

HAROLD BLOOM AND "J": A REVIEW ARTICLE

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The Book of J. Translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg. Interpreted by Harold Bloom. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, 340 pp., \$21.95.

Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University and Berg Professor of English at New York University, may have penned the most blasphemous book ever written. He credits his heroine, "J," however, with this feat: "From the standpoint of normative Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, J is the most blasphemous writer that ever lived, far surpassing the beleaguered Salman Rushdie." In truth, however, J—whom Bloom prefers over the rest of the Biblical authors—is a projection of his own psyche, his own invention, as this review will validate, and therefore he condemns himself. Were this eccentric book by an author of lesser stature and wit it would be written off as a joke. But because it was written by one of America's preeminent literary critics and sold like hot cakes when it hit the market in the fall of 1990, it is no laughing matter.

Bloom deconstructs traditional interpretations of J in every episode he selects for commentary. With regard to the gift-of-the-bride story: "J is not in the business . . . of endorsing marriage as such, let alone of considering Yahweh the establisher and sanctifier of marriage." About the Serpent and the fall: "We have no reason to believe the serpent malevolent. . . . J has given us no candidates for culpability, except perhaps Yahweh, already portrayed as a bungler in his original creation of candidates fit for Adam. Setting the tree of knowing good and bad as prohibition and temptation is a parallel blunder. . . . Nothing could be more incommensurate than Yahweh's punishments and the childish offenses that provoked them." He explains Cain's murder of Abel as "a murder provoked by the arbitrariness of Yahweh." The infamous "sons of god" in Genesis are not condemned in J. Rather, she has "a wry appreciation of those mythic men and women." In J's tower of Babel story "Yahweh is . . . an antithetical imp or sublime mischief-maker, in no way morally or spiritually superior to the builders of Babel." For the patriarchs "J has no particular affection . . . just as her attitude toward Yahweh is hardly marked by reverence or by awe." Sinai is "one of J's most extraordinary ironies, because it plainly shows us a Yahweh who is not only at the verge of going out of control but who keeps warning Moses to tell the people to watch out, because their God knows that he is about to lose all restraint." And on and on.

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The book is divided into four parts: Bloom's introduction (pp. 9-55), Rosenberg's translation of the "Book of J," which is strangely in much larger type than the rest of the book (pp. 57-172), Bloom's commentary on J (pp. 173-269), and "After Commentary," Bloom's reflections as a literary critic about J.

I. BLOOM'S ASSUMPTIONS

The key to his commentary and reflections is the introduction. Here Bloom lays down his convictions on which he builds his work. In my opinion there are essentially seven.

1. *Reject the Bible's witness to its inspiration.* "I myself," he writes, "do not believe that the Torah is any more or less the revealed Word of God than are Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or Tolstoy's novels."

2. *Accept Rosenberg's English version of J as the basis for his study.* He explains: "The primary virtue I find in David Rosenberg's translation of what we have ventured to call the Book of J is that he has preserved the Yahwist's ironic tone and stance, while remembering throughout how individual her irony is." The choice is important because Bloom recognizes J by style more than by substance, and since Bloom does not know Hebrew, though he pretends otherwise, he is dependent on Rosenberg. He writes in his "After Commentary": "One recognizes J not by the use of the name Yahweh rather than Elohim, but by vision and word-play, by irony and humor, by the shock of an originality that cannot be staled by cultural repetitions."

3. *Accept a modified documentary hypothesis.* According to the documentary theory the first four books of the Pentateuch were woven together deep in the postexilic period, about the time of Ezra, by a redactor (R) out of three distinct earlier literary strands labeled J, E and P. J is usually thought to have been written during the Solomonic era, ca. 950 B.C., but Bloom dates J at 915 B.C. E is dated about a century later, but Bloom thinks it presents an early revision of J. D was written two or three hundred years later with a focus on Josiah's reform in 621, and P about a generation after the fall of Babylon in 587, in the late exilic or early postexilic period, blurring into R. According to the hypothesis these literary strands present somewhat competing and developing views on Israel's history and laws. At the end of the book, in an appendix, Rosenberg tells his readers that he relied on Martin Noth to determine the limits of the J document and "the insights of Harold Bloom."

4. *Reckon E, D, P and R as revisers of J.* Bloom goes beyond positing merely that E, D and P presented competing views.¹ Rather, he insists, J

¹ P. Volz had also maintained that if there be an E source it should be described as a reviser of J (P. Volz and W. Rudolph, *Der Elohist als Erzähler: Ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik?* [BZAW 63; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1933] 13).

must be decontextualized and rescued from these normativizing scribes and priests. At the end of his introduction he writes:

I am aware that it may be vain labor, up Sinai all the way, as it were, to seek a reversal of twenty five hundred years of institutionalized misreading. . . . Yet the book of J, though fragmentary, is hardly Mr. David Rosenberg's creation or my own. All I have done is to remove the book of J from its context in the Redactor's Torah and then to read what remains, which is the best and most profound writing in the Hebrew Bible.

Bloom thinks E began the process of revision, but R is his real "villain."

Since the understanding of God in Judaism and Christianity is based on the full and marvelous orchestration of the Pentateuch, not on a poorly preserved and now misconstrued putative J, the god of Bloom's J is very different from theirs. Bloom writes: "The God of the Jews and the Christians, of the Muslims, of the secular scholars and critics, is not the Yahweh of J."

5. *Identify J's personality as an aristocratic woman in 915 B.C.* Bloom imagines J to have been a woman with the personality of an aristocrat, an elitist, a monarchist of Davidic blood, an heir of the Solomonic enlightenment, who wrote at about the time the kingdom fell apart under Rehoboam and Jeroboam. "I will put all my cards on the reader's desk here, face up. My J is a *Gevurah* [*sic*; he means *Gevirah*] ("great lady") of post-Solomonic court circles, herself of Davidic blood, who began writing her great work in the later years of Solomon."

Moreover, Bloom's J longed for the heroics of David and the orderliness of Solomon and was disillusioned about the nation in her own times. His J and her Yahweh are both in love with David and decidedly cool toward both the stammering Moses and the Israelite rank and file. "A life-long monarchist as I read her," says Bloom, "a distruster of priest and people alike, she has more faith in David than in Yahweh."

6. *Envision J as a literary figure who created Yahweh.* Having distanced J from the rest of the Pentateuch, Bloom now distances J from Yahweh by three tactical moves: (1) Yahweh is a literary character, just as Shakespeare's Hamlet is; (2) J created him in the image and likeness of her hero David; (3) J's interests are like those of Shakespeare, to whom Bloom frequently compares J, a powerful writer of personality, disinterested in religion as such. "The Yahwist herself is not a Yahwist," Bloom writes. Bloom's J is bemused by Yahweh as a mother is by an irascible child. "J's attitude toward Yahweh," he writes, "resembles nothing so much as a mother's somewhat wary but still proudly amused stance toward a favorite son who has grown up to be benignly powerful but also eccentrically irascible."

7. *Envision J as a dramatic ironist.* This conviction is the key to Bloom's book, not his contention that J is a woman, as he baited the biting public. Bloom reminds us that "irony" goes back to the Greek word *eiron*,

"dissembler." The normative reading of J understood the all-too-human representations of Yahweh as anthropomorphic, but Bloom loudly denounces that historic reading with some justification. He substitutes for the figure of anthropomorphism the figure of irony. Bloom's J is a grand, fierce, dramatic ironist. She writes with tongue in cheek, expecting her audience to understand the incongruities in her tales better than the characters in it.

Consider, for example, his comment on J's presentation of the Korahite and Reubenite rebellion (Numbers 16). When they rebelled against Moses, it will be recalled, Moses called for the earth to swallow them up, and Yahweh responded to his unique request. Bloom comments:

Nothing in the passage's tone demands that we read this superbly outrageous incident with high seriousness. It is a fabulous tale, and J clearly does not intend that either Moses or Yahweh will look the better for it. . . . An ironic distancing is always at work, even if we cannot be precisely certain of the limits of that irony.

Bloom's J is a seriocomic, consistent ironist. "Irony . . . is the continuous condition of the Book of J. It is at first disconcerting to realize that J is essentially a comic writer," Bloom writes. I would estimate that in Bloom's commentary on J the word "irony," or its equivalents such as "witty," "humorous," "comic," and so forth, occur on the average of at least three times a page. In sum, in Bloom's view J does not mean what she seems to intend.

II. CRITIQUE OF BLOOM'S ASSUMPTIONS

1. *Concerning the inspiration of the Bible.* The Bible's inspiration is a matter of systematic theology and apologetics, well beyond the scope of this review. Nevertheless the matter is urgent, and the point should be made here that those who have a taste for sound theology will see right through Bloom and be repulsed by his blasphemy. Those who do not, however, may become deluded by him and even praise him, as some reviewers do. One's desires are more important than one's reasons. I will expand this point in my critique concerning the identification of J.

2. *Concerning Rosenberg's translation.* Bloom's taste for Rosenberg's translation is more susceptible to objective criticism. Robert Alter rightly rakes Bloom on this matter: "Bloom has made a catastrophic decision in tying his project to the translation of David Rosenberg. . . . There is abundant evidence that when Bloom talks about J he is actually referring to Rosenberg's English version of J, and the distance between the two is very considerable."² Alter first contrasts the beautifully cadenced, predominantly paratactic syntax of J with Rosenberg's "syntactically choppy" and "rhythmically bumpy" English.

Alter then criticizes Rosenberg's lexical work: "More gravely, Rosenberg repeatedly misconstrues biblical terms or attaches arbitrary meaning

² R. Alter, "Harold Bloom's 'J,'" *Commentary* 90/58 (November 1990) 28.

to them."³ No need here to repeat Alter's tedious list of Rosenberg's sorry blunders.

Alter now criticizes Rosenberg for opting for a paraphrase, not a translation: "His truly lethal tactic as a translator, however, and the one on which Bloom builds most, is his decision to make his version a loose . . . variation on the original or an interpretive paraphrase of it."⁴

Alter now directs his guns against Bloom. "It is baffling that a man of Harold Bloom's intelligence should be guilty of so extreme a lapse in taste, even without the ability to judge the philological issues, as to endorse this translation. What is disturbing is that his construction of J is far too often based on things in Rosenberg's undreamt of in J's philosophy."⁵ Alter cites as an example the very passage that Bloom praises in his introduction, the tower of Babel story.

Here are snippets from Rosenberg's translation:

They said, ". . . Without a name we're unbound [*unattested in Hebrew*], scattered over the face of the earth. . . ." Yahweh said, ". . . They conceive this between them, and it leads up until no boundary [*bšr*] exists. . . ." From there Yahweh scattered them over the whole face of earth; the city there came unbound [*unattested in Hebrew*].

Now here is Bloom's comment: "This reinforces Rosenberg's care in repeating the subtle J's play upon 'bound', 'boundary', 'unboundary'." But the word in question, "bound," occurs only once, not three times, in the Hebrew text. The pun is entirely Rosenberg's.

Bloom, however, digs his hole deeper. J's Yahweh, he thinks, curses the snake with the same crucial setting of boundaries:

"Since you did this, you are bound apart [*ʔrr*] from flocks . . . bound [*unattested in Hebrew*] to the ground. . . I make you enemy to woman, enmity bound [*unattested in Hebrew*] between your seed and hers."

Again, the pun is the translator's fiction.

Bloom now buries himself with a feint at philology: "J plays incessantly, in these passages and elsewhere, upon the Hebrew stem *ʔrr*, which means 'to restrain or bind, as by a magical spell.'" His definition, I suppose, is based on KB's definition "bind with a curse," but the meaning hangs on "curse," not on "bind," and its connection with "bind" rests on a dubious etymology derived from Akkadian. Alter says:

Such comments as these by Bloom on Rosenberg lead me to the reluctant conclusion that Bloom could not possibly be reading the Bible in the original. He does appear to have enough Hebrew to consult lexicons, not always with great profit, and at one point he provides a translation of his own, which I assume he must have done by looking at existing English versions with some inspection of the Hebrew.⁶

³ Ibid. 29.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 30.

Bloom intends this parade illustration to be an example, not an incidence, of Rosenberg's translation—and ironically it is.

The use of Rosenberg's translation is not incidental to Bloom's argument. Recall that he has an ear for J by her wordplays, but the irony is that they are Rosenberg's, not J's. Let Alter have the last word here:

All this does not entirely invalidate Bloom's bold attempt to rescue the original J from 2,500 years of overlaid editing and institutional interpretation, but it surely casts a large shadow of doubt over his undertaking. . . . How seriously would we take someone who claimed that Shakespeare's sonnets were really written by a contemporary countess if we know that the critic had read the sonnets mainly in a highly eccentric Italian translation, with intermittent references to the original aided by an Italian-English dictionary?⁷

3. *Concerning the documentary hypothesis.* This is not the place to dispute the existence of J, but certain cogent points about the documentary hypothesis should be noted.

First, Bloom himself implies that his project is impossible. He cites approvingly Northrop Frye's contention that R pulverized his sources so thoroughly that, as Bloom writes, "we are totally unable to constitute any of them, J included." Sir Edmond Leach likened the isolating of the Pentateuch's sources to "unscrambling an omelette." Modern Biblical scholarship has moved beyond the questionable attempt to excavate a text to read instead a text holistically.

Also, Bloom's arguments for J's existence are questionable. Had he based himself on the data of normative Biblical scholarship for J's existence, one could not criticize him in particular. But, as noted, Bloom boisterously depends on his feelings, not on scientific data. Though he recognizes his feelings are fictions, beyond rational demonstration, he nevertheless proceeds to preach them with evangelistic zeal. He has heard J's voice, and he follows her like a sheep that has been led astray. He now asks the mixed multitude to follow him, the new Moses, into the unknown wilderness.

4. *Concerning E, D, P and R as revisers of J.* Bloom wrongly assumes that an earlier text is preferred to a later, calculated misreading of it, that a deliberate deconstruction of a text is contrary to the doctrine of inspiration and is necessarily unjust, and that an earlier reading represents a normative earlier stage of theology. All of these assumptions, which are basic to his concluding "theological reflections," are not necessarily right.

Most scholars heretofore believed that the writer of Genesis 1 plundered the Babylonian myth, the *Enuma Elish*, in composing that magnificent account of the creation of the cosmos. David plundered an earlier hymn to Baal to compose Psalm 29. These scholars usually thought the Biblical version better than the earlier pagan texts, and none suggested that the Biblical "misreading" was morally wrong.

Let us now suppose that Jack Miles is right, that Bloom's J is Bathsheba, a Gentile who loved David and had good reason to hate Moses and

⁷ Ibid.

all he stood for.⁸ How deliciously triumphant it would be if R plundered her and successfully made her into the first great theologian in the Bible, as some of the most prominent Biblical scholars interpret J! I do not believe one iota of this hypothesis, but it helps expose the fallacy of Bloom's reasoning.

5. *Concerning the misreading of J by her successors.* Bloom attempts to save J from the deliberate, calculated misreadings of J's successors and the institutionalized interpretations based on them, but ironically he seems unaware that his theory about deliberately misreading a text is itself contextualized. Is it not strange that none, not even the greatest Biblical scholars he admires, has read J as a consistent ironist? And is it not illuminating that his theory about misreading a text occurs at just this time when deconstruction is in the air? In fact, since Derrida proposed that all traditions have won out at the cost of violence to other traditions, deconstruction has been the fad in philosophy, history, hermeneutics and literary criticism. This irony would be comic were it not that its consequences upon gullible students are so tragic.

Finally, Bloom is not convincing that R misread J because he is inconsistent. On the one hand he accuses R again and again of deliberately excising material from J, such as her creation of the cosmos, but on the other hand he is amazed that he left so much. If R is the thoroughgoing revisionist Bloom contends this formidable adversary of his is, Bloom could not have written his book.

6. *Concerning the identification of J.* Bloom's characterization of J's personality as a woman made his book a cause célèbre, exactly as Bloom intended. Ironically, feminism gave the book its notoriety, but Bloom disagrees with feminists about the importance of an author's sex. "Feminist literary critics," he writes, "curiously condemn as what they term 'essentialism' any attempt to describe particular literary characteristics as female rather than male." I do not want to get into that spat here, except to point out the irony.

The truth, however, is that it does not matter a fig to his comments and reflections, or to orthodox theology for that matter, whether J is a man or woman. All of Bloom's literary comparisons to J and her alleged book are to men and their works. Moreover Deborah gave us one of the oldest and most felicitous songs in the Bible, and Hannah gave us one of its first hymns.

What troubles me here is Bloom's lack of honesty and audacious subversivity.

Regarding this lack of honesty, permit me to cite another critic. Jack Miles in his essay writes:

Bloom has lifted the notion that the author J may have been a woman from Richard Elliott Friedman, who proposed it in *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Summit,

⁸ J. Miles, "The Book of B: Bloom, Bathsheba and the Book," *Commonweal* 117/19 (November 9, 1990) 641.

1987). Bloom cites this work in another connection but does not credit Friedman for the provocative hypothesis that Bloom has placed at the center of his own work. Nor is this Bloom's only unacknowledged debt. Frank Moore Cross [in *Canaanite Epic and Hebrew Poetry* (1973)] . . . has been for a generation the learned and subtle proponent of a thesis crucial to *The Book of J*; namely that Israel's epic—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses—must be read in the light of the beliefs and prejudices of the Davidic dynasty. Bloom mentions Cross, as he mentions Friedman, in passing, but here too he fails to acknowledge his indebtedness.

What is also objectionable is that Bloom's method is unabashedly subjective and circular. To be sure, our intuitive literary critic tries to establish his thesis on one or two objective facts. But his few attempts at objective data, of which he is incapable by training or temperament, are silly. As I read Bloom I watched for sober, objective evidence. Alter did the same and likewise found what may be the only one and criticizes it better than I can:

Bloom latches on to a suggestion of Richard Friedman's that J refers in code several times to Rehoboam by using the word *rahav*, "broad," from which that king's name is derived. . . . But since this a perfectly common Hebrew adjective, the line of reasoning resembles that of an analyst in some remote future who, looking at English texts of our own period, would locate them in England between 1939 and 1945 because several occurrences of 'church' were seized on as veiled allusions to Churchill.⁹

Sometimes Bloom feigns to be objective but in fact the argument is farcical. For example, what is his evidence that J is a woman? Well, she has only heroines, no heroes. (The writer of Hebrews 11 obviously thought otherwise.) Bloom admits Joseph is a hero, but according to him Joseph is a surrogate for David, J's real hero. How does one answer a silly argument like that without becoming as silly (Prov 26:4)?

Alter counters Bloom's tendentious evidence that J is a woman by this appropriate analogy:

By the same reasoning, which Samuel Butler similarly invokes for the *Odyssey*, one could easily conclude that *Anna Karenina*, with its splendidly realized if doomed heroine and its large gallery of repulsive, feckless, or clumsy men, must have been written by a woman. The evidence of literary history suggests that there is no reason at all to assume that literary imaginations of the first order are trapped in this fashion within the walls of gender.¹⁰

Bloom's method is in fact unabashedly subjective and circular, not scientific, objective, or cogent. Jack Miles describes the method:

He infers a personality for his "great lady" from what she has written. Then, allowing the inference to feed his imagination, he reads the text again seeking what he might first have missed. The text, now more deeply and artistically understood, further specifies the imagined personality of the author.

⁹ Alter, "Bloom's 'J'" 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 32.

And so on until text and writer (not to speak of critic) stand in a fully achieved reciprocity, creators of each other, as it were.¹¹

The key to all of this is in that parenthesis. The reader's imagination creates the author. "As we read any literary work," Bloom writes, "we necessarily create a fiction or metaphor of its author. The author is perhaps our myth, but the experience of literature partly depends on that myth. For J, we have a choice of myths, and I boisterously prefer mine to that of the biblical scholars." One's imagination, however, is strongly influenced by one's spirit, one's own *psyche*. Bloom's cynical, irreligious spirit will give rise to an altogether different imagination than that of a pious person.

That the approach is boisterous, not sober, can be seen by two essays that have appeared in the past year, both based on Bloom and his diagnostic literary method and drawing different conclusions from his. We already noted Jack Miles' thesis that J is Bathsheba. Alter points to another. "It is instructive to note," Alter writes, "that a new book, working on avowedly Bloomian assumptions, by Leslie Brisman, a Yale colleague and friend of Bloom, uses those assumptions to arrive at precisely the opposite conclusion."¹²

Significantly, J is just like Bloom except for gender: hard, cynical, irreligious, without the slightest interest in holiness, strongly imaginative, and neither an historian nor a theologian. I came to the conclusion that Bloom created J and her god in his image after I had read through the first several pages of his subjective commentary. I found it refreshing that Bloom honestly owned up to the problem in his "After Commentary," and I wondered if Bloom could adequately defend himself against the obvious. "I may be accused," he says, "of creating my own J, and through her my own impish Yahweh." His typical defense, to accuse his opponents of the same fault, is dishonest and exposes that he has none. "I would argue," he writes, "that theologians have created *their* own J—an antiquarian scholar with normative Judaic or Christian beliefs in a transcendental Yahweh, just and orderly, a kind of heavenly university president." His answer is dishonest because he implies that all exegetes and Biblical theologians are antiquarians, that one has to accept his theology or his caricatured opposite, that objective data are in fact impossible to come by. In short, the charge he himself recognizes his readers will lodge against him sticks. He has said nothing to falsify it.

Again one comes back to spirit. How can a reader trust the imagination of a person whom others have shown to be dishonest? The words of Jesus take on new significance: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

7. *Concerning irony.* "Nothing in J is quite what it seems to be," Bloom writes, "and since Yahweh is for J just the name for reality, Yahweh also

¹¹ Miles, "Book" 640.

¹² Alter, "Bloom's 'J'" 32.

cannot ever be what he seems to be." When a writer makes a claim like that against 2,500 years of reading a text at face value, the evidence ought to be compelling. It is not.

Bloom primarily draws this conclusion because he alleges that Yahweh's reactions to humans are incommensurate with what they have done. His commentary mostly dwells on Yahweh's judgment against sin, against lack of faith and of commitment to him. Bloom often sees no wrong even where heretofore almost all readers thought it obvious. For example, regarding Israel's unbelief at Kadesh Barnea he comments: "A rabblement [*sic*] of grasshoppers is tramped on, to no purpose, presumably for having forgotten that their lives are not their own and that their acceptance of the Blessing obliges them to behave more courageously." But if putative J prized the Biblical virtue of courageous faith, then Yahweh's rejection of the inexcusably feckless Israelites to enter the holy land certainly makes sense. Yahweh's reactions to human virtues and vices are as commensurate as the value placed upon them. J's Yahweh, to assume Bloom's argument, is too holy for Bloom, and the faith J requires of those in covenant with him soars beyond his godless imagination.

Text after text should have told Bloom he is on the wrong track, but he either ignores them or trivializes them. For example, "He [Abram] trusted Yahweh, and it was accounted to him as strength" (Gen 15:6), though abused in Rosenberg's rendering, to an honest reader places value on trust in Yahweh. Bloom, however, after citing the classic verse ignores it and, commenting instead on the ceremony that seals the pact that Yahweh made with Abram, says: "Nothing even in J is weirder than the ceremony that celebrates the covenant that has been cut between Abram and Yahweh." To be sure, in his reflections he notes the element of faith: "She represents Abram, Jacob, and Moses as trusting him," but he dismisses that virtue with the offhand remark: "But trust is hardly the dominant element in the relation of any of those three figures to their uncanny God."

Or consider the sublime scene recorded in Exodus 24:

Then Moses ascended, and with him Aaron, Nadav and Avihu his sons, and with them seventy of Israel's elders. They saw the God of Israel. Under his feet a pavement of sapphire was created, a likeness pure as the substance of the sky. He did not lay a hand on them, the noble pillars of Israel. They beheld God; they ate and drank.

The text soars on eagles' wings to the heights of Yahweh's holiness and yet gracious condescension to fellowship with those who had just ratified his covenant on Sinai. Bloom, however, trivializes it through his own irony into a "picnic" on Sinai and a staring match between Yahweh and the Israelites.

Interpretation, as Bloom sees clearly, depends on a writer's tone. "The question of J's tone, her stance, is again at the center of the problem of interpretation," Bloom writes concerning his interpretation of the tower of Babel story. He blinds himself and his readers so as not to see that in interpretation the critic's attitude is just as important. The stance, the tone a critic brings to a text will decide the meaning for him or her.

Once again we come back to the spiritual attitude and preunderstanding of the reader, to the real irony of Bloom's J. Bloom, who wants to dis-

abuse his readers of their unfortunate contextualization by historic religions, is himself utterly contextualized by his own field of literary criticism and looks ridiculous. All of his companions of J come from writers within the tradition of Western literature. For example, he writes: "What J shows to an experienced literary critic [i.e. Bloom] are all the powers of an immensely strong writer, comparable in imagination and rhetoric only to the greatest Western authors: Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Tolstoy." One reviewer on the book's jacket rightly speaks of his "stunning comparisons to a vast number of other writers." His stunning and vast comparisons, however, carry no conviction for they all come from the Western tradition, none from ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures. To be convincing Bloom would have to demonstrate within J's own literary horizon a piece of seriocomic irony about its national deity and its founding ancestors. Without that horizon his comparisons to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Kafka, and on and on, do not amount to a hoot and holler. The fact is that no ancient Near Eastern writer irreligiously lampoons in a seriocomedy its national deity and heroes. In fact there is nothing like it in any literature. Miles explains: "No other nation has so calculatedly undermined its own national myth."

III. CONCLUSION

Bloom's convictions, the foundations of his thesis that J is the most blasphemous writer that ever wrote, are all subjective and boisterous, never objective and convincing. Without argumentation, with a wave of the hand he dismisses the inherited conviction about the Bible's inspiration. He prefers Rosenberg's paraphrase because it matches his own convictions, not for serious philological reasons. He recognizes that the documentary hypothesis is a fiction but is convinced by its style and his ear, not by what others thought solid data, that it is right. His conviction that later contributors deliberately misread J depends on his other conviction that J is a seriocomic, dramatic ironist. The personality of Bloom's J, as he himself admits, is the product of his imagination. His conviction that J has no faith in Yahweh again rests on his most important conviction that she does not mean what the text seems to say. His most important assumption, that she is a dramatic ironist because Yahweh's acts are incommensurate with human behavior, derives from Bloom's inability to imagine with the Biblical writer how holy Yahweh really is and the total commitment he demands of those on whom his blessing rests. The subjectivity and weakness of his diagnostic method is demonstrated by the two alternative reconstructions of J that have already appeared within less than a year.

Where Bloom attempts to ground his convictions in objective fact, such as philology or comparative literature, his arguments are silly and he looks ridiculous. When he tries to defend himself that his fiction is better than others he appears dishonest, for he carelessly assumes that demonstration beyond reasonable doubt is impossible. In a way it is too bad that he is so wrong, for how delicious it would have been to have had the

inspired writer who had the last word in the Pentateuch to have plundered Bloom's J so marvelously!

Bloom's J and her god, I also conclude, derive from Bloom's imagination, not from the Biblical text, in spite of his protests. Consider first the fact that J is just like him apart from gender. Bloom and his J are irreligious, ironic, humorous, and interested in literary characters, not in religion, politics or theology. The coincidence is a bit too much. Consider, second, the fact that for 2,500 years none, not even the most astute readers of the Biblical text, recognized the personality and style of J until Bloom found his own image in J. One could explain this fact away were Bloom the first to discover J. But J in its own right has been studied meticulously by literally hundreds of students and all of them missed—what should have been obvious—that J is just like Bloom. The third consideration puts my thesis beyond reasonable doubt. There is no other writer like J, who treats with bemused detachment his or her nation's deity and its ancestral founders, either in the ancient Near East or elsewhere. In sum, Bloom's J and her impish god are unique, and she is just like him. His delusion about her god is obvious and reveals Bloom's, not J's, psyche. He himself acknowledged that this charge would be brought against him, and, as shown, he has no defense.

The real irony of this book is that Bloom, who wants to decontextualize all the readers of J from their deluded heritage, is himself contextualized by his heritage and so deluded.

I have said nothing about Bloom's brilliant and engaging literary style, for it cannot be evaluated apart from his substance. What sensible person praises the wonderful taste of poison?

Unwittingly and ironically, Bloom drives home the Biblical truth that a person's heart, not his head, is the ultimate arbiter between truth and convictions.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment (1 Cor 1:14–15).

Pascal coined a classic proverb: "A person's heart has its reasons, of which the heart knows nothing. We know this in countless ways."¹³

For the faithful, Bloom reminds them in a fresh way that Yahweh demands of those bearing his blessing an extraordinary commitment. Without that kind of faith, one cannot please God. Bloom unwittingly reminds them also that God is more holy than the natural man can understand.

Finally, and for this Bloom deserves credit, he forces all his readers to take a fresh look at Yahweh and not to restrict him within their own theological packaging. Indeed, God is incomprehensible and greater than any human thoughts.

¹³ B. Pascal, *Pensées* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 154.