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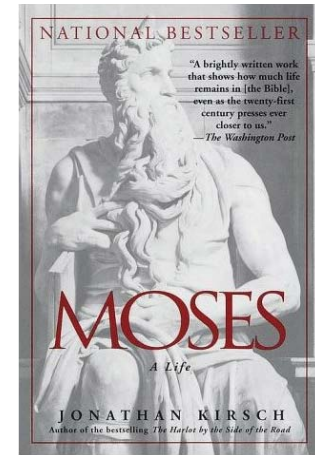
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Moses: A Life

Jonathan Kirsch

New York: Ballantine Books, 1998
415 pp., \$27.50 (hardback)

Reviewed by Sidnie White Crawford



Meek and arrogant, mild and unrelentingly harsh, merciful and cruel—Moses is one of the most difficult characters in the Bible. But Jonathan Kirsch, in this readable and well-researched account of Moses the lawgiver, does not shy away from those contradictions; instead, he emphasizes them. In so doing, Kirsch, a book columnist for the Los Angeles Times and also a lawyer, has made accessible one of the great figures of the Bible.

Readers expecting a straightforward historical biography of Moses will be disappointed, for, as Kirsch makes clear, there is very little in the life of Moses that is historically verifiable. In fact, “much of what we think we know about Moses is simply made up.” For example, popular culture provides two iconic images of Moses: the first is Michelangelo’s magnificent statue of the horned Moses (which serves as the cover illustration for the book), and the second is Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, whom Kirsch calls “the definitive image of Moses in late 20th-century popular culture.” The Bible, however, gives almost no physical description of Moses. It comes closest in the Book of Exodus, where it reports that after Moses’ 40-day sojourn on the mountain, his face glowed with an eerie light, which caused him to wear a veil until his death. (Kirsch points out that a mistranslation in the Latin Bible suggested that Moses had sprouted horns, the source of Michelangelo’s horned statue.)

With the biblical depiction so sketchy, Kirsch next turns to ancient commentary, including the Talmud, midrash, Philo, Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, to see what it adds to the portrait of Moses. Kirsch claims that “the legend and lore have so permeated the life story of Moses that much of what we think we know about him does not come from the Bible at all.” This is a legitimate approach, but the reader should remember that this material is legendary and adds practically nothing to our knowledge of the historical Moses.

Kirsch follows the order of the Bible, beginning with the birth of Moses (chapter 1, “Born at the Right Time”) and ending with his mysterious death on Mt. Pisgah. He always begins with the biblical text, setting out the story and noticing any gaps or contradictions. He next turns to the ancient commentators, recounting some of the more interesting legends associated with the biblical account. He then attempts to elucidate both the biblical account and the ancient commentators with the help of modern scholarship.

To his credit, Kirsch does not claim to be a biblical scholar or to know more than he does. When scholarship is stymied, he simply acknowledges it and moves on. For example, he recounts the ongoing debate over the identity of the Habiru, mentioned in the el-Amarna texts (a 14th-century B.C.E. Egyptian archive of pharaonic correspondence) and discusses whether or not they can be identified with the Hebrews of the Bible. Kirsch does not attempt to take a definitive position, but instead acknowledges that “the Israelites of the Book of Exodus might be characterized as Habiru in the sense that they were landless wanderers who found their way to Egypt, but they were almost certainly not the Habiru of the Amarna Letters.” This is a sensible kind of weighing of the evidence that a nonspecialist reader can trust.

I have only two criticisms of this otherwise fine book. The first is that Kirsch relies on the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible into English. This translation, which closely follows the King James Version, is difficult for the mod-

ern reader, and the language often obscures what Kirsch is attempting to clarify. He would be better served with a more up-to-date translation. The second has to do with the extra-biblical sources Kirsch uses to flesh out his portrait of Moses. Kirsch has missed a wealth of Second Temple literature that is older than the texts he turns to and that adds to the legendary information about Moses: the Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. These include the Testament of Moses, Jubilees and other works that rewrite the Bible (which is why scholars call them rewritten Bible texts), and works claiming to have been written by Moses. For example, in his discussion of the Song of Miriam (Exodus 15:21), Kirsch notes that the two lines that make up the song were once thought to be a fragment of a longer work (although most scholars now believe this short verse to be the original). What he fails to note is that the Dead Sea Scroll known as 4QReworked Pentateuch^b (4Q365) contains a longer version of the Song of Miriam, the only one known from antiquity.* While this longer Song of Miriam is not original and probably was composed during the Second Temple period, it sheds interesting light on one ancient exegete’s handling of a perceived gap in the biblical text. The inclusion of more of this kind of Second Temple literature would have strengthened Kirsch’s book.

Nevertheless, this is a very fine book for nonspecialists and deserves a wide audience. Last year I recommended to *BR* readers *The Harlot by the Side of the Road* (Bible Books, June 1998), Jonathan Kirsch’s first foray into biblical literature. I am happy to be able to do the same for his second book, *Moses: A Life*.

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* See Sidnie White Crawford, “The Fluid Bible,” *BR*, June 1999; and Phyllis Trible, “Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows,” *BR*, February 1989.