Janet Soskice, *The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Ladies Adventurers Discovered the Hidden Gospels*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

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In 1892, Agnes Smith Lewis and her twin sister Margaret Dunlop Gibson discovered in the Saint Catherine Monastery a palimpsest of what would become known as the "Lewis Codex" or "Syrus Sinaiticus." This Syriac version of the Gospels antedates the Peshitta and is related to the lost Old Syriac version of the Four Gospels. Janet Soskice's *The Sisters of Sinai* is the history of this discovery, as well as a learned biography of the twin sisters. A scholar of the history of religions and professor at Cambridge University, Soskice succeeds with brio in giving her readers both a lively description of the late Victorian age and a precise narrative of the events that led to the different editions and translations of the Sinai Palimpsest from its discovery to the 1930s.

Born in Irvine, Scotland, in 1843, the twins remained all their life devout believers, participating in charities and Sunday School, and funding in 1899 the establishment of Westminster College, the first Presbyterian college in Cambridge. Their intellectual vivacity had been aroused since their early youth by eclectic figures such as William Robertson Smith, a friend of Thomas de Quincey who held a parish in Irvine, and was a close friend of the family. Robertson Smith would become professor at Cambridge from 1883 to 1894 after he was tried and nearly excommunicated by his coreligionists for endorsing Biblical criticism (versus the "Verbal Inspiration" theory) in his preaching and in articles he wrote for the ninth edition of the *British Encyclopaedia*. At a time when women in England were not allowed to work, vote, or get a degree, the Smith sisters had found happiness in their misery. As their mother had died shortly after giving birth, they were raised by their widowed father, John Smith, as if they had been sons: they were taught gymnastics and given a higher education focusing on religion (they were Presbyterian Calvinists belonging to the Free Church of Scotland) as well as foreign languages. The mastery of any language would bring as a recompense a trip to a country where it was spoken, therefore instilling in the twins from an early age on a passion for travel that would never leave them.

At the death of their father in 1866, the Smith sisters had inherited a great amount of wealth. As they had no relatives closer than far-away America, "they enjoyed a freedom which was rare in England at that time, and almost unheard of in Scotland," as Whigham Price puts it in his biography of the sisters (see A. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Castlebrae*, Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1985). With the agreement of William Robertson Smith, they decided to go to Egypt and the Holy Land after eighteen months in mourning. During this trip which first took them to Cyprus, they had their first encounter with Orthodoxy for which Agnes seems to have had some contempt. Soskice writes, "watching the priests incensing the icons at the Monastery of Kykkos, it seemed a scene from the Middle Ages, with traditions and repetitious prayers that were in danger of making the Word of God of no effect," Soskice writes, quoting from Agnes Smith's travelogue 'Through Cyprus', "watching the priests incensing the icons at the Monastery of Kykkos, it seemed a scene from the Middle Ages, with traditions and repetitious prayers that were in danger of making the Word of God of no effect." It may seem hard for many today to imagine that already in the mid-19th century, Cairo was the place to visit for the European upper-class. Only twenty years before the Smith sisters' first visit to Egypt, the Khedive Ismail Pasha had commissioned Verdi to compose Aïda, an opera on the glory of Ancient Egypt for which the French Egyptologist Mariette would write the plot and design the scenery. During their first trip to Egypt in 1868, when they wanted to travel up the Nile river, a visit of the Prince of Wales created such a traffic-jam on the Nile that all boats had to wait for days before being allowed to pass the famous cataracts. In addition to the experience of Oriental exoticism, contemplating the Nile's beauty and visiting temples, most scholars in Egypt were searching for artifacts, from Pharaonic statues to Coptic and Arabic manuscripts. It was only recently that Bible criticism had reached such heights that Europeans were starting to look for pieces of the early Christian texts in the souks of Cairo.

Margaret was the first of the twins to get married, to a melancholic Presbyterian Minister named James Gibson. He died in 1885, only three years into their marriage. Agnes decided to visit Cambridge to attempt cheering up her widowed sister. There, she would meet her future husband, the Reverend Samuel Lewis, librarian of Corpus Christi College. Within three years of marriage

Agnes too became a widow. Being married to a Cambridge librarian, she had settled there in 1890 (with her inseparable sister), and she naturally decided that the best remedy to her sorrow would be another journey to the East. This time she was determined to visit the Sinai, especially after a friend of her late husband, Dr J. Rendel Harris, had just come back with the news of several interesting manuscripts he had discovered. Among the preparations for the trip were Syriac private lessons (Agnes in particular wanted to tackle Syriac), palaeography, and learning how to operate a camera. The twins left in January 1892. Both were fluent in Greek — including the pronunciation of Modern Greek — a factor which would enable them, according to Harris, to gain the confidence of the monks in Cairo from whom they would need authorization before heading to St. Catherine. Through their journeys and intellectual endeavours, Margaret had mastered Arabic as well, and they had learned Hebrew in their youth for religious purposes. The sisters had been made aware by Dr J. Rendel Harris about a small case in St. Catherine's monastery in which the monks were keeping some of their most precious manuscripts. It was there that he had discovered a few years before a manuscript of the *Apology of Aristides*, which had been known before only from a quotation in Eusebius.

As only beginner's luck could have it, the sisters came across a Syriac palimpsest which happened to be the oldest Syriac copy of the Gospels known to this day. Apart from the famed Sinai Palimpsest, they discovered several other important manuscripts (in Greek, Syriac and Arabic) which were published in two collections they would establish, namely the *Studia Sinaitica* and the *Horae Semiticae*. They would decipher the Sinai Palimpsest with the help of a team of Cambridge experts (R.L. Bensly, F. Burkitt and J. Rendel Harris) they had brought with them on a second trip. This proved to be one of the most important findings of the time, and it has still not revealed all its secrets. But this scholars' trip to the Sinai was the beginning of a heated feud that would be chronicled in specialized journals and publications for the next thirty years. The spouses of two of the scholars that had come along for the tiring expedition (it took nine days of walk through the Sinai desert to reach the monastery) took part in the feud by publishing their own travelogues, giving Soskice material for some entertaining narrative.

Three elements were of special interest. First, it was agreed that the Syriac Palimpsest shared some readings with the Curetonian Gospels, the only other witness to a Syriac translation of the Four Gospels earlier than the fifth-century Peshitta. It also showed agreement with readings offered by Tatian's second-century *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the Gospels into a unique narrative that circulated among early Syriac circles. Second, the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew gave, uniquely, the reading "Joseph, to whom was betrothed the virgin Mary, bore Jesus, who is called Christ," against all the Greek witnesses. Finally, the Sinai Palimpsest lacked the twelve last verses of the Gospel of Mark (16:9-20), ending in Mark 16:8. This was paralleled by an Armenian manuscript of the Gospels which gave further on "Ariston the Elder" as the author of these verses, as was noticed by Agnes Lewis quoting the discovery of F. C. Conybeare in 1891 in her *Light on the Four Gospels of the Syriac Palimpsest*.

In conclusion, a few remarks should be made which in no way detract from reading this very pleasant book: 1) Soskice refers to S. V. Morton's *Through Lands of the Bible*, published in New York in 1938, as containing the best description of St Catherine's Monastery but one would expect a mention of Pierre Loti's *Le Désert*, the travelogue of his Sinai experience and stay in the Monastery in 1894. 2) The pictures of the sisters and their colleagues and relatives could do with dates and explanations. The indiscriminate use of ancient and modern pictures of the Monastery create a sense of confusion. 3) The mention of the sixth-century Mosaic of the Transfiguration should be accompanied by a note on the fact that it has been restored by an Italian team between 2005 and 2009 (see http://www.cca-roma.org/en/node/249). 4) Finally, on the vexed question of whether what is known today as Mount Moses is the actual place where Moses received the tables, Soskice mentions Edward Robinson's observation that this seems to contradict the Biblical text where the peak may be seen from a plain, while the Sinai Mount Moses would be visible only half way up the ascent. This is certainly not accurate, since the peak may be seen from the valley of Wadi Isbaʿiyya, north-east of the Monastery. Some foreign pilgrims still pray there at Easter.

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