SEXUALITY AND HOLINESS:
SEMITIC CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH CONCEPTUALIZATIONS
OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

BY

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In the year 344 CE, Aphrahat the Syriac-speaking Persian Christian Sage, writes the following:

I write you my beloved concerning virginity and kadishuta [holiness] because I have heard from a Jewish man who insulted one of the brothers, members of our congregation, by saying to him: You are tame’in [impure] you who do not marry women; but we are kadishin [holy] and better, [we] who procreate and increase progeny in the world. [18.12/841.3-9].

Holiness. Who “owns” it? The Jews or the Christians? Which community better interprets God’s directive and achieves true sanctity? For Aphrahat, in mid-fourth century Mesopotamia, the answer resides in correct sexual behavior. The Jews claim that they are more holy and superior because they procreate, while the Christians are “impure” or unholy, even cursed, because they do not. Aphrahat, a sexually abstinent ihidaya, or “single-minded-one,” a member of his church’s elite, counters that virginity and celibacy are more holy than marriage. Not surprisingly, the Jews whom he criticizes perceive this life-style choice to be contrary to God’s commandment.

1 All citations to Aphrahat are in the following format according to Parisot’s text ["Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes," in Patrologia Syriaca 1:1-2]. Demonstration.chapter/column.line. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2 Although it is difficult to pin point which, if any, “real” Jews Aphrahat refers to, it is evident to me that he counteracts an actual polemical situation. See my article, “A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia,” Journal of Jewish Studies (Spring 1996). For a more extensive discussion see my dissertation, Jewish-Christian Polemics in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation (Stanford, 1993). I assume that Aphrahat writes about rabbinic Jews, however diverse they may have been in the mid-fourth century. The Jewish literature I cite is all rabbinic, for lack of any other sources.

3 Such is the accusation Aphrahat records elsewhere in this demonstration.
to procreate, and hence celibate Christians, according to these Jews, can not receive God’s blessings nor be holy.

The question’s ultimate import lies in divine access. Assuming that there can be only one way to achieve divine approval, how is it that sexuality becomes the litmus test for this discussion? That is to say, why is holiness dependent on the proper sexual behavior? The answer lies in a particularly ascetic interpretation of Exodus 19. Ironically, this exegetical reading is shared by Aphrahat and the early rabbis. While Aphrahat claims that the Jews promote procreation exclusively, the rabbinic texts divulge other, more renunciatory, sexual practices of which Aphrahat shows no knowledge.

Aphrahat and the early rabbi’s exegetical methodologies, biblical proof-texts, and interpretive traditions concerning holiness and sexuality converge rather than diverge. These literary commonalities not only illuminate the relationship between Aphrahat’s Christianity and rabbinic culture, but also highlight the rabbinic ambivalences concerning celibacy. A careful reading of rabbinic texts against Aphrahat’s biblical exegesis uncovers a rabbinic asceticism which actually shares much with Aphrahat’s own renunciatory theology. We will see below that the biblical narrative regarding Moses and the revelation at Sinai lead these biblical exegetes down analogous interpretive paths to a link between sexuality—particularly sexual abstinence—and holiness in a complex relationship.

This article is divided in two parts. The first discusses Aphrahat’s construction of the relationship between holiness and celibacy based on his interpretation of Exodus 19. The second compares Aphrahat’s exegesis of this passage to that of the early rabbis and illuminates the ambivalences apparent in both the rabbis’ and Aphrahat’s conceptualizations of sexuality and holiness.

Holiness and Sexual Abstinence

In Demonstration 6, “Concerning the Bene Kiyama” Aphrahat addresses his fellow ihidaye, other celibate men, who make up the community of the “Sons of the Covenant” or the Bene Kiyama. Here he valorizes their chosen religious vocation, celibacy. In this text Aphrahat moves between the terms betuluta [virginity] and kadishuta [holiness] indiscriminately. Without providing another term for celibacy or sexual abstinence, he presumes an association between kadishuta and celibacy. On one level, kadishuta is used