Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xv + 308 pp; hardcover. $74.00.

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After an overly long silence, Aphrahat, the fourth century Persian sage, known for his Syriac *Demonstrations*, is back in town. In recent years several studies were dedicated to this writer, including Stephanie Jarkin's dissertation on his theology;[1] Adam Lehto's new English translation of the *Demonstrations*;[2] and now, Naomi Koltun-Fromm, in the book under consideration, has devoted the lion's-share of her research to Aphrahat's concept of holiness and asceticism and to his polemic with the Jews over these issues. In doing so the book fills an important gap in our knowledge of Aphrahat, a writer whose life is poorly documented, and whose writings have yet to be fully researched.

The merit of this new study is that it does not examine Aphrahat in isolation. Koltun-Fromm's aim is rather to uncover the history and hermeneutics of holiness together with the relationship of holiness to sexuality. Toward this end Koltun-Fromm carefully reviews texts from the Bible, through Second Temple literature, the *Acts of Judah-Thomas*, and, finally, Aphrahat and rabbinic literature of the first centuries CE.

The main claim of this book is that both Judaism and Christianity base their concepts of holiness and sexual practice on similar biblical exegesis and traditions. Furthermore, according to Koltun-Fromm, the hermeneutic of sexuality served both Jewish and Christian communities in late antiquity in defining their communal boundaries, and creating hierarchies within their communities and in relation to outsiders.

The first and second parts of this book are devoted to a thorough investigation of the concept of holiness in writings from the Bible through the third century CE, studied through the lens of sexuality. The first chapter discusses the uses of the root QDS, holy, and its declensions in the Hebrew Bible. Koltun-Fromm distinguishes among three definitions of holiness. It could be

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[1] (Jarkins 2008).

[2] (Letho 2010).

ascribed, i.e. given by birth to a person, a group or a nation, or it could be achieved, i.e. acquired by ritualized behavior. The third option is found in Ezra, one of the latest books of the Hebrew Bible. His model of holiness is one of a derivative of protection from semen pollution. It combines the ideas of ascribed and achieved holiness since it refers to the group as holy; however, this holiness should be protected from defilement by certain behavior. The defilement which threatens the nation's holiness is semen pollution, and the protection is prohibition of intermarriage. Ezra's definition of holiness expands the earlier biblical notion of the ascribed holiness of the priest to the ascribed holiness of the whole nation.

The idea of holiness as a derivative of protection from semen pollution leads the discussion in the second chapter as well. Koltun-Fromm argues that the writer of *Jubilees* expands this model, claiming that not only is intermarriage defiling, but even the mere act of sexual relations with a Gentile. However, according to the writings of the Yahad, the sect living in the Judean desert, the precaution against semen pollution is different. They prohibit any sexual relations in the camp as a means of preserving their holiness.

Paul's approach to holiness is discussed in the third chapter. He defines holiness as achieved but combines his definition with the notion of semen pollution. Holiness, according to Paul, is achieved by faith, thus within the reach of all people. It should, however, be protected from defilement by refraining from sexual sins. Paul is concerned with immoral sexual relations among the Christians themselves, not with intermarriage. By marrying an unsuitable partner, such as a family relation or a divorced woman, the Christians may defile themselves and by that defile their communities. In fact, Paul, who accepted Gentiles into his new religion, rarely condemns intermarriage. In contrast with Ezra, he does not define the community's border lines by prohibiting marriage with others, but by highlighting the differences in sexual behavior in the community and outside it. Christians have different sexual behavior from non-Christians, and by that protect their holiness.

This picture changes with the *Acts of Judah Thomas*. The editor of the *Acts* combined two paradigms of sexual holiness, full celibacy in which all sexual relations are proscribed, and partial celibacy, in which only some sexual relations are proscribed.

Contrary to Paul, in the *Acts* it is not faith which leads to sexual purity, but, rather, sexual purity leads to faith. Faith, and with it the key to eternal life, is the result of celibacy.

Based on the knowledge acquired in the previous chapters, in the third part of the book Koltun-Fromm offers a detailed discussion of Aphrahat and his polemic with the Jews over sexual holiness. The fifth chapter examines Aphrahat's approach to celibacy and especially the celibate men—*bnay qyama*. According to Koltun-Fromm, Aphrahat draws two fences which are aimed at protecting the *bnay qyama*. The first fence is the *qaddishuta*, celibacy, a fence of proper sexual behavior which protects the Christian body. The second fence is the *iḥidayuta*, the singleness, a fence which protects the *qaddishuta*. Aphrahat does not demand merely celibacy from the *bnay qyama*, but singleness. They should separate themselves from the community and from any women, including celibate women in joint households. Aphrahat seeks to create for this spiritual elite a world similar to the world to come, without sexual relation or daily burdens as those of a family. According to Aphrahat, celibacy is required only from the spiritual elite. However, by claiming this behavior is holier, Aphrahat stresses the hierarchy between the *bnay qyama* and the other Christians. Holiness and celibacy are means of grading and classifying members in the Mesopotamian Christian community.

The book's sixth chapter analyzes the different commentaries on Moses, reviewing Philo, tannaitic and amoraic rabbinic traditions, and Aphrahat's writings. Based on a comparison of these sources Koltun-Fromm claims that Aphrahat and the rabbis, albeit reaching different conclusions, support their polemic claims with the same exegetical traditions. Moses, a prophet who—according to these exegetical traditions—lived in celibacy, raises the question whether he should be seen as a prototype for all celibates or a unique case. While Aphrahat claimed that all *bnay qyama* should follow Moses' celibacy, the rabbis claimed that he was one of a kind, and though admired, should not be followed.

The last chapter is devoted to rabbinic traditions which tie holiness to sexuality. Koltun-Fromm returns to the distinction between ascribed and achieved holiness and claims that while Palestinian rabbis seemed to use sexuality as means of defining the borders between the Jewish community and outsiders, thus claiming that holiness is ascribed (in different levels to different

Jews), yet could be defiled (by sexual sins), Babylonian rabbis claimed that holiness is not only ascribed but also achieved. The Babylonian rabbis did not renounce any Jews, claiming that all Jews are holy, yet, by sexual restraint one can become holier. Sexuality is therefore a means of creating a hierarchy within Israel which is based on achieved holiness, as well as a means of establishing the rabbinic authority.

In her study, and specifically in the comparative discussion, Koltun-Fromm demonstrates a careful reading, avoiding parallelomania, or should I say, polemomania.[3] She does not claim that Aphrahat's commentary is directly rooted in Jewish traditions (pp. 184–7); nor does she claim that the rabbinic interest in celibacy is directly influenced by the celibate movement of the *bnay qyama*. Rather, following Boyarin, she claims that both Aphrahat and the rabbis were troubled by a similar issue, the tension between spiritual life and daily life. They both shared similar sources and traditions to approach this issue, yet solved it differently, the ones by demanding celibacy from a spiritual elite, the others by demanding sexual restraint from a spiritual elite. Even though Koltun-Fromm thinks that Aphrahat may have been responding to a real debate with Jews, the other side of this debate is not necessarily the one reflected from the Babylonian sources.

This book raises a number of questions which should inspire further research. The first relates to the wider meaning of the root QDS. This root is the main Semitic root describing holiness, and the main Semitic root Koltun-Fromm discusses. It appears both in Hebrew and Jewish dialects of Aramaic as well as in Syriac. Koltun-Fromm surveys a variety of sources focusing on this root, especially when it appears in the context of sexuality. However, this root is related to sexuality in other meanings which were not mentioned in this book, but could, nevertheless, contribute significantly to her conclusions, or maybe even change them. For example, in biblical Hebrew, as well as in Ugarit and Assyrian, the root QDS may refer to ritual prostitution, which is definitely related to sexuality.[4] Another example is from mishnaic Hebrew.

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[3] (Sandmel 1962); (Goshen-Gotshtein 2003–2004).

[4] For the latest discussion, see (Rieger 2009) pp. 30–32, 43–46.

There, as well as in the Jewish dialects of Aramaic,[5] this root does not only mean 'to sanctify', but also means 'to betroth',[6] a meaning known to Koltun-Fromm (p. 94). This use has penetrated Christian sources as well. First, it may have influenced the Greek Paul uses in 1 Cor. 7:14.[7] Second, as Abraham Geiger, and following him Carl Brockelmann noted,[8] QDS as 'to betroth' penetrated Syriac, albeit not Aphrahat's writings. Nevertheless, the strong connection between betrothal, marriage and sexuality seems to imply that studying the links between sexuality and holiness in Hebrew and Aramaic texts cannot ignore the wide use of this root to describe betrothal in Jewish literature, and its penetration into Syriac sources. Moreover, the contradiction between linking QDS to celibacy in Syriac sources, and possibly linking it to its opposite, betrothal,[9] in Jewish sources seems to indicate that the comparative discussion on Jewish and Christian concepts of sexual practice and holiness should at least refer to this meaning of the root QDS. Such discussion may shed new light on the ties between asceticism and holiness, and the polemic between Jews and Christians on sexuality as a means of holiness.

The second question refers to the intensive discussion on ascribed and achieved holiness, as well as the discussion on the means of defiling or protecting holiness. This discussion leads to questions regarding the different concepts of law reflected from

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[5] (Sokoloff 2002a) p. 988 קד״ש‎[5]; (Sokoloff 2002b) p. 477 קד״ש‎[4].

[6] The root QDS in mishanic Hebrew is in addition to the biblical root ʼRŠ (אר״ש‎), which means 'to betroth', see: *BDB* pp. 76–7 אָרַשׂ‎. This root was used in mishanic Hebrew in a slightly different form: ʼRS (אר״ס‎).

[7] (Gillihan 2002) and (Hayes 2002) pp. 94–95.

[8] (Geiger 1867) pp. 489–90; (Sokoloff 2009) p. 1320 ܩܕܫ‎[4].

[9] The debate whether the use of QDS to describe betrothal reflects a notion of betrothal as holy or not is ongoing. For some of the literature on this question, see (Neubauer 1999) pp. 139–41; (Falk 1966) pp. 41–2; cf. (Gafni 1989) p. 14 and (Herr 1976), who argued that the use of the root קד״ש‎ is not evidence of understanding of betrothal as holy. See, too (Friedman 1980) p. 192 note 1; (Friedman 1989) p. 40; (Lifshitz 2001) pp. 214–5 note 3. Satlow claims that the rabbinic use of the root קד״ש‎ is influenced by the Greek parallel ἔκδοσις, see (Satlow 2001); Schremer relates the use of the root קד״ש‎ to the former root קנ״ה‎ and claims it reflects a change in the legal status of a woman, see (Schremer 2003) pp. 324–6.

these models of holiness. In recent years an interesting debate on the different legal concepts in Second Temple and rabbinic literature has evolved. Two different legal concepts lead this discussion: naturalism (or realism), i. e. a legal system based on the assumption that the law merely describes nature itself, and nominalism, i. e. a legal system based on the assumption that the law is dependent on the legislator's will and is imposed on nature. In other words: is the law a force of nature, or is it a result of a formalistic structure? While Daniel Schwartz[10] claimed that naturalism characterizes sectarian halakhah alone, Jeffrey Ruben-stein[11] refuted his claim, arguing that naturalism could also be found in rabbinic halakhah. He gave a different explanation for the polemics between sectarian and rabbinic halakhah. Recently, Vered Noam,[12] in her study on purities and impurities in sectarian and rabbinic halakhah, claimed that the rabbinic concept of impurity is rooted in a naturalistic approach, even though some nominalism influenced rabbinic halakhah as well.

Could the interesting distinction between ascribed and achieved holiness which Koltun-Fromm discussed be compared to the distinction between nominalism and naturalism which Schwartz, Rubenstein and Noam discussed? Might the claim that the law is a result of a formalistic decision and legislative action be compared to the model of achieved holiness which is also dependent on legislative actions? Could the claim that holiness is ascribed, there are simply such people, be part of a naturalistic point of view, in which laws are simply the way of nature? In other words, is the distinction between ascribed and achieved holiness in Second Temple and rabbinic literature part of a bigger phenomenon characterizing these sources? This question is especially emphasized upon reading Noam's discussion of impurity. Is the naturalistic model of impurity similar to the ascribed model of holiness? Furthermore, while the above scholars discussed only sectarian and rabbinic halakhah, Koltun-Fromm widened her horizons to Christian sources. Could the discussion on nominalism and naturalism be applied on these sources?

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[10] (Schwartz 1992).

[11] (Rubenstein 1999).

[12] (Noam 2010b) For full discussion, see also in Hebrew (Noam 2010a).

This discussion could also be relevant to specific issues in the definition of holiness. Koltun-Fromm devotes extensive discussion to the means by which holiness could be defiled. For example, according to Koltun-Fromm, Ezra and *Jubilees* differ in their understanding of semen pollution. While Ezra prohibits intermarriage, *Jubilees* prohibits any sexual relations with Gentiles, even those not resulting in children. This raises the question of the nature of the impurity caused by sexual relations, and the implied concept of law of Ezra or *Jubilees*. Does the Jubilean concept of semen pollution as described by Koltun-Fromm correspond with other studies which described sectarian matrimonial law as a naturalistic law, and sexual relations as contaminating, regardless of intent or consent?[13] Discussing the different models of holiness and sexuality through the lens of legal thought will surely enrich and sharpen our understanding of both the different legal systems and concepts in late antiquity, and their influence on the development of the concepts of holiness and sexuality.

A book's importance is measured by its contribution to current knowledge together with its ability to stimulate further research. This book meets both goals, by presenting us with a thorough and careful study on the concept of holiness in late antiquity, yet inspiring us to further investigations, and new questions on the literature of late antiquity. Furthermore, the close reading of biblical, Second Temple, rabbinic and Christian literature, together with their careful comparison, contributes both to the comparative study of Jewish and Christian sources in late antiquity and to the separate study of each of these sources.

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[13] (Shemesh 1998).

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