Sexuality and holiness: Semitic Christian and Jewish conceptualizations of sexual behavior

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

BY

NAOMI KOLTUN-FROMM

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 *Patriologia Syriaca* 1:1-2]. *Demonstrationes* 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.

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*Vigiliae Christianae*, 54, 375-395
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 illustrate 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
as a technical term for sexual abstinence. Yet, this word also connotes holiness—imbuing the celibate practice with sanctity. What is the basis for such an association?

The relationship between sexual abstinence and holiness is presupposed in Aphrahat’s discussion in Demonstration 6 without further explanation. Presumably his readers, Christians and fellow thidaye, already dedicated to the abstinent life, do not need to be convinced of the value of celibacy. Only in a subsequent demonstration, number 18, “Against the Jews concerning Virginity and Kadishuta”, does he provide textual proof of this assertion that holiness equals sexual abstinence. In this demonstration, Aphrahat develops his exegetical argument concerning celibacy in order to counter perceived Jewish propaganda such as I cited above.

Aphrahat’s understanding of sexuality does not change over time, but rather he develops his presentation and argumentation due to a necessary change in agenda. In “Bene Kiyama,” Aphrahat writes to his fellow celibate male Christians in order to encourage them in their practice and to admonish them in the appropriate ways to behave. This demonstration’s central movement focuses on the dangers of “spiritual marriage”—the practice of celibate men and women living together. In many parts of the early Christian world, both East and West, celibate men and women found cohabitation spiritually and economically advantageous. But by the mid-fourth century this practice apparently fell into disrepute for its “unseemliness.” Choosing abstinence is not at issue here, but the proper behavior of those who are already celibate. Yet, in “Virginity and Kadishuta,” Aphrahat composes a strident polemic against the Jews, their false presumption of holiness and misinterpretation of Scripture. Here he divulges his exegetical sources for the assimilation of holiness and celibacy. Moreover, it is in the heat of debate with the Jews that Aphrahat reveals his closeness to rabbinic hermeneutics as well as highlights the tensions concerning sexual abstinence underlying the rabbinic texts on this subject.

In order to understand Aphrahat’s developing exegetical argumentation it is necessary to return to Demonstration 6. This demonstration belongs

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4 See for instance, the Acts of Judas Thomas, where the women particularly are called to kadishuta—holiness/celibacy. It is the very act of these women foregoing their conjugal lives that Judas Thomas advocates.


to his first set of demonstrations, written in the year 337, concerning issues of proper Christian faith and behavior. This particular demonstration addresses the Bene Kyama, or "Sons of the Covenant," a male celibate elite with in the larger Syriac-speaking church. As noted above, this demonstration's first movement focuses on living the segregated as well as celibate life, in order to combat the now abhorrent practice of "spiritual marriage" between continent men and women. Emphasizing the dangers this practice holds for celibate men, Aphrahat catalogs the evil temptations inherent to all women, including virgins and celibates. Interestingly, it is only in this section that Aphrahat even acknowledges the existence of "Daughters of the Covenant"—the rest of this demonstration is clearly addressed to men exclusively. He addresses these virginal women only to encourage them to stay away from the men.

Living alone, or at least in sex segregated habitations, is always preferred. Aphrahat invokes the image of the yoke from Lamentations 3:27 to support his theme:

Thus this counsel is appropriate and just and beautiful that I counsel my soul and also to you my beloved ihidaye [single-ones]: that women we do not marry, and virgins [female] are not given to men. And those who love kadishuta it is right, just and seemly that even under pressure a man remains by himself; and thus it is seemly for him to dwell as it is written in the prophet Jeremiah: "that it is good for a man to carry his yoke in his youth and sit by himself and be silent, because he received upon himself his yoke" [Lam 3.27]. Thus it is seemly, my beloved, for he who carries the Yoke of the Messiah, that he guard His yoke in purity. [6.4/261.2-14].

While it may have been the case that in its earliest incarnation, all members of the Syriac speaking church were celibate, it certainly is not the case in Aphrahat's time. See A. Voobus, Celibacy, a Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church (Stockholm: The Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1952).

Aphrahat uses this term only once in this demonstration. Although Aphrahat acknowledges the existence of female virgins, they are never called holy. Their virginity simply elevates them from the level of "Daughters of Eve" but it does not bring them to holiness, kadishuta. Aphrahat notes: "All those [females] who betroth themselves to the Messiah, from the curse of the Law they distance themselves, and from the principle punishment of the daughters of Eve they are removed." [6.6/269.10-12]. There is no connection here between their female virginity and holiness. Female virgins exist, but they are not called to a holy vocation as the men are. They simply upgrade their status from "daughters of Eve" to virgins. Unlike the Acts of Judas Thomas, which is preoccupied with married and virginal women giving up their roles as wives and mothers in order to change the world order, Aphrahat spends only a few words on female virginity. There is no religious status for celibate woman who have renounced their conjugal beds.
The Lamentations yoke separates the *ihidaya* from the community; he sits in silence, does not marry and remains by himself. The yoke⁹ represents the celibate’s solitary sexual status. Thus it is imperative that the yoke-bearer guard his yoke carefully. How better to achieve this “purity” or separation than to remain far from women? While the yoke embodies the bearer’s celibacy, the symbol is vulnerable if it is not “guarded” or protected. The only way to safe-guard one’s yoke is by living alone. To emphasize the sex-segregated life’s appropriateness, Aphrahat calls it “loving *kadishuta.*” Aphrahat extols those who do not marry and who “remain by themselves.” A man who lives apart from women, “loves *kadishuta*” and by definition is also celibate.

Yet, what is the true import and meaning of *kadishuta* in this and the following passages for Aphrahat? We have seen that it can represent celibacy in a technical sense. But, similar to biblical Hebrew, the Syriac root also has two connotations, “separate” and “make holy.” Plainly both meanings come into play for Aphrahat. In the above passage, *kadishuta*-as-separation is given precedence over *kadishuta*-as-holiness since segregating the men from the women motivates his primary purpose. But without the secondary connotation of “holiness” his argument surely would not carry weight. The dual meanings of this term create an obvious relationship between sanctity/holiness and separation/celibacy. Nevertheless, in this demonstration Aphrahat never explains this relationship, it is simply presumed. Where does this assumption that holiness/separation equals celibacy derive from and what does it mean to Aphrahat? Aphrahat does not answer the “where” directly in this passage but gives a hint to its ultimate import.

To support his argument that living alone and celibate is more appropriate, and equivalent to “loving *kadishuta,*” Aphrahat marshals several prominent biblical characters to his aid. He first calls upon Moses, who was the first to “love *kadishuta.*” Moses, upon being called into service by God, abandons his wife and family, for the scripture states that Joshua, rather than his wife, Zippora, served him in the tent of meeting. Aphrahat writes:

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⁹ It is interesting to note that the yoke image invoked here is a the heavy yoke of a beast of burden, rather than the easy and light yoke of Matthew 11:30. See my article “Yokes of the Holy Ones: The Embodiment of a Christian Vocation,” forthcoming *HTR* 94:2 (April 2001).
From the time that the Holy One revealed himself to him [Moses], even he [Moses] loved *kadishuta*. And from the time that he was sanctified [*ekadash*] his wife did not serve\(^{10}\) him. Rather it is thus written: “that Joshua served Moses from his youth.” [Ex 33.11] \([6.5/261.16-20]\).

Aphrahat implies a connection between God’s revelation to Moses, Moses’ subsequent sanctity and his separation from conjugal relations. He retains no responsibilities towards his wife, nor she to him. Rather Joshua served Moses in place of Zippora, for the Scriptures state that after Moses spoke “face to face” with God, “Joshua served Moses from his youth” [Ex 33.11].

Concerning Joshua’s marital status, this same verse continues: “[Joshua] never quit the tent.” Aphrahat argues, since women were not allowed into the tent of meeting,\(^{11}\) how could Joshua have been served by a wife if he never left the tent? Hence, Joshua too was celibate. Furthermore Aphrahat contends, the priests were required to be celibate, i.e. “remain in their sanctity [kadishuta],” during their days of service.\(^{12}\)

Last but not least Aphrahat brings the examples of three other supposedly celibate prophets, Elijah, Elisha and John the Baptist. Not only is Elijah served by Elisha, and not a woman, but his heart is in heaven—that is, he is fully occupied with his service to God. The birds who feed him on Mt. Carmel mistake him for an angel; and for his proper, cel-

\(^{10}\) Marie-Joseph Pierre notes that *shamesh* [to serve or minister] can also connote having conjugal relations (*Aphraates*, *Les Exposes* 1 [Paris, 1988] 377, n. 39). Although this definition does not appear in the smaller Payne-Smith dictionary (see pp. 585-6), Pierre makes this assumption from Aphrahat’s usage in Demonstration 18. There he writes: “If [Moses] served a wife, he would not be able to serve the majesty of his Lord” \([18.4/825.13-15]\). The implication being that the service of one is exclusive of the other. The ministry to a wife includes conjugal duties which take time away from the divine service.

\(^{11}\) It is not clear to me what brings Aphrahat to this conclusion. Pierre, *Aphraates*, 1:377, cites Ex 38:8: “He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.”

\(^{12}\) There is no such requirement recorded in the Bible. While the priests are restricted in whom they can marry, they are not otherwise restricted in sexual practices. See Lev 21.6-8. There, in order to be holy, the priests are instructed to marry only virginal women. Yet, as Eliezer Diamond has noted, even the rabbis expand on this notion of *kedushah* [holiness]. The rabbis allow for restrictions on their own marriage patterns which are not outlined in the Bible. In *Lev Rab* 24.6 the rabbis claim that he who builds a fence around sexual immorality finds *kedushah* (*Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* [Oxford, forthcoming] 116). Perhaps Aphrahat builds on this notion that what applies to priests can be applied to others.
bate service, Elijah is taken alive to heaven in the fiery chariot. Elisha, too, is ministered to by his servant, even though he lived in the Shunamit's home. Aphrahat explains:

Thus said the Shulamit\(^{13}\) woman: “That a holy prophet of God is he who passes by us regularly. Thus it is proper for his holiness [ kadishuta ] that we build him a second story room for his use” [ 2 Kings 4:9-10 ]. And what served Elisha in this room? Only a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. [ 6.5/264. 15-22 ].

Aphrahat implies from this verse that Elisha lives alone in this room, for he has all he needs there.\(^{14}\) Any transactions he makes with the woman are through his servant, Gehazi, as the subsequent verses indicate. Yet Aphrahat ( or his source )\(^{15}\) amends the citation of 2 Kings 9-10. Like the massoretic text, the Peshitta reads: “A holy prophet [ MT: man ] of God is he and he passes by us regularly. We will fashion a small upper room, and we will put there a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp.” There is no mention of Elisha's kadishuta in either the massoretic text nor the Peshitta. Clearly for Aphrahat the whole purpose of building the addition is to provide Elisha with a segregated living space where he can live in kadishuta. Hence, Aphrahat ( or his source ) puts this sentiment into the words of the Shunamit. Finally, after these prophetic examples are explained, Aphrahat turns to New Testament images. John the Baptist guards his virginity in virtue though he dwells among the people and thus receives the spirit of Elijah. Paul and Barnabas, while traveling among the peoples, also choose to remain bachelors.

Without making the connection explicit, Aphrahat infers that all of these men who served God, lived continent lives separate from women. The kadishuta that Moses “loves” is the segregated life—which points to the celibate life. Yet, because of kadishuta’s dual connotations, the separated and necessarily sexually abstinent life is also the holy life. The practice of celibacy, which is a product of separation, creates holiness as well—though the source of this holiness remains ambiguous. Does the holiness derive

\(^{13}\) Aphrahat refers to her as the Shulamit, as does the Peshitta. This may just be a scribal error—an elision with the female character in Song of Songs. Lev Rab 24.6 also implies that Elisha is called holy because he does not even look at the Shunamit woman, let alone talk to her.

\(^{14}\) Is this also a description of the proper ihidayya’s quarters?

\(^{15}\) Since we do not know Aphrahat’s sources, texts or teachers, it is difficult to trace such variations. It is always possible that the variations are unique to Aphrahat. See J. R. Owens, The Genesis and Exodus Citations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage ( Leiden, 1983 ).
from being in God's service or from the men's sexual status or both? While it appears that these men's celibate lives somehow prepare them for holiness they also seem to attain holiness through their service to God. In Aphrahat's understanding, Elisha is called holy by the Shunamit woman both because he is the servant of God and because he is presumed celibate. Hence a connection is established between the holy service to God and sexual abstinence.

Yet celibacy remains derivative, it is a side effect. While one chooses abstinence in order to better serve God, it is a means to an end. Holiness is affected through abstinence, but the behavior in itself is not explicitly equated to holiness through textual support in this demonstration. One acquires holiness primarily through one's devotion to God, yet celibacy is a requirement for the job. Moses "loves kadishuta" because it connotes his chosen life style, but also because it is a product of his closeness to the Holy-One.

The direct association between abstinence and holiness, through a biblical prooftext, is only made in Demonstration 18, "Against the Jews Concerning Virginity and Kadishuta." As we will see there, Aphrahat is better grounded in scriptural prooftexts when discussing the issue in the context of his anti-Jewish polemic. He gives prominence to kadishuta-as-holiness because his polemic hinges on his understanding of holiness as specific sexual behavior. By contrast in Demonstration 6, Aphrahat elevates kadishuta-as-separation in order to condemn the practice of spiritual marriage.

Between the years 337 and 345 Aphrahat composes 23 demonstrations. He writes his first 10 essays primarily for his fellow ihidaye as a guide to proper Christian faith and practice for the celibate. Seven years later, however, Aphrahat finds himself embroiled in a lengthy polemic against the Jews.16 Although directed at the same audience, Aphrahat writes this time to prepare his readers to debate their Jewish antagonists in other forums. In this context Aphrahat must support textually many of the assumptions he leaves unexplained in his earlier essays. His discussion of virginity and kadishuta provides an excellent example. At the same time, while defending virginity as a legitimate religious practice, he tones down his complete valorization of the practice. It is here, as well, that Aphrahat displays, perhaps unconsciously, his own ambivalences concerning virginity, procreation and holiness.

16 I have discussed the historical context of this polemic elsewhere. See note 2 above.
In “Virginity and Kadishuta,” unlike in “Bene Kiyama,” Aphrahat connects kadishuta-as-holiness and sexual abstinence explicitly through his interpretation of Ex 19.10 and 15. He writes:

And concerning virginity and kadishuta I will persuade you that even in that nation [Israel] they [virginity and kadishuta/holiness] were more loved and preferred before God . . . [for] Israel was not able to receive the holy text and the living words that the Holy One spoke to Moses on the mountain until he had sanctified them17 [kadshe] the people for three days. And only then the Holy One spoke to them. For He said to Moses: “Go down to the people and sanctify [kadesh] them for three days” [Ex 19.10]. And this is how Moses explained it to them: “do not go near a woman” [Ex 19.15]. And when they were sanctified [etkadashu] these three days, then on the third day God revealed himself . . .” [18.4/824.25-27; 825.15-23].

At the moment before revelation, God instructs Moses to sanctify/separate [kadesh] the people for three days, yet in Moses’ repetition of the instructions to the people he adds “and do not go near a woman” to “sanctify/separate yourselves.” It is in this verse that the connection between sexual abstinence and kadishuta is established. God says, kadesh enun “sanctify/separate them;” Moses explains, “sanctify yourselves by restraining from sexual intercourse.” In order to receive God’s revelation the people Israel must be sanctified/separated for three days. To achieve sanctity/separation they must restrain themselves from sexual relations. Aphrahat creates a syllogism: Kadishuta connotes separation—separation translates into sexual abstinence—hence kadishuta equals sexual abstinence. Aphrahat clearly promotes kadishuta-as-holiness in this equation such that it becomes holiness equals sexual abstinence. More emphatically than he states in Demonstration 6, Aphrahat here infers that sexual abstinence is holiness. No longer just a means to an end, it is the ultimate goal in itself. The technical use of kadishuta-as-celibacy presumed in Demonstration 6 is now explained.

Yet, Aphrahat follows this argument to one logical conclusion. If the people Israel needed to be celibate for three days in order to receive God’s word—to stand in God’s presence just once—how much more so someone who wishes to be in God’s presence continuously. Aphrahat supports this assertion by returning to the example of Moses, whom God called upon regularly. How then could he have had time for his conjugal duties? Aphrahat explains:

17 Aphrahat refers to Israel or the People of Israel in the singular, while I have translated his usage into the plural for better compatibility in English.
For Moses was speaking and God answered him with a voice. Israel stood on that day in terror, fear and trembling. They fell on their faces, for they were unable to bear it. And they said to Moses “Let not God speak with us so, that we may not die” [Ex 20:19]. O hard-hearted one who is vexed by these things and stumbles! If the people of Israel, with whom God spoke only one hour, were unable to hear the voice of God until they had sanctified themselves three days, even though they did not go up the mountain and did not go into the heavy cloud; how then could Moses, the man, the prophet, the enlightened eye of all the people, who stood all the time before God, and spoke with him mouth to mouth, how was it possible that he be living in the married state?! [18.5/828.19-829.8].

Aphrahat extrapolates from the narrative that if Israel needed three days of sanctity for one audience with God, than how much more so Moses, the greatest of prophets, who was constantly “on call.” We have already seen the argument that Moses refrained from his conjugal duties when designated to serve God. But in Demonstration 6 his celibacy is understood more as a side-effect of the divine appointment. Here, the divine call is to celibacy. God commands the people to make themselves holy through sexual abstinence. The very act of sexual restraint, rather than the audience with God, confers holiness upon them. Yet, Aphrahat understands this command not as a temporary status—but as a potentially permanent one as gleaned from Moses’ example. If Moses must stand before God at all times—he must be “holy,” i.e. celibate, at all times. Moses’ holiness derives from his sexual status. Furthermore, Aphrahat does not stop with Moses, but rather applies the model to his own life style. Aphrahat explains,

And if with Israel, that had sanctified itself for only three days, God spoke, how much better and desirable are those who all their days are holy, alert, prepared and standing before God. Should not God all the more love them and his spirit dwell among them? [18.5/829.8-14].

Aphrahat intimates that God did not command these three days of abstinence as a one time occurrence, but that through this example it is evident that God prefers abstinence. God loves those who make themselves holy, and one becomes holy through sexual abstinence. The emphasis is no longer on deriving holiness from serving the Holy One, but from sexual abstinence itself. Furthermore, by equating celibacy to holiness, Aphrahat establishes its value over its opposite: procreation. It is clear from this demonstration’s introduction and conclusion that the proper understanding of holiness and sexuality greatly preoccupies Aphrahat.

As noted above, Aphrahat contends that the Jews accuse the Christians of impurity because they do not procreate, while the Jews are “holy and better” because they do. Through a close reading of Exodus 19 Aphrahat
answers this accusation: in actuality God favors celibacy over procreation. The child-bearing Jews can not make an exclusive claim on *kadishuta*, if *kadishuta* equals celibacy. Furthermore, Aphrahat suggests that choosingess is intimately connected to holiness as well. God’s spirit dwells within the properly sanctified people. The people are holy only when they have sanctified themselves through sexual restraint. Hence God prefers to dwell among the celibate. Without directly condemning the Jews as the Jews supposedly reprove the Christians, Aphrahat implies that the Jews have neither an exclusive claim to chosenness nor divine blessing.

In Demonstration 18, Aphrahat attempts to counter the Jewish argument that the Christians are *tame'in* [impure] and not *kadishin* [holy]. Yet, he never condemns the Jews outright for their sexual practices; nor does he ever denounce Christian marriage. Rather, he establishes that virginity and celibacy are legitimate forms of religious expression and suggests that they are preferable to God. He explains,

> Concerning marriage that God gave to the world, far be it for us to censure something which he decreed for us. For thus it is written: “that God saw all that he had made and it was very good” [Gen 1:31]. Nevertheless, there are things which are better than others. God created the heavens and the earth and they are very good, but the heavens are better than the earth. And [God] created the darkness and the light and this is very good, but the light is better than the darkness. And [God] created the night and the day and this is very good, but the day is better than the night. And [God] created the sun and the moon and this is very good, but the sun is better than the moon. And [God] created the stars of the heaven and this is very good, but one star’s light is brighter than another’s. And [God] created Adam and Eve and this is very good, but Adam is better than Eve. And [God] created marriage—namely procreation—and this is very good, but virginity is better than it. [18.8/836.20-837.11].

Here Aphrahat outlines a hierarchy of creation. Everything that God made for the world is good, but some things are more worthy than others. The heavens, the sun, light, day and Adam are all better than their counterparts. Virginity and marriage fall into the same categorization. Both are God’s creations, but one is preferable to the other. Aphrahat does not even address the issue of holiness here, but rather makes room for both marriage and celibacy, while at the same time promoting one over the other. Despite the Syriac-speaking church’s early reputation for requiring celibacy before baptism, Aphrahat is unwilling to condemn marriage completely.¹⁸

¹⁸ Vööbus, “Celibacy.”
While valiantly attempting to defend virginity against the Jews, he subverts his own reasoning that God dwells only among the celibate.

In Demonstration 18, Aphrahat finds it unnecessary to dispute his Jewish opponents line by line. Rather he undermines their contentions with more subtle arguments. He demotes the Jewish claims to a secondary level while promoting his own claims as superior. Yet, in Demonstration 6, Aphrahat makes a strong case for celibacy as the only avenue to holiness. Writing strictly for a celibate audience, there is no question concerning its value and import. Without true or complete holiness, which celibacy provides, the body cannot become the haiklo, the temple, in which the Holy Spirit resides.  

For instance, Aphrahat writes:

> Let us prepare our hayklin [temples] for the Spirit of the Messiah…. He who guards the Spirit of the Messiah in purity, when he goes before the Messiah, thus he will say to him: “the body in which I go before you, and which I renewed in the waters of baptism, I have guarded in kadishuta.” [6.14/292.19-20; 293.24-296.3].

Aphrahat places great importance on the sanctity of the celibate body—and that it should be guarded, namely, kept far from all sexual temptations. He notes further, that the body that is not kept holy can be invaded by Satan and prevented from participating in the final resurrection. Hence his admonitions to stay away from all women, whom Satan often uses to tempt men. Aphrahat closes this demonstration with the following statement:

> These things I have written as a witness to my soul and to yours my beloved. Love virginity, a heavenly portion, communion with the watchers of heaven. There is nothing comparable to it. And it is in these sorts of people that the Messiah resides. [6.19/309.21-26].

Aphrahat implies here that the Messiah only resides in pure temples, namely celibate bodies. These statements may be residual from an earlier time when all or most of the Syriac-speaking church was celibate. Yet, it is clear from Aphrahat’s polemical demonstrations that he cannot always stand by such strong statements. In contrast, Aphrahat’s subtleties in Demonstration 18 may reveal the somewhat ambiguous or tenuous place the lay Christian

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19 See the paper by Stephanie Skoyles, “Aphrahat the Sage: A Study of his Anthropology,” presented at the Syriac Symposium III: The Aramaic Heritage of Syria (June 1999, Notre Dame, Indiana). The baptized body is the temple in which God dwells. Yet, this temple must be guarded by good deeds, proper words and appropriate offerings, namely prayer.
community occupied between the celibate church elite and the surrounding procreative communities.

Relation to Rabbinic traditions

Yet, in Aphrahat’s attempt to explain celibacy and kadishuta, he reveals his literary traditions’ closeness to rabbinic exegetical methodologies and interpretations. For instance, Aphrahat’s dependency on Moses and Exodus 19 in both demonstrations is unusual for a fourth-century Christian. Most early anti-Jewish Christian polemicists base their arguments on Abraham, partially because he is pre-Sinaïtic and hence more universal, and partially because Moses is glorified by the Jews due to his strong association with Sinai and the giving of the Law.20 What is all the more striking, therefore, about Aphrahat’s interpretation of Moses is not only this choice of role model, but its closeness to the rabbinic understanding of Moses. The very same interpretation that Aphrahat uses to counter what he perceives to be Jewish disputation is also found in the rabbinic texts. While it can be proven that Aphrahat correctly assesses, and provocatively counters other rabbinic argumentation promoting procreation,21 he appears unaware that at the same time he shares his understanding of sexual abstinence and holiness with the rabbis.

For these fourth-century Semitic Jewish and Christian leaders, the prototypical celibate biblical personage is Moses,22 who when called to serve God separates from his wife. The service of a prophet to God requires total absorption: no distractions, no prior nor ancillary commitments, certainly no marriage and family. The rabbinic literature carries several different traditions concerning Moses’ sexual abstinence. While this tradition is found in both Aphrahat and the rabbis, Philo makes a similar assumption several centuries earlier and geographical spheres distant. He writes:

But, in the first place, before assuming that office [of priest], it was necessary for him [Moses] to purify not only his soul but also his body, so that it should not be connected with or defiled by any passion, but should be pure from

20 See for example Paul in Romans 4; Justin Martyr, Dialogue 23; Clement, Stromateis 5.1. It must be noted that many anti-Greek apologists (including Justin, Clement and Tatian) depend heavily on Moses as the prototypical wise man and lawgiver who precedes and outshines all Greek and Hellenistic heroes. Yet in their anti-Jewish polemic they switch to Abraham.

21 See Koltun, Jewish-Christian Polemics, ch. 3.

22 The tradition is also known to Ephrem, see In Ex. (CSO 153) 113.
everything which is of a mortal nature, from all meat and drink, and from
any connection with women. And this last thing, indeed, he had despised for
a long time, almost from the moment when he began to prophesy and to
feel divine inspiration, thinking that it was proper that he should at all times
be ready to give his whole attention to God's commands.23

Philo, when describing Moses' greatness, often depicts him in light of Greek
philosophical mores. Moses is well-educated, civilized, athletic, and asceti-
cally restrained. He is able to control or even eliminate his passions in
order to properly prepare himself to receive God's word. He is leader,
priest and prophet. Both Aphrahat and the rabbinic texts seem to build
on this first-century idea, emphasizing Moses' sexual abstinence due to his
special prophetic calling—his constant, almost physical interaction and close-
ness to God. Despite the possibility that Aphrahat and the rabbis could
have developed their subsequent midrashim separately from Philo, or some
related source, the similarities between the two passages discussed below
are too striking to discount interdependence of some sort.

Returning to the Moses passage explored earlier (Dem. 18.5/828.19-
829.8), Aphrahat extrapolates Moses' celibate behavior from Exodus 19-
20, where Moses commands the people to abstain from sexual contact for
three days before hearing God's words. As explained above, Aphrahat
deduces that if the people, who were to remain at the foot of the moun-
tain, in order to hear God's word (and even then were unable to do so),
had to sanctify themselves through sexual abstinence, Moses all the more
so should remain celibate at all times since he stood before God each and
every day at the top of the mountain, in the heavy clouds.

The rabbis make a similar deduction. Acting on God's original com-
mand to the people—to sanctify themselves—Moses orders the people to
restrain from sexual contact. The rabbis' Moses, like Aphrahat's, then con-
cludes that if the people need to be sexually abstinent in order to stand
before God for one hour, Moses, who is called before God without any
prior notice, should be continent all the time. This midrash appears sev-
eral times in the rabbinic literature with slight variations. I cite from the
Abot de Rabbi Natan:

This is one of the things that Moses did on his own and his opinion matched
the opinion of God... He separated from his wife, and his opinion agreed
with the opinion of God. How so? [Moses] said, "What if Israel, who are

of Philo (Peabody, MA, 1993) 497.
not sanctified except for the hour and are not called but in order to receive upon themselves the ten commandments from Sinai (for the Holy Blessed One, said to me, ‘go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow’); and I, who am called to this every day at every hour and I do not know when God will speak with me—in the morning or in the night—isn’t it more important for me to separate from my wife?” And his opinion agreed with the opinion of God . . . [however] R. Yehudah ben Batira said . . . as it is said [Num 12.8]: “Mouth to mouth I will speak to him,” mouth to mouth I said to him separate from your wife’ and he separated . . . and his opinion agreed with the opinion of God. 24 [Abot de Rabbi Natan 2:3].

In the biblical text [Exodus 19.14-15] Moses, after receiving God’s command to have the people sanctify themselves, adds to God’s instructions when he tells the people to refrain from sexual intercourse as well. The midrashic interpretations, like Aphrahat’s, simply continue Moses’ train of thought. If Moses understands that it is imperative for the people to be abstinent before their one interview with God, all the more so Moses, who is in constant contact with God.

While the theme of Moses’ abstinence, because of his divine calling, can be traced back to Philo, the exegetical structure, language and textual citations in the rabbinic passage and Aphrahat’s demonstration strongly resemble each other and reach beyond Philo. Although Philo may be aware of a tradition concerning Moses’ celibacy, his retelling does not directly reflect this particular biblical interpretation, for he is not dependent on an extended exegesis of Exodus 19. Philo’s observation simply establishes this tradition’s antiquity.

Returning to the rabbinic and Aphrahatian texts, there are two passages in particular that stand out in their similarities. The first statement, based on the biblical narrative in Exodus 19, stresses that the people would have only a “one hour” interview with God, while Moses was constantly “on call.” Aphrahat asks, “If the people of Israel, with whom God spoke only one hour, were unable to hear the voice of God until they had sanctified themselves three days . . . [how] then could Moses, the man, the prophet, the enlightened eye of all the people, who stood all the time before God?”

The rabbis also compare Israel, “who are not sanctified except for the hour”

24 This text was chosen for its wording, while it is not provably a tannaitic source, it is seemingly earlier than its amoraic parallels and probably still contains or continues tannaitic traditions. This midrash also appears twice in Ex Rab 19.3, 47.3, bShab 87a and bYev 62a with slight variations. The tradition of Moses’ celibacy appears in several other places, including bPes 87a-b, Targum Jonathan to Hosea on verse 1:10 and Sifre on Num 99.
to Moses who is called to this duty “every day at every hour and [does] not know when God will speak with [him]—in the morning or in the night.” The biblical text does not say how long Israel’s interview would be, but both the rabbis and Aphrahat claim that God spoke to them for one hour (or moment in time).

In the second parallel text the writers emphasize that God spoke to Moses *mouth to mouth*. This phrase is found in Numbers 12:8 and is quoted in part in our rabbinic passage: “mouth to mouth I will speak to him.” Aphrahat insists that because God spoke to Moses *mouth to mouth*, up close and in person, Moses could not have continued to be actively married. One rabbi cites the verse to suggest that God commanded Moses to be celibate. Nevertheless, both Aphrahat and the rabbis agree that one who speaks “mouth to mouth” with God cannot be concerned with earthly matters such as marriage and children. This parallel use of biblical citations and cognate word patterns, along with similar interpretations to support the original thesis of Moses’ abstinence once he was called to serve God shows that these texts share more than the earlier Philonic tradition. These textual correspondences attest to some sort of cross fertilization, though it is difficult to say how, when or in which direction.

Moreover, Aphrahat’s contends not only that Moses was celibate after the divine call, but that celibacy itself is called holiness and is greatly valued by God. As noted above he makes this association between sexual abstinence and holiness based on his reading of Exodus 19.10 and 15. This reading is not unique to Aphrahat but can be found in an early rabbinic text as well. The *Mekilla*, exegeting on verse 15 states:

> And [Moses] spoke to the people—be ready, etc. [Ex 19.15]. But we did not hear that God said “separate/abstain from the woman.” Rather “be ready” [v.15] and “and be ready” [v.11]. [They] are a *gezerah shava* [an analogy]. “Be ready” [v.15] here signifies “separate/abstain from the woman” therefore “and be ready” [v.11] there [also] signifies “separate/abstain from the woman.”

Rabbi says from its own context it can be proven. [God said] “go to the people and sanctify them [*kidashtem*] today and tomorrow” [v.10]. If [the command] concerned bathing only they should have bathed on the 5th [day] and they would have been [ritually] pure [*tahor*] by the evening sun. But why does the text say “Go to the people and sanctify today and tomorrow?” [v.10]. To indicate that God said to Moses, “separate/abstain from the woman.” [*Mekilla* Yitro Bahodesh 3].

In this passage the rabbis make a similar association between the verses of Exodus 19 as does Aphrahat. The “be ready” of God’s commandment in v.11 is translated in v.15 to “separate/abstain from the woman.” The
rabbis imagine that God actually explains to Moses on the mountain that “to be ready” means “to abstain from the woman.” The connection is made by a *gezera shava*, an analogy between the two verses—a methodological move similar to Aphrahat's. If God intended “be ready” to mean “refrain from sexual intercourse” as stated by Moses in v.15, then obviously God meant the same in verse 11. Yet, Aphrahat makes a move not directly reflected in the rabbinic text. His exegetical analogy is between “sancify them” and “abstain from women” rather than “be ready” and “abstain from women.” Thus Aphrahat can conclude that sexual abstinence equals holiness. The issue of sanctity only appears by implication in the second part of this tannaitic midrash. Rabbi [Judah the Prince] notes that the first analogy is not necessary, but can be understood from verse 10 which reads “sanctify them today and tomorrow.” If the Israelites had only needed to be ritually purified for the revelatory event, then bathing [after sexual intercourse] should have been enough, but since the text commands bathing and “sancify[ing] today and tomorrow” the implication must be for total sexual abstinence, as “don’t go near a woman” indicates. Furthermore, because the command in v.10 is to “sancify,” not just to purify, sexual restraint takes on an element of holiness.

It is important to note that the rabbis, in describing the text, do not quote the biblical text exactly, but translate the biblical Hebrew phrase “do not go near the woman” [*al tigshu el ha-isha*] as “to separate/abstain” [*lifrashi*] from the woman. The root word *parash* takes on the connotation of separation as well as sexual abstinence in the rabbinic texts. Nevertheless, the connection between sexual abstinence and holiness is also suggested here by the rabbis. In order to receive God's word, the people must prepare themselves, i.e. they must make themselves holy. One sanctifies oneself through sexual abstinence. Yet, it is important to note that these interpreters do not act upon their exegesis in the same way that Aphrahat does. The authors of this text, an early tannaitic one, perhaps are not aware of the avenues this line of thought might produce in the future or are simply unwilling or uninterested in pursuing the issue. Alternatively,

25 Exodus 19.14-15 reads: So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, “Be ready by the third day, do not go near a woman.”

26 See further connections between sexual restraint and holiness as discussed in Diamond, *Fasting*, 117-118.

they understand the commandment simply to pertain to that particular historical moment and no other.

While the rabbis do not seem to draw any practical conclusions from this tannaitic exegesis concerning the people’s sanctity and their own situation, Aphrahat, as we have seen, applies the interpretation to everyday Christian life:

And if with Israel, that had sanctified itself for only three days, God spoke, how much better and desirable are those who all their days are holy, alert, prepared and standing before God. Should not God all the more love them and his spirit dwell among them . . . ? [18.5/829.8-14].

God speaks to those who are sanctified—those who prepare themselves through sexual abstinence and become holy receptacles for God’s spirit. While God may have commanded the Israelites only once to prepare themselves for holiness through sexual restraint, because their revelation was a one-time occurrence, Aphrahat clearly sees broader ramifications. What if everyone, or a group of people, voluntarily choose holiness all the time? Would not God recognize their special status and reward them with the indwelling of God’s spirit among them? Hence the celibate life takes one to a higher spiritual plane than marriage.

While the rabbis do not draw the same conclusions from these passages, these stories concerning Moses’ celibacy and the association of sexual abstinence with revelation and holiness reflect a tension in rabbinic culture. On the one hand, the rabbis permit continence for prophets only, on the other, they reveal an ambivalence towards sexuality that suggests an unstated admiration for Moses’ prerogative to follow a celibate life. Steven D. Fraade has demonstrated that Jewish asceticism, originating in the pre-rabbinic period, continued to influence, and perhaps cause these tensions among the rabbis while they attempted to construct a rabbinic “way of life.”

The rabbis perceive of their vocation, the study of Torah, as deriving from God’s original revelation. What then should be expected of them as the guardians of God’s word? Should they imitate Moses and totally submit themselves to their calling (and hence follow his example to celibacy?) or fulfill the commandments written within the Torah, the first of which is to procreate?

28 Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects,” 253-288. See Also G. Vermes who notes that there was a long tradition of prophethood and celibacy in the Jewish literature (Jesus the Jew [London, 1973] 99). D. Biale also concludes that the rabbis considered Moses to be an exception to the rule (Eros and the Jews [New York, 1992] 34).
This tension is reflected in the midrash discussed above. While the rabbinic passage begins with the statement that Moses acted on his own, the rabbis cite Numbers 12.8 in an addendum, perhaps questioning whether Moses acted voluntarily or at God’s command. Yehudah ben Batira adds: “mouth to mouth I will speak to him,’ [Num 12.8] mouth to mouth I said to him separate from your wife,” indicating at least that some rabbis believed that God had commanded Moses to leave his family. The other authors of this passage note that Moses’ abstinence was not a direct divine command, but an action taken by his own reasoning, which only afterwards God approves. This disagreement illuminates the ambivalence the rabbis feel toward celibacy. If God commands the people to procreate, how could God also approve of Moses’ sexual abstinence? Perhaps there is something peculiar about Moses situation? The answer is found in Exodus 19. If for an hour audience the people require sexual abstinence, so too Moses who was constantly in God’s service. Yet, a tension remains as to the value of this move. Was it voluntary or did God demand it? The question stands unanswered. Perhaps the implications of certain potential answers were too unsettling. If God indeed commands Moses, the prototypical rabbi and rabbinic hero to be celibate, should not the rabbis, Moses’ disciples, follow his example? Promoting celibacy however would be detrimental to the survival of the Jewish people and go against God’s commandment to procreate. If the Jewish people died out, what would happen to God’s promises of a future redemption? Hence it appears that Yehuda Ben Batira’s opinion remains in the minority. Yet as a minority opinion, it illuminates the rabbi’s uncertainty concerning the ultimate value of procreation. Surely the examples set by others like Aphrahat were both attractive and repulsive to the rabbinic community. Furthermore, Aphrahat’s dependency on similar literary traditions must have been unsettling.

While most rabbis are not able to make the exegetical leap of faith following Aphrahat,29 they compromise by emulating Moses in other ways. Nevertheless, their emulation contains an important nuance: following his procreative pattern, before indulging in his celibate pattern. Moses may

29 The only recorded example to the contrary is Ben Azzai. See tYe 8 and Gen Rab 34.14. This is the Gen Rab text: “Ben Azzai taught: anyone who refrains from procreation it is as if he spilt blood and diminishes the image [of God]. And Rabbi Eliezer said to him [Ben Azzai], ‘pleasant are the words when they come out of the mouths of those who do so [procreate]. There are those that pontificate and those that do, Ben Azzai pontificates but does not do’ [he was a bachelor]. Ben Azzai answered him, ‘because my soul yearns for Torah, the world will be established by others.’”
have separated from his wife—but he at least had a wife, Zippora, who produced two sons from their conjugal union. Mishnah Yevamot 7.6 discusses the issues of procreation and children. The mishnah states: "A man shall not do away with procreation, unless he already has children. Shammai adds that he should have two male children; Hillel says one male, one female. Tosephta Yevamot 8.2-3, elaborating on Shammai's qualification, reasons that because Moses had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, so should the requirement be for all Jewish men. Moses certainly is not the only biblical character with two sons, but it is Moses that the rabbis most wish to emulate. After having fulfilled his duties as a father, Moses is free to pursue higher goals—such as his relationship with God. Similarly, the rabbis allow themselves the luxury of spending most of their lives studying God's word, following in Moses's footsteps, the "proto" rabbi, after they have produced at least two children. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has argued that this mishnaic ruling should be seen as a maximum number as opposed to a minimum. One needed to produce only two children, not two or more children.30

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that the rabbis and Aphrahat share exegetical traditions concerning Moses' celibacy and the association between sexual restraint and holiness. While it is difficult to determine the sources of these traditions, one can trace their developments in our texts in parallel trajectories. On the rabbinic side, these traditions appear in early, mostly tannaitic works.31 Perhaps Aphrahat also studied similar exegetical texts, by

30 H. Eilberg Schwartz, God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism (Boston, 1994) 216. It is interesting to note, that despite minority dissension, the mishnah rules that the commandment to procreate is incumbent upon men only. Women are obviously necessary for this act, but the commandment is not theirs. This seemingly forced exclusion may be an indication that some Jewish men may have chosen to dedicate themselves to the study of God's Torah, to the exclusion of family and children. Therefore, the rabbis felt compelled to emphasize the seriousness of the commandment by this exclusion. In other words, procreation was a grave matter, commanded by God and therefore a spiritual as well as physical matter, and should not be left to the whims of human nature.

31 See note 24 above on the Abot de Rabbi Natan. See also Daniel Boyarin (Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993]), who argues that the Palestinian rabbis privileged ascetic behaviors more readily than the Babylonian rabbis did.
his time disassociated with the early rabbis. If this is so, what we see in Aphrahat is the potential paths later rabbinic writers did not follow. Clearly, Aphrahat’s Christian orientation colored his approach to text and the focus of his discussions. Those passages which most appealed to him may have been uninteresting to his contemporaries in the rabbinic academies. Yet, what Aphrahat reveals most clearly for rabbinic studies is the continuing struggle of rabbinic culture with sexual abstinence’s appeals and offenses. Finally, Aphrahat betrays an underlying tension within his own writings concerning the place of marriage in a culture that historically favored celibacy. This ambivalence is most plainly illustrated in Aphrahat’s attempts to defend his life-style against the accusations of the Jews—accusations that resonated loudly in his own Christian community.

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