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The Truth About the Virgin: Sex and Ritual in the Dead Sea Scrolls

Ita Sheres and Anne Kohn Blau

(New York: Continuum, 1995) 236 pp., \$27.50

REVIEWED BY

SIDNIE WHITE CRAWFORD

A book about gender in the Dead Sea Scrolls is long overdue. For many years, the scholarly consensus that Qumran (where the scrolls were found) was inhabited by an isolated Jewish sect of celibate “monks” made the subject of gender, peripheral at best. With that consensus increasingly called into question, more writers are discovering material about women in the scrolls (see, for example, the excellent work of Eileen Schuller). A book that brings this material together is therefore very desirable. Unfortunately, this is not the book.

Author Sheres and Blau Fall into an all-too-common trap among interpreters of the scrolls: They assume that something mysterious or esoteric lies hidden in the scrolls and needs to be uncovered. They begin with several chapters of introductory material explaining the corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Greco-Roman cultural Milieu and its misogyny. These chapters are well researched and documented, although I did find it disturbing that the authors do not differentiate between the various “schools” of scroll scholarship. It is unusual, to say the least, to find Robert Eisenman and Lawrence Schiffman footnoted in the same paragraph, as if their conclusions concerning the scrolls were in any way compatible!

It is in the later chapters that Sheres and Blau embark on their dangerous journey into the realm of speculation. Their main thesis, contained in chapters 4 through 7, is that the male covenanters at Qumran practiced an elaborate ritual of castration, which left them incapable of participating in sexual acts, any and all of which the sect considered polluting. However, since the sect was also eager to bring about the birth of the messiah, they engaged in a parallel ritual: the artificial insemination of a young virgin girl with semen from a chosen male member of the sect. They base these rather astonishing conclusions on an interpretation of a supposed “secret ritual” described in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q400–405, 11Q17) and another “secret ritual” discovered in 4Q502, a *Ritual of Marriage*. In no way do the authors offer any convincing proof for their speculations. In both cases, the material can be adequately explained as liturgical texts accompanying worship and marriage (as Carol Newsom has done in her edition of the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*). There is no justification for forcing an esoteric interpretation upon these texts: there is enough unclarity in even the most banal interpretation to keep researchers busy for a long time to come.

Though it addresses a worthy topic, *The Truth About the Virgin* is not a work of serious scroll scholarship.

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