

Sisters of Sinai - How Two Lady Adventurers Found the Hidden Gospels by Janet Soskice.  
Chatto and Windus 2009.

Gazing at the beautiful manuscript of the Codex Sinaiticus in the subdued lighting of the British Library in London, few observers would hitherto have been aware not only of the extraordinary tale of how the Library came to possess it but also of its provenance. A handful might know of the unscrupulous Constantin Von Tischendorf who gulled the monks of the St Catherine Monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai into letting him remove a priceless text from their collection, but until *Sisters of Sinai* I suspect that hardly any would have heard of the Scottish sisters Agnes and Margaret Smith and known the extraordinary story of their engagement with the Monastery, their travels to Egypt, their self-taught scholarship and philanthropy, and their role in the separate tale of Solomon Schechter and the Cairo Genizah.

Thanks to Janet Soskice, Reader in Philosophical Theology at Cambridge University, this story has now been brought to the widest possible audience, and a truly amazing story it is.

Independently wealthy due to the good fortune of their father, Agnes and Margaret Smith, two sisters who remained devoted to each other until the end of their lives, even though each was briefly married, were able to live independent life styles unusual for their time. Their travels took them to Egypt on numerous occasions, and they made visits to the Monastery of Saint Catherine with whose monks and manuscripts they became very familiar. Moving from Scotland they settled in Cambridge where they became acquainted with some of the university's leading Orientalists, enjoying a love-hate relationship with those who refused to take them seriously because of their lack of academic background.

*Sisters of Sinai* tells the story of the sisters in great detail, particularly focussing on their work in the library of the monastery, and their discovery of manuscripts that have contributed a great deal to knowledge of the early years of Christianity and the study of its sacred texts. It describes the battles they fought with jealous academics and their redoubtable wives as well as with the Cambridge academic authorities that denied them the recognition they so richly deserved.

One of the most fascinating chapters concerns Schechter and the Cairo Genizah, for it was the purchase of some Hebrew fragments by the sisters in Cairo, one of which turned out to be a section of Ecclesiasticus that led Schechter to the Genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue with which his name will be forever associated.

*Sisters of Sinai* is a wonderfully written, pacy biography with more than enough story for any reader and a great deal of interest for students of the Bible and Semitic languages. It fills an important gap in the knowledge of many of us about the role played by the Smith sisters in the discovery of some major manuscripts and reminds those who labour in this field of study of the debt they owe to these two remarkable women.

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