mary is in many ways a difficult character in the Christian tradition. So problematic that she was, for all intents and purposes, banished during the Protestant Reformation because the Reformers found her worship too extreme. Although the Catholic and Orthodox traditions maintain categorically that she is NOT a goddess and NOT divine, that is not always obvious. And the reason they have to keep maintaining this so adamantly is because her worship is so very similar to that of goddesses within other religious traditions. She is often named and depicted as the Queen of Heaven and the Bride of Christ. She is the most powerful female in the Christian theological universe and is still venerated by millions of followers throughout the Christian world. Understanding her position, her status, her nature, are key to understanding much of Christian theology and practice throughout its history. All of which makes Boyarin’s an interesting and important study.

The book seems to be extremely well researched, thought-out, and carefully considered; the arguments seem well considered and logical. It introduced me to a body of literature and accompanying visual art, and led me to look for other possible connections, for which I am always grateful.