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June 1998

Review of *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, by Jonathan Kirsch

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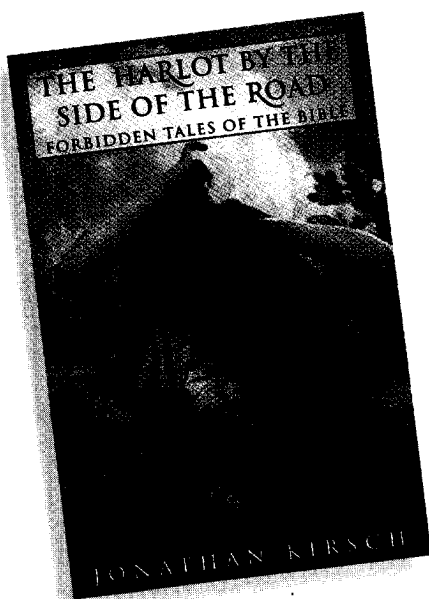
Crawford, Sidnie White, "Review of *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, by Jonathan Kirsch" (1998). *Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department*. 58.
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BIBLE BOOKS

BR

Sex, Violence and Greed



The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible

Jonathan Kirsch

(New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 378 pp., \$27.00 (hardback)

SIDNIE WHITE CRAWFORD

Many modern readers think of the Bible as a “dry and preachy” book, not having much sympathy for the all-too-human passions of sex, violence and greed. In this book, Jonathan Kirsch, author, book columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and practicing lawyer, attempts to change that impression, to reveal the Bible’s full-

ness in recounting human complexity. In the process, Kirsch hopes “to take back the Bible from the strict and censorious people who wave it in

our faces and to restore it to the worldly man or woman who will appreciate the flesh-and-blood passions that are described in the Holy Scriptures.”

Unlike most books about the Bible, this one begins with a warning: “The stories you are about to read are some of the most violent and sexually explicit in all of Western literature. They are tales of human passion in all of its infinite variety: adultery, seduction, incest, rape, mutilation, assassination, torture, sacrifice, and murder. And yet every one of these stories is drawn directly from the pages of the Holy Bible.”

“Hidden away in the odd cracks and corners of Holy Scriptures,” these stories have been overlooked because their contents are often shocking. Religious authorities, according to Kirsch, have smoothed over, euphemized away, and just plain ignored these stories, leaving most readers unaware of their existence.

Kirsch draws attention to the lesser-known accounts of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:1-38), the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:1-31), Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38:1-26), Zipporah and Moses (Exodus 4:24-26), Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11:1-40), the traveler

and his concubine (Judges 19:1-30), and Tamar and Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-22).

Kirsch treats each story in two or three chapters. The first chapter retells the story in modern English, expanded and embellished with details not found in the biblical text. As a check on his creativity, Kirsch includes the biblical story in boxes alongside his retold story. For this purpose, Kirsch uses the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation—one of the few weaknesses of the book: This archaic translation will be difficult for the average reader to comprehend easily. Kirsch would have been better served by using a more modern translation, for example, the New Jewish Publication Society translation, published in 1985.

In his expansions and embellishments, Kirsch draws on extrabiblical retellings of the stories, such as rabbinic midrash, as well as his own imagination. For example, in the story of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 19, the daughter is nameless. However, when Pseudo-Philo, a first-century C.E. Jewish author, retold the tale, he gave the daughter’s name as Seila, and Kirsch reuses this name in his version.

Following the retelling, Kirsch devotes a chapter to explaining the story and why it has been so difficult for believers to accept this tale as part of the Bible. Kirsch includes a very readable discussion of contemporary scholarship on the passage and then draws his own conclusions. For example, in the story of Zipporah and Moses (Exodus 4), the text seems to say that God attacked Moses on his way back to Egypt and attempted to kill him! Kirsch

notes that Moses appears to be saved by Zipporah's action when she circumcises her son and then smears the blood on somebody's (God's or Moses') feet (or genitals). He attributes this story to an ancient tradition of the need to appease the deity by bloodletting. This may be uncomfortable for our contemporary theological notions (a God who demands human blood and threatens to kill his prophet would seem to contradict a por-

trait of God as all-loving and merciful), but it is based on sound scholarship. These chapters illustrate the thoroughness of Kirsch's research in preparing this book, both through the endnotes and the extensive bibliography, which lead the interested reader to further research.

The Harlot by the Side of the Road would be an excellent addition to the library of the interested layperson or a valuable supplemental text in an undergraduate course.

Jonathan Kirsch has produced a book that is a responsible treatment of some rather shocking and sensational biblical stories, and I recommend it to the readers of BR.

Sidnie White Crawford is associate professor of Hebrew and chair of the department of classics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches

Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch

The Family, Religion, and Culture series, ed. by Don S. Browning and Ian S. Evison

(Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997) 329 pp., \$25.00 (paperback)

REVIEWED BY DENNIS C. DULING

"Family values" has recently become a catchword among traditional Jews and Christians, especially politicians. Many proponents cite the Bible in support of these values. Yet how much do we really know about family values in the biblical world?

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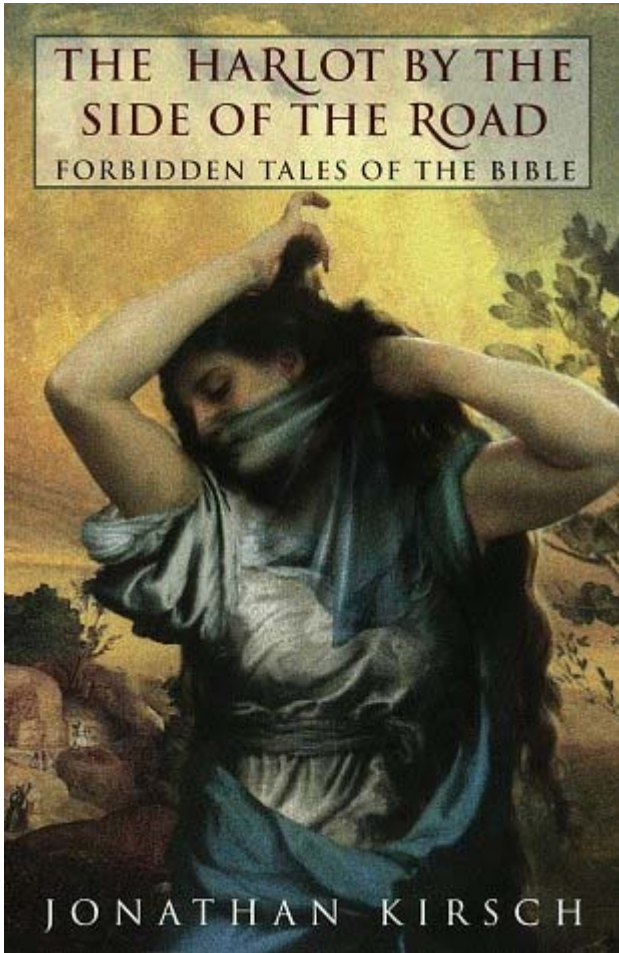
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THE HARLOT BY THE
SIDE OF THE ROAD
FORBIDDEN TALES OF THE BIBLE



JONATHAN KIRSCH