

Hermeneutics of Holiness

*Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions
of Sexuality and Religious Community*

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Introduction

In mid-fourth-century Persian Mesopotamia, a Syriac Christian named Aphrahat writes the following:

I write you my beloved concerning virginity and holiness [*qaddishuta*] because I have heard from a Jewish man that insulted one of the brothers, members of our congregation, by saying to him: You are impure [*tam'in*] you who do not marry women; but we are holy [*qaddishin*] and better, [we] who procreate and increase progeny in the world.¹

With this short notice, Aphrahat underscores a major polemical confrontation of his time: the debate over “holiness” and its relationship to sexual practices. Is holiness attained by a life of marriage and procreation (as the Jews in this text maintain) or, instead, by its opposite—a life of sexual asceticism and abstinence (as Aphrahat claims)? These are two very distant worlds, yet both assert holiness. Who is right? How is human holiness manifested on earth? The answer is important because the holy are those who will live forever in God’s midst, a position for which both Jews and Christians vied. Yet, the quest of the present book is not, of course, to pinpoint an answer to this age-old question of holiness, one that will continue to follow us into the distant future. Instead the book’s goal is to reveal this ancient nexus of holiness and sexuality and to explore its roots in the biblical texts, as well as its manifestations throughout ancient and late-ancient Judaism and early Syriac Christianity.² In particular the

book examines the biblical exegetical underpinnings of Aphrahat's hermeneutic of holiness (which explicitly links holiness with celibacy, but does not relegate marriage to impurity) and places it within his fourth-century Aramaic milieu by way of comparison to the rabbinic culture that flourished simultaneously in the same Persian-Mesopotamian context, as well as to the post-biblical literature that preceded them both.³

Interestingly, Aphrahat and the early Rabbis understand the nature of holiness in a similar way and both build their hermeneutics of holiness and sexuality on related exegetical traditions and interpretive methods. Yet the two groups arrive at very different practical conclusions for how holiness itself should be achieved. I contend that the polemic discourse of these two groups is but a manifestation of these developing communities' essential need for self-definition, both internally and against the other, as well as in relationship to God. In the end, Aphrahat's links between virginity, celibacy, and biblically inspired holiness become his hermeneutic of holiness—it is how he rationalizes and physically demonstrates his elevated relationship to God (and hence salvation) in distinctly physical human terms. Although posited here in opposition to Jewish constructs of holiness and their resultant practices, it resonates deeply within early rabbinic thought as well. Sexual asceticism, the direct result of Aphrahat's interpretive move, manifests itself as sexual restraint, if not full abstinence, among certain layers of rabbinic tradition. Moreover, these practices embody or further demonstrate a practitioner's more intense relationship to God, for both Aphrahat and the Rabbis.

This book suggests that sexual practices among Jews and Christians, particularly ascetic sexual practices, are rooted in the history of biblical exegesis and tradition as much as in any other late-ancient phenomena. Moreover, the book posits that holiness as sexual practice helped these groups demarcate borders between communities. Hence, this book establishes the importance of biblical interpretation for late-ancient Jewish and Christian practices, the centrality of holiness as a category for self-definition, and fourth-century asceticism's relationship to biblical texts and interpretive history.

In order to understand the process of biblical interpretation and the study laid out here, it is necessary to define several key terms and issues, as follows.

Hermeneutics

While I admit to having chosen *hermeneutics* in part because of its appealing alliterative effects alongside *holiness* in the book's title and, in so doing, to slightly stretching the term's usual semantic range, my deeper logic for selecting the

term follows. “Hermeneutics” is usually understood to be the study of the methodologies used in biblical exegesis and interpretation. I use it here more as a lens through which to view the variety of understandings of holiness itself. Phyllis Tribble explains, in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, that her “topical clue” is “the image of God” and that her “hermeneutical clue” is “feminism as a critique of culture.”⁴ In a similar vein, I would like to claim for my subjects that their topic is holiness, and their “hermeneutic” is sexuality. That is, I, as a scholar, am interested here in those biblical texts (and the biblical exegesis built upon them) in which holiness is described as somehow connected to human sexuality. Hence, when I write of different “hermeneutics” of holiness, I am thinking of the different ways in which my subjects have constructed their notions of holiness, how these notions both exist in and are linked exegetically to the biblical texts, and how these notions manifest themselves in sexual practices.

Holiness

Biblical scholars and academic theorists of religion have attempted to define holiness with varying results. In the early twentieth century, Rudolf Otto, perhaps reacting to social-scientific constructions of religion as human creations, focused on the intangible yet ineffable nature of the holy and therefore defined holiness as the numinous and awesome part of God that no human could possibly understand or achieve, for it belongs solely to God and is in fact what differentiates the divine from the mundane. It is the element of God that most attracts humans, but it is also the reason they cannot know God fully. Moreover, for Otto, it has no physical manifestation and it was shared with only one human in history, Jesus. It is through Jesus that true Christians will become holy ones of God in the next world. But this world retains no physical manifestations of the holy.⁵ Building on Otto, but acknowledging certain positions in the scientific study of religion, Mircea Eliade perceived God’s holiness in the world around him and in the humans that populate that world. Humans and the divine work together to create and maintain holiness in this world. Places can be holy (as portals to the divine), objects can be imbued with holiness, and people who pursue God can become holy as well.⁶ Holiness for Eliade is not just an otherworldly substance that remains elusive to most humans, but is a tangible characteristic of this world. It is God’s gift to the world, but it requires constant maintenance by humans. Thus, Eliade and Otto each focused on different elements of holiness as they see it manifested in the world, yet its ultimate source remains God or the divine, however understood. The holy, as a

manifestation of God, is transcendent for Eliade and Otto. It cannot be in and of itself a human construct.

Note that I will use the English terms *holy* and *sacred* interchangeably, as they both equally translate the Hebrew root קִדְשׁ (QDS), which is the focus of this study. Yet I acknowledge that the terms have been distinguished from each other. According to Williard G. Oxtoby, *holy* in general refers to God and the things that God consecrates, while *sacred* is used to describe special or venerated objects. Our bible, for instance, is “holy” while other cultures have “sacred” literature. The key is in the source of the “holiness.” That which humans revere as holy is only sacred, unless also consecrated by God.⁷ This differentiation between “God-made” and “human-made” holiness proves useful to my discussion, for both types appear within the biblical constructs. While holiness clearly is fundamentally a divine characteristic, other things, places, and people come to be holy (i.e., to participate in the divine) as well. So, for instance, God is holy and therefore can consecrate things to himself: land, sanctuary, or priests. But humans, too, can consecrate items to God (sacrifices, offerings) and sometimes even themselves (the case of the *nazir* is interesting here, as it is a temporary holiness). So while acknowledging the difference between the divine (holy) and the human (profane), the biblical worldview allows for an in-between space in which humans can participate in that divinity either by appointment (e.g., the priest) or by ritualized action (e.g., the *nazir*).⁸ This book is an exploration of how Jews and Christians reconstructed that in-between space in their own time and place in the first centuries of the Common Era. While I may describe one group’s holiness as “ascribed” (i.e., given at birth) and another as “achieved” (i.e., acquired through ritualized behavior), my subjects most likely saw them as manifestations of the same thing: holiness.

Holiness, then, for late-ancient Jews and Christians, is, on the one hand, the most valued attribute of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, on the other hand, sharing in that divine attribute marks a person or community as belonging to God and, hence, as being elevated above other human beings. Moreover, this special relationship with God in this world positions one for privileged placement in the next: salvation. Holiness is a manifestation of power—whether physically in this world or existentially in the next. According to the biblical text, God chose Israel from among all the nations to be that special people—the holy nation of God. In so doing God promised to protect Israel from its enemies. But who in the first, second, third, or fourth century CE could claim exclusive lineage from Ancient and Holy Israel, and therefore be that community with sole access to divine protection? Furthermore, how did they prove it? From the beginnings of the Second Judean Commonwealth⁹, various groups competed for that very title. Second Commonwealth Jews, as well as

Jews and Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era, developed their respective communal religious identities out of a shared notion of exclusive access to God. If one community had divine access, the other surely could not. But how could one tell who was holy in this world and hence saved in the next? Retaining or gaining that title, as a community, remained of paramount importance to fourth-century Christians and Jews as it did for their ancestors. In these centuries, the groups who eventually became “Christian” and “Jewish” struggled to separate themselves from each other. Holiness loomed as a fulcrum of difference at the center of these struggles. The community that could prove its exclusive claim to holiness prevailed.

Holiness, Sexuality, and Purity

As we have seen, Aphrahat achieves his holiness through his sexual practices, calling his practice of sexual renunciation “holiness” in his native Syriac (*qaddishuta*). Aphrahat also uses Scripture to forge the link between holiness and sexual practices; yet he is not the first to do so. Even before the Hebrew biblical canon could be constructed as “secured,”¹⁰ biblical exegetes mined its narratives, poetry, prophecies, and law codes for usable prooftexts of holiness. They too often discovered, uncovered, or created a connection between specific sexual practices and individual or community holiness. Here unfolds, then, a history of holiness—specifically of holy people (not places or things), that proves to be dependent on human sexuality—from its biblical beginnings. Aphrahat’s hermeneutic of holiness and sexual practices, as well as the chronologically and geographically parallel rabbinic traditions on holiness and sexual practices, are case studies of this long and complex development.

The quotation at the opening of this chapter shows that, for Aphrahat, holiness is linked to celibacy through some notion of purity; in other words, for him, chastity, purity, and holiness fall under a single religious rubric. Yet, while it is impossible to discuss holiness without reference to purity, they are not one and the same. In the biblical context, one pursues purity in order to protect or achieve holiness. But purity can be procured without any attainment of holiness. Holiness ultimately comes from God. It is God’s to give or take away, and therefore it remains on another level, above and beyond purity. The deserving person or community will be granted holiness at God’s will. The pure person has potential but has not yet won the key to the prize. Ambiguities and inconsistencies in the biblical texts leave the holy pursuer at a loss as how ultimately to gain that key. Different hermeneutics of holiness, even within the biblical texts, offer different answers.

In recent years, notions of purity and impurity have been discussed at length by scholars such as Jonathan Klawans (*Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*) and Christine Hayes (*Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*).¹¹ Like Klawans and Hayes, I trace an intellectual and exegetical history of a biblical concept. While they focus on purity and impurity, I focus on holiness. Nevertheless I am beholden to both authors for their insights and categorizations, for an understanding of biblical and post-biblical purity constructs is essential for comprehending paradigms of holiness. Purity exists for the sake of holiness. How one understands the dynamic between the two is a key to one's construct of holiness. Klawans argues that the biblical texts present two competing notions of purity (one "ritual" and one "moral").¹² I argue that the biblical texts also present several paradigms of holiness, which are in part dependent on these two different systems of purity.¹³ What is of interest to me is not so much when and where the two categories of purity cross paths (this is Klawans's study) but when and where the paradigms of holiness intersect with the various systems of purity. For when there is confusion between the categories of purity and holiness, sexuality is often present and even the agent of that confusion.

Sexuality becomes the fulcrum for many of the prevailing post-biblical hermeneutics of holiness because of sexuality's presence in various forms in the biblical systems of purity defined by Klawans. Semen, for instance, is a physical pollutant that must be removed in order to achieve "ritual" purity so as to protect the holy presence of God (e.g., Lev. 15). Removing an impurity renders one pure, for God's protection, but does not change one's status vis-à-vis the holy. Forbidden sexual practices, such as bestiality, sleeping with a menstruant, and incest all fall into the category of "moral" impurity that opposes holiness (e.g., Lev. 18, 20). Avoiding the latter practices renders one "morally" pure, which then allows one to enter the holy community. Hence, pure behavior here does have something to do with the possibility of advancing to a holy status. But later texts (e.g., Jubilees) instruct the Israelites to behave purely in order to protect an ascribed holiness in the people, not just in God. Hence, purity here also protects an innate holiness. Thus, the differences between purity as a protective fence around God's holiness and purity as a protection around Israel's holiness begin to collapse. Furthermore, when a purity practice (e.g., avoiding incest or bathing after the voiding of a "ritual" impurity such as semen) becomes a means to achieving holiness in and of itself, a new hermeneutic of holiness and sexuality emerges. Hence, Aphrahat's choice of celibacy (chapters 5 and 6), and the Rabbis' suggestions of ethnic endogamy, on the one hand, and sexual restraint, on the other (chapter 7) fall within a several-centuries-long continuum of exegetical discourse on proper marriage partners, sexuality, purity, and holiness.

This book traces that discourse from the biblical texts through the Second Temple literature and early Christian writings into the Jewish (rabbinic) and Christian (Syriac) exegetical writings of the fourth century.

Within these texts and traditions I highlight two prominent paradigms. In the first, the holiness of Israel is assumed (that is, God ascribes holiness to them) and hence their sexual practices protect their innate holiness. In this case, in order to maintain one's God-given holiness, one must limit one's marriage partners to other members of one's holy community (endogamy). In the second, achieved holiness is the goal. That is, whether or not one might be of an ascribed holy community, the community also maintains that there are means or methods to improve on, elevate, or change one's holy status. One often achieves or gains this holiness through sexual restraint. The notion that the ability to stand in God's presence, to participate somehow in divine holiness, requires some sort of sexual restraint pervades the achieved-holiness construct. In contrast, for the person whose holiness is ascribed—gained at birth—endogamy proves to be the best protection.

As Martha Himmelfarb has argued, the biblical phrase “a kingdom of priests” expresses an important tension that is central to understanding ancient Judaism.¹⁴ This phrase refers to the notion that Israel, the nation, is or becomes holy through God's choosing of it at Sinai, in imitation of God's “choosing” the priests from among Israel to be God's holy servants. The tensions Himmelfarb describes between priests by birth and those who win priesthood by merit map outwards to all of Israel (whether “Jewish” or “Christian”), when Israel considers itself to be holy as a “kingdom of priests.” Are they holy by birth or did they do something to deserve to be called holy? While Himmelfarb focuses on the priesthood, the present study moves toward an exploration of the figure of Moses, for at Sinai he manifests himself as the leader of this newly chosen “kingdom of priests.” But the question often raised about him by later authors is: why was he chosen from among Israel, if he himself was not a priest?

Moses—the prophet of God, the leader of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt, and the one biblical character allowed to speak “mouth to mouth” with God—arises as the exemplary holy man because of his sexual choices (in his case giving up his married life). And it is here that we see an enduring fusion or cross breeding between notions of holiness—both ascribed (given to Moses by God) and achieved (attained by Moses through his sexual choices). We also see a fusion here between holiness and purity. At Sinai, God instructs Moses to direct the people to prepare themselves for Revelation. They must purify themselves by washing their clothing and abstaining from sexual contact for three days. An exegetical tradition as old as Philo, if not older, suggests that if the Israelites had to be celibate for three days, Moses, who was constantly in God's

presence must have had to give up his conjugal life for his leadership role. Moses rises as both unique in his role and as a model to follow. For the Rabbis, he is Moses our teacher (*Moshe Rabbeinu*), the model rabbi who passes on rabbinic lore and law to his faithful disciples and spiritual descendants, the Rabbis, who represent and lead the descendants of holy Israel, the Jews. For Aphrahat, Moses is the quintessential mystic—the one human being who achieves the ultimate mystical goal: communion (or even union) with the divine. Moreover, Moses' achievements can be emulated by his followers, the *ihidaye* (single-minded ones), by copying his behavior at Sinai. The celibate Moses on Sinai, a tradition upheld by both the Rabbis and Aphrahat, suggests a culminating fusion of the various paradigms discussed in this book: singular devotion to God, sexual purity, and holiness. Finally, Aphrahat's laudatory praise of Moses places Aphrahat more solidly in his Aramaic milieu and differentiates him from his Greek and Latin counterparts.¹⁵

Holiness and Ethics

Scholars who discuss "moral" impurity (even as a separate category from "ritual" impurity) often describe it as an impurity created by sin. Thus, one can talk about the "defiling nature of sin." But what happens to this person so defiled? If he were already holy, does he lose his status? If one manages to avoid all the sins enumerated, can he become holy? If so, does this mean that anyone can become holy? This line of thinking often leads to a seemingly related conclusion: if sin (general or specific) is equated with "moral" impurity and "moral" impurity stands in opposition to holiness, is the holy one sinless? That is, if one can be sinless, is one necessarily holy? Moreover, while one can certainly argue that the levitical holiness code is in part an ethical code, it is more difficult to determine whether all biblical hermeneutics of holiness contain the same or any ethical component.¹⁶ The post-biblical discussions of holiness are equally opaque and difficult to understand on exclusively ethical grounds. If one begins with the premise that an Israelite is inherently holy (as many of the post-biblical texts do), how can she lose her status through sin? Or, from another angle, do all sins tarnish holiness, or just grievous sins? Furthermore, to suggest an exclusively ethical or moral understanding of holiness is equally misleading.¹⁷ At times it can be claimed that holiness is linked to "good behavior," but at others it is not. I have chosen to avoid such terms as "sin" and "moral" in order not to be tied to a notion of holiness as strictly (or even remotely related to) an ethical code of behavior. Moreover, the authors examined here do not necessarily link their ideas of holiness to ethical

or moral behavior and I do not wish to do so for them. For the authors and exegetes of this study, holiness remains an indescribable, yet quintessentially valuable attribute of God, an embodiment of divine power. The focus of this book is not the ethical implications of holiness but, rather, its sexual implications. That is, how sexual practices, when mapped onto notions of holiness, become markers of community identity.

Holiness and Asceticism

Even within the biblical texts, I argue, it is possible to foresee the tendency to link holiness with sexuality that develops among certain groups in the post-biblical period. I contend that for these exegetes who pick up on this particular hermeneutic, they also integrate it into the foundations of their ascetic practices.¹⁸ Elizabeth Clark, in her book *Reading Renunciation*, argues that certain Western Church fathers read their already established ascetic practices back into the biblical texts, rather than exegeting it out of the text. She argues that they were compelled to read asceticism back into the biblical texts in order both to further support their practices and to reclaim the rather procreative-oriented Hebrew Scriptures as truly Christian and hence ascetic.¹⁹ Yet Clark concedes, in contrast to the flow of much modern scholarship on Christian asceticism, that asceticism was not imported from the outside culture, such as Hellenism, nor was it motivated by politics or social pressures.²⁰ Rather, she understands Christian asceticism as a phenomenon or tendency already present in the New Testament writings. The very first generations of Christians read and understood their developing Christian canon in various ways. Some chose to understand Paul, for instance, in a more ascetical way than others. These Christians then composed their own ascetically inclined tracts, such as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, which present Christianity as a sexually renunciative religion. Others, such as the authors of the Pastoral Epistles, promote an anti-ascetic practice.²¹

Yet both groups claim dependence on Paul, and thus if we can argue that Paul pushes the envelope toward or around ascetic practice, can we ask what motivates Paul? I would like to suggest that some element of Paul's "ascetic" roots (that is, not whether he was or wasn't ascetic, but that others perceived him to be) can be linked to the constructs of holiness that evolve out of the Hebrew biblical and post-biblical literature. Like Clark I do not wish to impose an outside motivation toward asceticism on my subjects, yet in contrast to Clark, I wish to uncover, if possible, an internal motivation—one based on their reading and interpretation of Hebrew Scripture. Thus, while I also agree with Clark that the late ancient Christian theologians attempted to "asceticize"

the more procreative elements of the Hebrew Scriptures, I argue that a native ascetic tendency also existed within these texts side by side with the more pronounced procreative elements. This element was particularly wrapped up within ancient biblical notions of holiness, a tendency that was picked up most avidly among the Aramaic-speaking (and reading) Christians. I wish to emphasize here that asceticism did not appear on the scene as something new in the fourth century but has deep roots in the biblical texts and particularly in the early interpretive history of some of those texts.

In Aphrahat's case, then, one could similarly suggest that Aphrahat "read renunciation" back into his biblical texts. Yet, I would argue that his theology of asceticism is more strongly linked to an exegesis of text, particularly of holiness, rather than a retroactive eisegesis as Clark posits for her Church fathers (Origen, Jerome, and Chrysostom). I further claim, in part, that this is due to Aphrahat's Aramaic (non-Greco-Roman) background. I attempt to show here that the ascetic practices of Syriac Christians are inherently tied to their hermeneutics of holiness—that is, to their exegetical and scriptural reading strategies. In other words, without arguing for or against "outside influences," I suggest that Syriac Christian asceticism can, in part, be traced back to very early exegetical expansions on notions of holiness and community derived from a reconfiguration of the various biblical hermeneutics of holiness that worked best in an Aramaic linguistic context. Moreover, Moses plays a primary role in these exegetes' ascetical imaginations.

Following a different line of argument, Kathy Gaca points to the primacy of the Septuagint in earlier Greek ascetical writings. Namely, she suggests that Greek Christian ascetic practices can be tied directly to their septuagintal readings. Gaca, arguing against what she calls the "continuity thesis," in which she counters Foucault among others, claims that Paul, Philo, Clement, and Tatian's ascetic tendencies are essentially more dependent on the Septuagint than on any other Greek or Hellenistic philosophical writings. Likewise, social historians miscalculate the possible rationales for Christian asceticism when they underestimate their philosophical and biblical theoretical underpinnings. Nonetheless, Gaca leaves plenty of room for cross-fertilization and philosophical enhancement from the various Hellenistic philosophies she examines in parallel to her Church fathers. While I strongly disagree with many of Gaca's specific readings of the Septuagint and the way it was interpreted in the Greco-Roman milieu, I support her argument that the Hebrew Scriptures, in whatever version or translation, played an important if not primary role in many Church authors' formative ascetical theologies. The Syriac Christian trajectory is but one very strong example.²² In the end, Gaca argues that Paul and Philo are not moral philosophers under the influences of the Stoics and Pythagoreans but, rather, function as acculturated Greeks, for they read their Bible in Greek and this is what influences them most.

It is the particular nuances of the Greek biblical text that most directly affect their particular sexual politics. Gaca focuses on the commandment against adultery and its placement among the ten commandments as primary support for the ascetic tendencies of Paul and Philo. In contrast, for Paul at least, I argue that it is Paul's understanding of holiness, as inherited from his Second Temple Jewish background, that most influences his thinking on sexuality. Finally, it also seems fair to argue that it is Paul's hermeneutic of holiness, in Aramaic garb, that also proves foundational to Syriac Christian ascetic practice.

While most authors who study Christian asceticism focus on its manifestations in the Greco-Roman world, I focus on Syriac Christianity because of its Mesopotamian-Aramaic milieu.²³ Syriac Christianity develops an ascetic practice and theology essentially different from its Greco-Roman counterparts in that sexual renunciation appears as fundamental to Syriac Christian belief (at least in its earliest forms as embodied in the *Acts of Judah Thomas*, for example) and is founded on an enduring image of the oneness of the believer's dedication to God. These two concepts are interrelated in Syriac Christianity: it is because of the theology of oneness that sexual renunciation becomes fundamental. So, while the existence of asceticism, and particularly the practice of sexual asceticism in Syriac Christianity, does not differ greatly from other Christianities—sexual renunciation can be found in most forms of early Christianity—its centrality and theological underpinnings in Syriac Christianity set it apart.

The Syrian Orient was most likely evangelized by Aramaic-speaking Christians probably not before the late second century.²⁴ No matter from where these missionaries originated, they most likely propagated an already ascetic Christianity (again as the *Acts of Judah Thomas* seems to testify, for Judah came from some place else to India). Nevertheless, asceticism is soon incorporated into the very core of Syriac Christian belief and practice. While early scholars such as Arthur Vööbus and Robert Murray argued that celibacy was a requirement for membership in the early Syriac Church almost from the beginning, this argument has been modified by others such as Sidney Griffith. Nonetheless celibacy certainly was a highly valued Christian practice.

Peter Brown suggests that there must have been something specific to the Syrian East that differentiated it from the Greco-Roman world that allowed this sort of asceticism to flourish during the second and third centuries, for the East was not only home to the Syriac churches, but also other ascetic groups such as Manichaeans and Marcionites. Brown surmises that the lack of large Greco-Roman cities in the Syrian hinterland, the harsh life there, no anti-Christian persecutions (in the early centuries at least), and the larger and more prosperous Jewish communities all added up to create a culture receptive to asceticism.²⁵

Yet the lack of Greco-Roman culture, particularly its sense of moderation in all parts of life, and other cultural landmarks, can only be part of the answer.²⁶ Early Christianity did not land in a vacuous countryside, but into a thriving civilization with a distinctive, Aramaic culture of its own. The cities may not have been distinctly Greco-Roman, but they were vibrant in their own multicultural landscape. The Jewish communities thrived and suffered as the other communities did along with the economic fortunes of the Persian Empire. Certainly the culture of the East (or perhaps Christian reaction to the cultures of the East) fostered the growth of an ascetic Christianity, but it is equally possible that the ascetic tendencies of Christianity were already in place when the first missionaries arrived in the Syrian Orient. I suggest that those tendencies grew out of native Aramaic exegesis on a shared biblical text, as well as a dependency on an already asceticized Paul, and continued to flourish in the Aramaic cultural milieu of Persian Mesopotamia. In other words, I posit a native Hebrew biblical ascetic tendency, found within its various hermeneutics of holiness, that is expanded upon and developed first by Jewish readers of Scripture and then by Christian readers, especially Paul. Moreover, these hermeneutical trajectories manifest themselves strongly within the Hebrew and Aramaic Jewish and Aramaic Christian writings of the third and fourth centuries.

Finally, the early Christians, particularly the Aramaic/Syriac speaking ones, were not the only biblical exegetes to connect holiness, sexuality, and asceticism. The early Rabbis, or some segment of that grouping, equally imagined the importance of that three-way equation. Not just that holiness and some sort of sexual practice go hand in hand, but more specifically that some restriction on sexual practices is innate to holy living or holy acquisition. Steven Fraade was the first to suggest that the Rabbis (and their predecessors among Second Commonwealth Jews) possessed and developed their own native asceticism.²⁷ Following on the pioneering scholarship of Steven Fraade, Eliezer Diamond, in his work, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, further establishes rabbinic ascetic patterns, based in notions of *perishut* and *nazirut*, especially in the area of food and fasting. While his argumentation does not link these practices strictly or exclusively to a hermeneutic of holiness, he establishes that the early Rabbis were no strangers to asceticism. Building on Diamond's framework, I show that the Rabbis were not strangers to sexual asceticism, either. Moreover, their sexually restrained practices often descend from their hermeneutics of holiness and compare in striking ways to Aphrahat's hermeneutics of holiness and sexuality—both of which are firmly grounded in Scripture and revolve around the image of Moses.

In short, Syriac Christian asceticism, as manifested in Aphrahat, and early rabbinic asceticism share an Aramaic biblical tradition and cultural milieu that bring their scriptural exercises closer together while differentiating them both

from the biblical interpretive practices and cultural influences of the Greco-Roman West.

Holiness, Sexuality, and Community Boundaries

While one could argue that sexuality and holiness are linked exclusively on exegetical grounds, that argument would ignore the social-historical context in which these exegetes lived. Every one of the constructs of holiness presented here develops out of a need to create community boundaries. Each exegete faced real or perceived opponents who laid claim to or somehow threatened Israel's holiness. The Deuteronomist uses the threat of uncontrolled sexuality as leading to idolatry to draw borders between Holy Israel and its unholy neighbors. Ezra constructs his notion of the holy seed—which cannot mix with unholy seed—in order to designate the returning Judaeans alone as representing true Israel. Paul suggests that Christian holiness necessitates certain types of (restrained) sexual behavior, both to protect the Christian's holy status and also to mark her differentiation from the non-Christian. Aphrahat, too, looks to sexual renunciation as a means to differentiate Christians from Jews. So while these exegetes depend on biblical prooftexts to support the nexus between holiness and sexuality, their focus on sexuality also proves to be an indispensable tool for constructing community identity. Sexual practices come to the fore in this endeavor of boundary building because they can easily be defined and monitored. The competition for God's exclusive attention (holiness) combines practically with social mores (sexual practices) to produce defensible community borders.

Daniel Boyarin argues in his book, *Borderlines*, that constructing tangible borders was a major endeavor of both Jews and Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era.²⁸ This endeavor manifested itself particularly strongly among Christians who created categories of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” with which to police the boundaries of Christianity. Thus, “Judaism” was created as an opposing heretical religion that was out of bounds. Boyarin argues that, at first, the early Rabbis accepted this differentiation and attempted to create their own external boundaries and internal heresiologies (*minim*) among traditionally ascribed Jews. *Minim*, therefore, were not necessarily Christians or Jewish-Christians, but ethnically ascribed Israelites who did not follow rabbinic law. As the borders between “Christianity” and “Judaism” firm up (especially for the Christians), the later Babylonian and Amoraic rabbis retreat from their own internal heresiologies, allowing all Israelites to remain within the category of Israel, despite their theological deficiencies. In short, the Tannaitic rabbis borrowed the Christian construct of heresiology, creating a Jewish or rabbinic “orthodoxy” in

parallel to developing Christian orthodoxy, while the later Amoraic rabbis rejected this Christian notion of “true religion” for an older notion of ethnicity and culture.²⁹ Building on Boyarin, I argue that one can follow these developments, within both Judaism and Christianity, through their various and evolving hermeneutics of holiness. Moreover, when a particular construct of holiness includes all Jews, or Christians within a particular community, this construct can be further manipulated to create internal hierarchies. Holiness cuts both ways: on the one hand, it establishes firm boundaries between us and them, but, on the other, it allows for internal hierarchies of holiness and authority as well. To wit, our fourth-century exegetes, intellectual elites of their respective communities, begin to maneuver their understandings of holiness achieved through sexuality as a means to improve on their own status within their communities, often in line with the biblical priestly hierarchies in which the holier priests among Holy Israel remain closer to God. He who can claim the highest level of holiness wins. Thus, these exegetes also bolster their own authority within their communities. Aphrahat, as much as the fourth-century Rabbis, concerns himself with internal hierarchies as well as external borders.

Thus, this book concerns holiness and sexuality and the exegetical constructs built to support such a link, particularly within the Aramaic-Persian milieu. The book does not propose to discuss sexuality or holiness in all of their respective manifestations in the ancient texts, but, rather, to focus on and unpack those moments when holiness and sexuality merge into one theological concept and exegetical framework. I am also most interested in those manifestations of sexuality that assume sexual restraint or renunciation and become a religious practice of asceticism. Moreover, I attempt here to suggest social and political matrices in fourth-century Persian Mesopotamia for which these hermeneutics proved most useful.³⁰

While the material treated in this book leads up to and culminates in the fourth century, I feel it necessary and compelling to understand the whole trajectory of biblically based holiness from its biblical roots. As this is a book focused on biblical exegesis, I include rather detailed chapters on the biblical and post-biblical and other exegetical material that precede the fourth-century context. While I find this material interesting in and of itself, I also believe it impossible to truly understand the fourth-century hermeneutics of holiness and sexuality without a thorough examination of the literature upon which these hermeneutics clearly depend. Each text or set of texts emerges from its own peculiar cultural milieu. Yet there remain connecting themes. By examining the earlier texts in detail I hope to show the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities that lay before my select few fourth-century authors. Moreover, I wish to demonstrate that because of or perhaps despite these many options,

certain routes or trajectories of exegetical choice can be traced and mapped out from the biblical texts through the centuries to our late ancient authors.

Prologue to the Fourth-Century Context

Aphrahat: The Persian Sage

Aphrahat, the Persian Sage, has been overlooked by scholars of many fields. Within studies of the early Church, Aphrahat and his fellow Syriac writers have been ignored in part because of the vast literature of the Greco-Roman world and in part owing to basic language barriers. Yet even within the more narrow field of Syriac studies, Ephrem, Aphrahat's more prolific and younger contemporary, enjoys a wider readership than Aphrahat.³¹ While this study does not intend to examine the whole of Aphrahat's writings, *The Demonstrations*, I hope in a small way not only to show Aphrahat's centrality to understanding fourth-century Syriac Christianity but also to illuminate how his compositions are essential for a more complete picture of both early Church history and rabbinic culture.

Although we know little about Aphrahat the man, his writings show him to be an educated and engaged student of the Bible. He neither reveals his sources nor quotes his teachers, but speaks from his own authority. He appears to have been a man of ecclesiastical position in the fourth-century Persian Church. Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* were read continuously, if sporadically, throughout the next ten centuries among the Eastern Churches, and at least one Western writer references his compositions.³² An anonymous manuscript of the fourteenth century lists "the sage Aphrahat who is Jacob bishop of Mar Mattai."³³ This is the only source that gives a locale for Aphrahat—and a thousand years after his demise at that. Although it is impossible to prove, this anonymous manuscript may preserve an older tradition that was lost to other manuscripts. The monastery at Mar Mattai is or was on Mount Elphah, also known as Maklob, or Sheikh Matta;³⁴ it is east of the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia, in what is today Kurdistan. Lack of an earlier recorded witness to Aphrahat and Mar Mattai, however, makes this association tenuous. The use of both the names Aphrahat and Jacob might suggest that the Persian Sage actually had two names: Aphrahat, his given name, and Jacob, the name he took either on conversion or when he was consecrated into the priesthood or bishopric, a known practice in the Syriac Church.³⁵

It is possible that Aphrahat was a monk, priest, or even a bishop as some of the sources claim (although the last title may have been added subsequently in order to lend him additional authority).³⁶ Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* show that, at the very least, he was a thinking and educated man with a vast knowledge of the Scriptures. Demonstration 14, which is a condemnation of the corruption

within the Church, especially of its higher ranked clergymen, indicates that Aphrahat had “pulled rank” himself. He addresses the other bishops and clergymen as equals: “We bishops, presbyters, deacons and all of the Church of God,” corroborating his potential bishophood. In addition, John Gwynn claims that Mar Mattai’s seat, Aphrahat’s supposed bishopric, at or near Ninveh, was second only to that of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (when the hierarchy was established in later years), perhaps giving Aphrahat the additional clout needed to chastise other bishops if needed.³⁷ Although it is not clear whether Aphrahat was born a Christian or converted at an early age, he became a master of its traditions and texts, a teacher to his flock, and a protector of his Church’s reputation.³⁸

There are twenty-three “demonstrations,” or homilies, in total; Aphrahat himself states at the end of demonstrations 10 and 22 that the total number of demonstrations (twenty-two) matches the twenty-two letters of the Syriac alphabet. In addition, a twenty-third “epilogue” demonstration concludes the whole work. Aphrahat composed at least the first set of demonstrations in response to a parishioner’s question concerning the true Christian faith.³⁹ Aphrahat, answering this question directly in his first demonstration, “On Faith,” continued to outline other Christian duties and practices in the next nine demonstrations, addressing topics such as charity, fasting, prayer, wars, members of the covenant, penitence, the resurrection, humility, and pastors. Three of the second twelve demonstrations cover similar themes, but nine center on issues of conflict with the Jews. Four of these argue against the Jewish ritual practices of circumcision, Passover, the Sabbath, and dietary laws, while the last five constitute a rebuttal of Jewish criticism against Christianity on issues such as the Messiah, virginity, the call of the Gentiles, the dispersion of the Jews, and the election of Israel. The twenty-third demonstration chronicles righteousness and salvation from Adam to Aphrahat (based on the concept of the “grape-cluster” in Isa. 65:8).

It is equally important to note what the demonstrations do not contain. They do not deal with Arianism, the “heresy” most threatening to the Church in the West, nor with the decisions of the Nicene Council, which had convened only a decade before the composition of the first demonstrations. The Persian Church might simply have been outside of the jurisdiction of the council, or the concerns of the Nicene fathers might not have been of interest or threatening to Aphrahat.

Luckily for the historian, Aphrahat dates his writings. At the end of demonstration 22 he writes:

These twenty-two discourses have I written according to the twenty-two letters of the [Syriac] alphabet. The first ten I wrote in the

648th year of the Kingdom of Alexander the son of Philip the Macedonian [337 CE] as is written in the end of them. And these twelve last I wrote in the 655th year of the Kingdom of the Greeks and of the Romans, which is the Kingdom of Alexander [344 CE] and in the 35th year of the Persian King.⁴⁰

In addition, demonstration 14 is dated to the year 655 of Alexander (344 CE), and demonstration 23 is dated to the year 656 of Alexander (345 CE). One can see from the dating that there is a hiatus of seven years between the writing of the first ten and the second twelve, and that all the demonstrations concerning Jewish topics are among the latter half. Aphrahat, content to discuss the Christian life in 337, turned to controversy with the Jews in 344 to combat the spiritual and physical onslaught brought on by the Persian anti-Christian persecutions. Some Christians who were not martyred at the hands of the Persians might have opted for conversion to Judaism as a mechanism of survival. Since the Jews did not appear to discourage this trend, Aphrahat may have felt compelled to do so.⁴¹ The narrative quoted at the opening of this chapter may exemplify the type of “encouragement” Christians received from their Jewish neighbors. The Jews could boast that they were “holy”—that is, protected by God and endowed with divine blessing—while the Christians, because of their celibacy were “impure,” or cursed by God, and to be persecuted by the Persians for their “unholy” beliefs and practices.

This book’s discussions focus mainly on Aphrahat’s two demonstrations that concern celibacy: demonstration 6 and demonstration 18. Demonstration 6, “On the Members of the Covenant,” addresses Aphrahat’s fellow celibates who form a core elite for his Church. Aphrahat’s main concern here is promoting uniformity of practice among already committed celibate Christians. His latter demonstration (18), “On Virginity and Holiness,” comes from among his polemical writings composed at the height of the persecutions. In this demonstration Aphrahat must defend his earlier position against supposed Jewish procreative arguments.

Yet, in both compositions Aphrahat not only projects traditional Syriac Christian exegetical support and uniquely promotes his own interpretive course. Indeed, when faced with a Jewish procreative argument—one that is both dependent on Hebrew biblical support and apparently *attractive* to his parishioners, he is forced to turn to Hebrew biblical support for sexual renunciation. Nevertheless, he does not limit his innovative reading only to his polemical works. Aphrahat presents us with a new and creative reading of biblical text in the name of traditional Syriac Christian practice. When Aphrahat, as well as other Syriac Christian patristic authors, are more widely studied within

the larger field of early Church writings, a more nuanced notion of Christian biblical exegetical practices emerges. This study demonstrates how Aphrahat's hermeneutic of holiness broadens our understandings of Christian exegetical strategies for supporting sexual renunciation.⁴²

Yet what appears as unique and new to fourth-century Syriac Christian biblical exegesis resonates widely in the rabbinic literature, revealing Aphrahat's importance to any comparative project. Aphrahat uses biblical traditions and interpretive strategies found within the rabbinic corpus (but not necessarily originating there) to defend his position against a supposedly Jewish one. The parallels and crossovers speak to a wider cultural literary milieu that Aphrahat shares with the Rabbis. While Ephrem sits on the border between Persia and Rome, imbibing Greek as well as Syriac traditions, Aphrahat situates himself firmly in a Persian Aramaic cultural context that is more readily comparable to the Babylonian rabbinic context. Yet both Aphrahat and Ephrem are firmly of the fourth-century Syriac Church. When scholars speak of the fourth-century Syriac Church they always turn to Aphrahat and Ephrem as the only extant writers of this century, yet Aphrahat's comparatively meager produce is usually overshadowed by Ephrem's broad corpus. Aphrahat's exegesis is often lumped together as an addendum to Ephrem's interpretive thought process rather than as a separate entity.⁴³ Their differences are overlooked and individual contributions obscured. Studying Aphrahat in isolation can only deepen our understanding of the breadth and variety of Syriac exegetical traditions.

Aphrahat among the Rabbis

Aphrahat and the fourth-century Babylonian rabbis were contemporaries in and around Ctesiphon/Mahoza, near modern-day Baghdad in the Mesopotamian river valley. Yet no consensus has formed among scholars concerning the nature of Aphrahat's relationship with rabbinic Jews and Judaism. In the early twentieth century, Saloman Funk, Louis Ginzberg, and Frank Gavin all concluded that Aphrahat was a "docile pupil of the Jews" since his style and exegesis closely followed the rabbinic literature.⁴⁴ Yet the assumption that Aphrahat created his writings by borrowing from the rabbinic literature may be altogether false, as pointed out by Jacob Neusner. As Neusner notes, any similarities between Aphrahat's texts and the Rabbis' do not necessarily mean that Aphrahat borrowed from the Rabbis.⁴⁵ Other factors may have played a role in the similarities between Aphrahat and the rabbinic literature—among them, older traditions and common milieus that could have affected both Aphrahat and the Rabbis' writings such that it appears as if one might have copied from the other.⁴⁶ In fact, Neusner's textual analysis concludes that Aphrahat had

nothing to do with rabbinic Jews: Aphrahat neither copied nor learned an exegetical style from rabbinic Jews. Because Aphrahat never mentions rabbis, rabbinic schools, or the oral law, Neusner is convinced that Aphrahat knew no rabbinic Jews. According to Neusner, Aphrahat's critiques of Judaism are not by observation of fourth-century Jews necessarily, but of Jews of the Bible.⁴⁷ Neusner does not deny that Aphrahat knew any contemporary Jews, only that the Jews he would have met were nonrabbinic, or "Yahwistic," probably descendants of the converts of the royal house of Adiabene or even the ten tribes of Israel who had been exiled to northern Mesopotamia.⁴⁸ This region, Neusner claims, was far enough away not to have been influenced by the rabbinic stronghold of the south.⁴⁹ (Southern Mesopotamia, or Babylonia, was home to most of the region's Jews, rabbis, and academies. The dividing line between north and south ran somewhere northwest of Pumpedita, where the land between the rivers widened.)⁵⁰

While I do not completely disagree with Neusner's analysis, I am not convinced, however, that the northern Jews were completely isolated from their southern coreligionists. Other scholars have shown that northern Mesopotamia was home to a number of rabbinic Jews. There are several references within rabbinic writings to Jews who lived in or hailed from "the north." We read of Ya'akov of Adiabene who asked Rav Hisda a question about a mishnah, and Zuga of Adiabene who twice added a teaching to a talmudic discussion that the other rabbis did not know.⁵¹ Furthermore, the Rabbis of the south, as well as their Palestinian contemporaries, traveled through the northern regions on their journeys between Palestine and Babylonia. Traveling preachers and rabbis most certainly would have stopped along the way in these Jewish communities since the journey back and forth to Palestine could not be accomplished in a day. They may very well have traded lessons in rabbinic teachings for lodging and food.

In addition, clear evidence exists for a second-century rabbinic academy in Nisibis, a major city about 100 miles to the northwest of Aphrahat's supposed diocese of Mar Mattai (near Ninveh).⁵² The Jewish community there was weakened in numbers by the fourth century, possibly owing to a growing Christian presence.⁵³ If the Jewish community had been "rabbinic" in the second century, it would be unlikely that it would have reverted to "pre-rabbinic" or "Yahwistic" in the fourth century. Moreover, Nisibis' expanding Christian population might have turned to Aphrahat for guidance, and that, very likely, would have drawn that bishop into closer contact with the Jews of Nisibis. Granted it would be difficult to say who exactly was a rabbinic Jew even in the fourth century—let alone the second—as rabbinic Judaism itself was an evolving phenomenon in these centuries. As scholars such as Daniel Boyarin have been

arguing for the last few years, it would be very hard to peg down any Jew before the fourth century as “rabbinic,” given that the thing we call “rabbinic Judaism” was an emerging phenomenon.⁵⁴ Yet any Jew, post 70 CE (and probably many Diaspora Jews pre-70), in order to continue living a Torah-based life, must have engaged in some sort of interpretive enterprise. What we have in hand today descends from rabbinic circles, but surely they were not the only interpreters of biblical texts, just the lucky ones to have their legacy survive. Moreover, I wish to argue that that which we call “rabbinic” today might not have been exclusively “rabbinic” in the second to fourth centuries. I do not imagine any Jewish community that did not attempt to interpret the biblical texts in some way. Thus, Aphrahat and his community fit squarely into the larger shared Aramaic biblical interpretive milieu. What I call “rabbinic,” for lack of another term, most likely encompasses a larger variety of Jewish (and other) interpretive adventures in these locales and centuries.

It is evident from Aphrahat’s writings that while he may have spent most of his time in the north, he also communicated with the Christian communities in the south, specifically in Ctesiphon, the seat of the Catholicos in later centuries.⁵⁵ Mahoza, a suburb of Ctesiphon, was home to Rava, a leading rabbi of the mid-fourth-century generation. It is possible that Aphrahat addressed the problems plaguing the southern Christian community in its struggle with a large and vibrant rabbinic Jewish populace while at the same time dealing with a similar phenomenon in the north. Lastly, while it is true that Aphrahat does not mention the Talmud or the rabbinic academies in which it was studied, he does refer to a Jewish wise man with the same title as the Rabbis referred to themselves: *hakham*.⁵⁶ Yaakov Elman has also argued that Mahoza, being a suburb of the capital city, was a very cosmopolitan town. The Jewish community and its rabbinic leaders, such as Rava, were not immune to its influences. He also suggests that there is evidence that “interfaith dialogue” was not uncommon among its religious leaders. Hence, Mahoza/Ctesiphon presents itself as a possible place of meeting, sharing, or influencing—conscious or not—between religious communities.⁵⁷

Thus, while Neusner rightly criticizes Funk, Ginzberg, and Gavin for over-emphasizing the parallels between Aphrahat and the Rabbis, he seems to go too far in the other direction in his attempt to show Aphrahat’s complete isolation from rabbinic or other Jews. I believe that there is evidence to show that Aphrahat and the Rabbis or other Jews were in closer contact than he would have us believe, even if their contact was through third parties. While Aphrahat may not have had personal relationships with rabbis, certainly his parishioners knew other Jews, for this is how most of his narrations are reported, as our opening quote illustrates. Although Aphrahat did not meet a rabbi or a Jew

himself, in this case, he clearly heard a story about “one of the members of our Church” and a “Jew.”

One must also consider Marie-Joseph Pierre’s claim that the “Jew” in Aphrahat’s writing is a literary fiction, written for internal consumption only. Pierre contends that Aphrahat’s community suffered from Judaizing—the Christian practice of keeping Jewish rites and rituals such as the dietary laws and Passover—and that, hence, the Jewish arguments that Aphrahat records did not come directly from fourth-century Jews but, rather, from descendants of Jewish converts, or “Jewish-Christians,” eliminating the possibility that Aphrahat maintained contact with *any* Jews, rabbinic or other.⁵⁸ In short, Pierre has claimed that while Aphrahat’s style and some of his doctrines appear similar to rabbinical formulations, in actuality they were inherited from “Jewish-Christians” and other early Jewish converts to Christianity.⁵⁹

In trying to detect whether the Jews in Aphrahat’s writings were real or imagined, it’s helpful to consider that, as a rhetorician and author, Aphrahat most likely created the Jewish sage in his writings with whom he conversed. The conversations between Aphrahat and the sage must be considered fictitious or, at best, composites. But they are probably also dependent on live encounters experienced or retold that Aphrahat combined and recast in his essays. The opponent in question, however, most likely represents some version of fourth-century Judaism and the Jews who practice it in Aphrahat’s day: no mention is made of “Jewish-Christians” or Jewish converts, while again and again Aphrahat addresses the Jews in his writings or instructs his readers to answer back to the Jews with these arguments that he puts forward. In fact, he specifically noted a number of times that his purpose was to arm his readers for verbal combat with the Jews, for their arguments confused the Christians.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Aphrahat’s first ten homilies do not polemicize against Judaism. It is only after the onset of the Persian regime’s anti-Christian persecutions that he takes up the subject, suggesting that the issue at hand was not mere Judaizing but a more serious issue of “backsliding” all the way into Judaism. Christians were more likely converting or returning to their native Judaism in the face of martyrdom than simply Judaizing.

Establishing that Aphrahat or his parishioners knew or associated with Jews remains a separate issue from whether those Jews were rabbinic. As I noted above, certainly not all people who called themselves Jews in the fourth century could be defined as “rabbinic” even by fourth-century standards. Rabbinic literature and culture was still in its formative stage and remained fluid. Although the Rabbis who composed the material may have had a sense of self, there is no telling how many non-rabbis looked to the Rabbis as final arbiters of things “Jewish.” Nevertheless, the rabbinic material is all we have to go by

for defining “Jewishness” in this period. That many of Aphrahat’s “Jewish” statements and claims also appear in the rabbinic literature only suggests that they are also rabbinic, but not that they are exclusively rabbinic. We do not know how far rabbinic ideas permeated the general Jewish cultural outside of rabbinic circles, nor how large those circles were. In the end we can only say that it is more likely than not that, given the geographic and literary crossovers, Aphrahat’s Jews were rabbinic in some manner.

The issue of audience and rhetoric is inherent in any of our ancient Christian documents concerning Jews and Judaism. Many scholars have convincingly argued that later fourth-century writers, such as Ephrem, Chrysostom, and Augustine, “think through” Jews and Judaism to get to another point (often against competing Christian doctrine). What they say about Jews and Judaism may not actually reflect historical reality.⁶¹ No doubt this is in part true with Aphrahat as well. His purpose, after all, is to teach Christians how to be Christians. What interests me in the end is not so much whether or to what extent Aphrahat’s Jews are real, but whether Aphrahat’s biblical exegesis reflects a cultural reality in which both Jews and Christians participated.

Ultimately, I suspect that Aphrahat’s community had dealings with Jews of some sort and in this way were exposed to the fourth century’s variety of Judaisms. Aphrahat in writing his *Demonstrations* responds to the confusion his parishioners felt when confronted with other manifestations of a biblically derived religion that did not seem so different from their own. This Christian community at least still suffered some sort of separation anxiety. They were concerned about theological beliefs and doctrines, which were more integral to their self-identification than whether or not to follow biblically based ritual observances such as the Sabbath. Second, through the contacts established between the communities there must have been interchange of ideas and biblical traditions and interpretations—not necessarily between Aphrahat and a rabbi, but between common Christians and Jews. Yet I hesitate to say that the *only* means by which Aphrahat acquired traditions or texts that have parallels in the rabbinic literature would have been through direct interchange with rabbis or rabbinically influenced Jews, given that Aphrahat and the Rabbis share a cultural literary milieu from which these similarities most likely arise. So, while Pierre argues that Aphrahat’s seemingly “rabbinic” texts come from former Jews and “Jewish-Christians” in his community, I posit an even broader field of possible exchange, discovery, and mutual development. While Neusser makes a similar claim, this claim for him is proof positive of absolutely no active interchange between Jews and Christians in fourth-century Mesopotamia. I prefer not to exclude all possibilities of actual dialogue or intellectual cross-fertilization.⁶²

My reading of Aphrahat convinces me that Aphrahat is neither a “docile pupil of the Rabbis” nor completely ignorant of rabbinic Judaism. He neither descends from rabbinic circles nor copies wholesale from their texts, nor is he so geographically and intellectually isolated that he has no knowledge of the Jewish exegetical developments in his day (whether he recognizes them all as “Jewish” or not). Rather, he clearly shares biblical traditions, exegesis, and interpretive strategies with his rabbinic contemporaries through the broader literary milieu of Aramaic-speaking peoples of Persian Mesopotamia. Aphrahat writes in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic not far removed from the Aramaic of the Rabbis. The biblical text he reads (or has memorized) is also probably in Aramaic or Syriac, again not so dissimilar from the Hebrew and targumic biblical versions of the Rabbis. Furthermore the parallels between Aphrahat and the Rabbis are not restricted to his polemical material but appear throughout his writings. It seems quite possible to me that Aphrahat and his contemporaneous rabbis had access to similar biblical interpretive collections and “libraries” that they depended upon equally to develop their exegesis and theology. Under these circumstances it would not be surprising to find similar interpretive patterns and traditions.

While it is not my purpose to equate Aphrahat’s “Jewish” exclusively with “rabbinic,” I see no reason to exclude “rabbinic” from whatever Aphrahat understands about “Jewish.” Moreover, I believe he provides us with an opportunity to study what we have already determined “rabbinic” from another angle. How innovative is the rabbinic material? How unique? What other cultural influences come into play in its development? I will argue that some of Aphrahat’s sources are “proto-rabbinic” or even early rabbinic—that is, they stem from interpretive collections that end up within the rabbinic corpus in one form or another but also have literary lives outside the rabbinic circles. The evolution of these traditions within Aphrahat’s writings in comparison to their contextualization and development within the rabbinic corpus provides us with a new perspective on the development of rabbinic modes of thought and interpretation. Aphrahat’s reading of text and tradition can illuminate other options of interpretation not followed through in our present rabbinic literature or even to highlight undercurrents present but not developed fully. In other places Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* simply illuminate the biblical traditions, interpretive methodologies, and literary idiosyncrasies that he shared with the Rabbis through their common Aramaic milieu in fourth-century Persian Mesopotamia. In sum, I posit that Aphrahat and the Rabbis share a matrix of text, tradition, language, and literary culture that shapes their exegetical output. For the purposes of this study I also submit that, even if they never met face to face in open discussion, this common matrix propels them into parallel and overlapping discourses on holiness and sexuality, which often

depend on the same exegetical units and strategies. This shared cultural milieu allows for cross-fertilization without direct interaction. The “Jewish” arguments that pollinate Aphrahat’s anti-Jewish discourse really represent only part of this cultural interchange. While some actual exchange—person to person—surely took place, Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* reveal a more deeply rooted shared literary tradition.

The Aramaic-Mesopotamian Context

Though widely spoken by many peoples in the area, Syriac (one of many dialects of Aramaic) evolved into an almost exclusively Christian language in the first centuries of the Common Era. In tension with Jewish Aramaic and Gentile and especially Christian Greek, Syriac proved useful as an independent Christian linguistic and cultural vehicle. Furthermore, by adopting a distinct and non-Greek language, Syriac Christian authors had other literary traditions of their own to emulate, draw on, or contradict. Syriac Christians were free to pursue their theological and other writings in a different literary milieu than many of their Greek Christian counterparts. Thus, Syriac Christian texts must be studied within the larger Aramaic literary context, as well as in comparison to developments in Greek and Latin Christianity. Aphrahat, as one of the earliest known Syriac Christian authors, proves essential to this program.

The fourth-century writers Aphrahat and Ephrem centered on sacramental and devotional rituals of an elite celibate community. These writers marked several transitions in Syriac Christian development. By the mid-fourth century, when these two writers flourished, celibacy was no longer a prerequisite for baptism (as it appears possibly to have been for some elements of the early Syriac Church); instead, celibacy was reserved for an inner core—the *bnay qyama*—the few, the elect, the elite at the center of the Church. Married householders were now a part of the Church, not outside it. The yearning for the next world was pushed to the background as the day-to-day existence, maintenance, and expansion of the Church predominated. Along with this functional transition the theological explanation for celibacy changed as well. Celibacy was no longer a mechanism to change the world, but a physical manifestation of the single-minded-one’s (*ihidaya*’s) dedication to God. Celibacy became the starting point for Aphrahat, not the end point. Furthermore, celibacy—which was taken for granted in the early manifestations of Syriac Christianity—found itself in need of support, explanation, and apology. Aphrahat appeared on the scene at a theologically defining moment.

Nevertheless, Syriac and its Christianization did not evolve in a vacuum, but in the Aramaic culture of the Near East. While Hellenistic influences may

have been minimal, others were in abundance. Whatever the origins and later stimuli, whatever the subsequent innovations in the Syriac language, Syriac Christians could not remain unaffected by the surrounding cultures—even as they tried to differentiate themselves from them. This is nowhere more true than in the theological arena. As an Aramaic dialect, Syriac remains closer linguistically to Jewish Aramaic and Hebrew than to Hellenistic Greek. The Syriac Christian Bible translations develop analogously to the Jewish Aramaic Targums as interpretive texts, transmitting extra-biblical traditions as well as translations. While some scholars even claim that the Peshitta at core is originally a Jewish Targum translation later adopted by the Christians and abandoned by the Jews, as was the Septuagint before it, M. P. Weitzman disagrees. Weitzman contends that the Peshitta is a direct translation from the Hebrew by Syriac-speaking Christians. Yet he allows that even these translators must have depended on or consulted a wide range of sources, including targumic and Greek translations, as well as other extra-biblical sources that would have been available to all biblical scholars in the Aramaic milieu.⁶³

In the Syriac-speaking East, as opposed to the Greek-speaking West, Christians pursued their biblical studies and theological speculation in a linguistic, literary, and cultural milieu more similar to that of the Palestinian, and later the Babylonian, rabbis (both of whom wrote in similar dialects of Aramaic and Hebrew) than to their Greek-speaking coreligionists. Whether or not Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians exchanged biblical readings, their shared literary heritage and linguistic culture further provoked similar interpretive methods and biblical traditions. These traditions and methods did not necessarily lead to similar practices (i.e., sexual renunciation), but the methods for interpreting text and using text as support for religious practice remain constant. Hence, while I argue that Syriac asceticism, in part, can be traced to ancient biblical interpretive traditions, I also suggest that once asceticism was established in the Syriac Church, the way in which it is presented, discussed, and supported by its fourth-century proponents relates more to their rabbinic exegetical practices than to Greco-Roman Christian hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, I believe it quite possible that there might have been an “exchange” or, better, a borrowing of early Jewish interpretive traditions that postdates the earliest inceptions of Christianity, takes place in Syrian territory, and further enhances the similarities found in Syriac and rabbinic biblical interpretive tradition. Robert Murray, while arguing for a link back to Qumran sectarian Judaism (which I do not agree with), nevertheless suggests the mechanism and place for such a transfer of influences: Nisibis.⁶⁴ Nisibis was a city on the crossroads from East to West—a thriving metropolis where goods and ideas were readily accessible. Up until the mid-second century there was an

active Jewish community that supported an academy. This community and academy disappears by the mid-fourth century, when Christians and their schools dominate the city. While it is possible that many Jews simply moved south to other centers of Jewish learning and prosperity as Nisibis was increasingly Christianized, it is equally possible that many of those Jews converted to Christianity—taking their learning, texts and biblical traditions with them. By the time they “reappear” in Aphrahat, we can trace developmental trajectories. The tradition of Moses’ celibacy may very well be one of those well-traveled and translated Aramaic traditions.

This book is divided into three parts. The first two parts are shorter and deal with the earliest texts. Part I (chapters 1 and 2) examines the Hebrew biblical and Second Temple literatures’ various hermeneutics of holiness and attempts to trace trajectories of holiness from the Hebrew biblical texts into these post-biblical writings. I use the term “Hebrew biblical” to refer to texts that are part of the standard canonized Hebrew Bible. “Second Temple literature” refers to all those writings that fall between the close of the Hebrew biblical canon and the start of the rabbinic writings, within the Jewish context, and the New Testament writings, within the Christian context. “Post-biblical literature” refers generally to the writings of the Second Temple period, with the exception of those texts written in the Second Temple period that are included within the biblical canon (Ezra and Daniel, for example) and those texts that are also literature of the Second Temple period but are included in the Christian canon (Paul, for instance). I generally include the New Testament literature in the broader category of early Christian writings rather than in Second Temple literature. The category of early Christian writings, for the benefit of this study, stretches only into the fourth century.

The second part of the book (chapters 3 and 4) moves into the early Christian literature, starting with the New Testament writings. I focus my attention almost exclusively on Paul in chapter 3, as he is an essential link between the earlier writings of the Second Temple period and the developing Christian literature. Chapter 4 focuses on early Syriac Christian writings, as background to Aphrahat.

Part III (chapters 5 through 7) centers on the writings of Aphrahat, the rabbinic literature, and the interrelatedness of their various hermeneutics of holiness. Here, we find the shared literary and cultural influences of the Mesopotamian-Aramaic milieu in which these two exegeting communities flourished. It is also here that Moses appears as holy-protagonist.