

THE BIBLE IN BLOOM

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of J by Harold Bloom joins a flourishing industry in literary criticism and the Bible. This enterprise covers more than a decade on the American scene and includes contributions from abroad. If the trend continues, the Bible, largely through the efforts of literary rather than biblical critics, may indeed regain its dubious status as a best-seller.

The story begins in the seventies. *Commentary* published several articles on a literary approach to Scripture by the American critic Robert Alter. They led to a book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981). Subsequently appeared a companion, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985). Next Alter collaborated with the British scholar Frank Kermode to edit *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987). Kermode had already written about the gospels (*The Genesis of Secrecy*, 1979). In *The Literary Guide*, biblical and secular authorities from the United States, England, and Israel discussed individual books and general topics. The same year American Jewish authors produced a collection of essays entitled *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*. David Rosenberg, later to translate the book of J from Hebrew, edited it. Harold Bloom, ostensibly writing on Exodus, gave a synopsis of the ancient author J, an earnest of his book to come.

Gabriel Josipovici, a British literary critic, then took another direction. In *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (1988) he explored the grand design of Scripture, acknowledging that the Canadian professor Northrop Frye had already pursued a parallel path in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982). Last year Frye completed a sequel, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (1990).

The Book of J now joins this enterprise. Of all the works, it has received the greatest public attention. Unlike the others, it enjoys a flamboyant style, an anti-religious bias, outlandish generalizations, and the particular belief that a woman wrote the document called J. These distinctive features provoke spirited discussion from varied perspectives.

This essay reviews *The Book of J* from within biblical scholarship. To be

sure, Bloom has not written for scholars, nor does he claim membership in the scriptural guild. Often he disdains what he calls normative or institutional thinking. But at the same time he respectfully cites numerous biblical authorities to render his interpretation. He even derives his subject, J, from a widely accepted scholarly theory.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Use of the symbol J identifies Bloom less with literary than with historical criticism. The former concentrates on the final form of the text. The latter seeks the life behind the text, the process by which the final form takes shape. Varied phenomena within the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, indicate such a history of composition: duplications, contradictions, different names for the deity, diverse theological outlooks, changes in style and vocabulary, and anachronisms. To account for these phenomena historical critics propose the Documentary Theory. Formulated by nineteenth-century German scholars, it holds that the Pentateuch is a compilation of four documents written at different times in different circles.

The letter J designates the earliest source. This symbol transliterates in German the Hebrew consonant *yodh* (Y in English). J uses the sacred name Jahweh (Yahweh) from the beginning of time. (Most English translations substitute the title LORD for this name.) The document was probably composed in the tenth century B.C.E. The next source, E for Elohist, characteristically uses the generic term Elohim (God). E appeared a century or two after J. From the seventh century comes D, the core of the book of Deuteronomy. P, the priestly source, dates from the sixth century, the exilic or post-exilic period. Over time the four documents were combined in various ways. R, the Redactor(s) who completed the work, sought to reconcile differences among the sources. By the fifth century B.C.E. the Torah had received its present shape.

From this theory Bloom gets his book of J. He makes much of extracting it from a hostile context so as to overturn traditional misreadings. But Bloom is not the first to isolate the source—only the first to blossom in the secular press. Two studies by biblical scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century have already analyzed J on its own terms.

In 1968 Peter Ellis (*The Yahwist*) investigated the document and its

author under the rubric “the Bible’s first theologian.” He appended a complete translation drawn from the *Jerusalem Bible*. Appropriating the interpretation of Gerhard von Rad, he pictured a male Yahwist living in the Solomonic era and writing a salvation history. It proclaimed God’s election of Israel as a blessing for all humankind. Ellis held that grace, not power politics, was the meaning and mission of the royal dynasty. Bloom seems not to know this analysis, though he does consult von Rad.

A dissimilar, but not incompatible study, *The Bible’s First History*, appeared in 1989, the year before Bloom’s book. Written by Robert B. Coote and David Robert Ord, the work provides a new translation and pursues a socioeconomic and political reading. Coote and Ord argue that the male Yahwist lived in the Davidic period and wanted to justify the royal house over against the less centralized government it replaced. This new system existed to free laborers from exploitation that they might become agents in the earthly salvation of humanity. Rather than describing the Yahwist as the Bible’s first theologian, Coote and Ord promote his document as “the Bible’s first history.” Centered in the Yahweh cult, it is thoroughly involved with power politics.

However different from each other, the interpretations of Ellis and Coote and Ord also become foils for Bloom’s views. Though all the books say that J is “a first,” they diverge on the category: theology (Ellis) or history (Coote and Ord) or literature (Bloom). Bloom openly rejects the other designations when he declares, “J was no theologian and rather deliberately not a historian.” Instead, J was the first “substantial biblical writer,” even “the greatest Jewish writer.”

Yet by positing the book of J, Bloom allies himself with Ellis, Coote and Ord over against some current trends. Since Ellis, certain historical as well as literary critics have attacked the Documentary Theory.¹ Given Bloom’s general scorn for the traditional and normative, his adherence to the Documentary Theory offers a small irony.

Within the spectrum of historical criticism, Bloom resonates and diverges on specific issues. He accepts the consensus that J was written in Jerusalem during the tenth century B.C.E. by one who had royal connections. For the exact period, however, he selects neither the reign of David (1000–961), as do Coote and Ord, nor of Solomon (961–922), as did von Rad and Ellis, but of Rehoboam (922–915). This king strayed far from the

greatness of his grandfather and the splendor of his father. Bloom's J writes out of nostalgia for David, dubiety for Solomon, and disdain for Rehoboam under whose rule the United Monarchy collapsed. On the whole, Bloom's proposed setting offers biblical scholarship no surprises; nor does his ascription of royal status to the author.

FEMINIST CRITICISM

What does excite response, though not a new idea, is Bloom's female identification for J. Three years before his book appeared, the biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman tentatively suggested the same (*Who Wrote the Bible*, 1987). Bloom knows this work, but he does not credit it. Instead, he exploits the idea fully, as Friedman did not. Bloom calls J a great lady, perhaps a princess, the granddaughter of David and the daughter of Solomon. If the genealogy holds, then Rehoboam, son of Solomon, would be her brother or half-brother. Yet Bloom likes to think of Rehoboam "as J's unworthy nephew." A confusion of generations results. Be that as it may, the attribution of female gender to J upsets conventional thinking to elicit attention.

Bloom claims no feminist inspiration for identifying J as a woman. He is painfully aware, however, of the debate about essentialism, the thesis that intrinsic differences exist between the sexes and manifest themselves in specific ways. He sees the J document as quite unlike the rest of scripture. It employs uncanny irony, lacks male heroes, mocks patriarchy, and views power as marital and familial rather than administrative and military. Such features suggest a gender division between its author and all other biblical writers. Risking the charge of essentialism, Bloom has chosen to sin boldly. Thus he defies secular feminist criticism.

But feminist biblical criticism he ignores, including its work on the J document. This discipline, like its secular counterpart, perceives an unmistakable chauvinism throughout Bloom's portrayal of J the great lady. Occasionally it appears through stereotype. J is a "Jewish mother" with a wary, amused stance toward her impish son Yahweh. Overwhelmingly it appears through adulation. "If one could imagine a Jewish Chaucer writing with the uncanny ironies of Kafka and Isaak Babel and Nathanael West, but also with the high naturalistic wisdom of Tolstoy and Wordsworth, then one would approach the high humor of J, ultimate ancestor

of *The Canterbury Tales* as well as of Tolstoy's fictions and Kafka's parables." Her peers are "Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Tolstoy, Proust, and only a few others." In portraying human psychology, she equals Shakespeare; in depicting divine psychology, she has no equal. By placing J on all these male pedestals, Bloom robs her of the company of women even as he discloses his own lack of respect for outstanding female authors.

Bloom also shows his disdain for religion. He holds that J's sophistication removes her from any commitment to Yahwism. She writes at a distance from belief and unbelief. Yet he undercuts that distance when he calls her "an ironic opponent of Yahwism." From the perspective of normative religion, she is "the most blasphemous writer that ever lived, far surpassing the beleaguered Salman Rushdie." Bloom subverts a quintessential religious author for his own anti-religious bias and demeans a female theologian.

If J epitomizes all that Bloom admires, then how can she be a "she"? As the topside of envy, admiration would possess another for its own purpose. This female author becomes the surrogate for the male reader. Interestingly, Bloom retains a male rhetoric. With a single exception, chapter titles about individuals exhibit the traditional patriarchal line: Abram, Jacob, (Tamar), Joseph, and Moses. By Bloom's own evaluation, would not the women merit titular attention: the admirable Sarah, the formidable Rebecca, the sly Rachel, and the defiant Zipporah? In pondering these and other signs, one questions whose essentialism prevails. Whether or not J is female, misogyny lurks in Bloom's arguments. While he ignores feminist biblical criticism, it exposes him.

CONTENT

Bloom's choices of content for J often lead him away from biblical scholarship. In *Congregation* he uses Martin Noth's analysis for identifying J (there a male), "though my ear accepts as likely certain moments he considers only probable or at least quite possible." In *The Book of J* Rosenberg similarly follows Noth except when "superseded by the insights of Harold Bloom." Neither man gives specific documentation, but most likely each refers to Noth's *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (1948; English translation, 1972). The telling point, however, is the candid acknowledgment

that Bloom's intuition prevails wherever doubts or lacunae occur.

In the beginning Bloom declares a lacuna and fills it. What scholarship universally recognizes as the start of J, the story of Eden in Genesis 2:4b–3:24, becomes but “a point of origin.” Earlier J had opened with a combative cosmological Creation so outrageous that the Redactor squelched it to substitute P's hymn to divine order (Gen. 1:1–2:4a). Now Bloom unabashedly fabricates this beginning. He utilizes numerous texts that suggest a horrendous battle between God and natural forces. These passages come from Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Job, Psalms, and Proverbs. Bloom provides what biblical scholars prone to such speculation (now a diminishing breed) would dub “the lost J account of creation.” Ironically, his argument challenges his own insistence on J's distinctiveness within the canon. Moreover, he fails to see P's involvement, albeit negatively, with a combat myth. In the beginning Bloom undercuts Bloom.

The license to innovate continues. Almost all critics, including Noth, assign Genesis 22:1–19, the sacrifice of Isaac, to E. Rosenberg properly omits it from his translation. But Bloom, shrewdly citing two biblical authorities (E. A. Speiser and John Van Seters), claims the story for J though not in its present form. According to his version, Yahweh orders the sacrifice of Isaac for no reason, even as he will later seek to murder Moses without cause (Exod. 4:24). Abram resists fiercely. In this confrontation “Yahweh himself,” not an angel, “would stand alongside Abram and change his mind about the sacrifice.” (The antecedent for the adjective *his* remains unclear.) Bloom judges the present narrative a “crucial mutilation of J's text,” the result of censoring by P and R. But no censoring was able to remove “the outrage of Yahweh's behavior” or the distaste for sacrifice, emphases characteristic of J. Thus Bloom, once more in the style of an older biblical criticism, reconstructs what he explicitly calls “the lost J text.” Ingenuity becomes license.

Though Bloom argues a case for the Abraham-Isaac story as originally J, in other places he simply takes from traditional E texts whatever he wants. He holds that “for pure joy” J reported Rachel's theft of her father's household gods (Gen. 31:26–35). Similarly, the story about the midwives who defy the king of Egypt to let Hebrew babies live displays “J's ironic humor” (Exod. 1:15–22). The revelation of the sacred name in Exodus

3:14 becomes “a very J version of God, punning elaborately upon his name, Yahweh, and the verb of being, *ehyeh*.” When discussing the classical E Decalogue in Exodus 20:1–17, he assigns it to P and then says that its second commandment (Exod. 20:4) “may reflect an origin in J.”

If Bloom adds to J, he also subtracts from it. He correctly includes the tale of Moses’ sister aiding his rescue from the Nile River (Exod. 2:1–10) and yet omits two other stories about Miriam. The first depicts her as “the prophet” who leads the people in song when they cross the sea (Exod. 15:20–21). Rosenberg translates her song, but then, apparently on his own authority, assigns it to Moses. The second story has Miriam challenging the leadership of Moses and consequently becoming the target of divine anger (Num. 12). Source analysis of this material is difficult, but in both instances Noth leans toward J. Besides, these stories contain ingredients that Bloom relishes—a strong woman and an outrageous Yahweh. Why he excludes them is unclear.

Although Bloom fabricates the beginning of J, he chooses an ending, the death of Moses, that resonates not with this putative opening but rather with the known beginning, the creation of an earthling (Gen. 2:4b). He establishes a link between Yahweh making “with his own hands” the first man Adam “of clay” and Yahweh burying “with his own hands” his chief prophet Moses “in clay.” The imagery and movement are poignant; the connection is specious. The metaphor of divine hands appears in neither passage. Further, contrary to Rosenberg’s translation, Yahweh buries Moses not “in the clay (*’adamah*) of Moab’s land,” but only “in the land (*’eres*) of Moab.” Translator and interpreter have added clay to invent a grand *inclusio*. Moreover, attribution of this death account (Deut. 34:1–6) to the J source remains doubtful. Most scholars think J concludes with the Balaam narrative (Num. 22–24), which brings together many motifs developed throughout, especially the blessing for all humankind.²

To end J with the death of Moses is puzzling. After all, Bloom deems J’s Moses “quite underwhelming,” lacking in theomorphic qualities, “a curiously flat, hesitant, even estranged personality” who does not bear the Blessing. By contrast, Bloom acknowledges the Balaam and Balak story to be “J’s finest achievement in the Numbers narrative” and also points out genuine connections between it and other sections of J, going back to the talking serpent in Eden. For choices within Bloom’s reconstruction of J, there is often no accounting save intuition.

TRANSLATION

The addition “in the clay” to the account of Moses’ death becomes but one of many examples where the translator invents a text. Genesis 2–3 illustrates others. Rosenberg has Yahweh say, “You will not touch” the tree of knowing good and bad, a prohibition absent from the Hebrew (Gen. 2:17). He has God ask the man, “Did you touch the tree I desired you not to eat?” The Hebrew reads, “Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen 3:11). He sets up a play on English verbs, “Woman I call her, out of man she was *parted*. So a man *parts* from his mother and father . . .” (Gen. 2:23–24). But the Hebrew verbs differ: “out of man she was parted” (*lqh*) and “a man leaves” (*ʿzb*). Rosenberg quotes the man, “The woman you gave (*ntn*) to stand beside me. . . .” He misquotes the woman, “The smooth-tongued snake gave me and I ate.” This rendition concocts a nonexistent parallel to the earlier verb *give* and embellishes the subject of the second with a nonexistent adjective. The Hebrew says, “The snake beguiled (*ns*) me and I ate” (Gen. 3:13).

Yahweh’s speech to the serpent begins with the harsh judgment, “Because you did this, cursed are you” (Gen. 3:14). The vocabulary continues a play on words, beginning with the *ʿarūmmīm* (naked) couple (2:24) who are ensnared by the *ʿarūm* (clever) serpent (3:1) whom Yahweh now curses (*ʿarur*). Rosenberg ignores these associations. He moves from a naked man and woman to a “smooth-tongued” snake to the binding, rather than the cursing, of the animal. “‘Since you did this,’ said Yahweh to the snake, ‘you are bound apart from flocks. . . .’” Then Rosenberg builds on *his* term “bound” to contrive a wordplay in English: “. . . bound to the ground . . . enmity bound between your seed and hers.” No equivalent terms occur in Hebrew.

Again, he ignores the connection between the curse upon the serpent and the curse (*ʿarūrāh*) upon the ground (Gen. 3:17) to develop instead his own image for the soil: “‘Now: bitter be the soil to your taste; in labor you will bend to eat from it, each day you live.’” This reckless play continues. In Genesis 3:22 he inserts images of sight: “‘Look,’ said Yahweh, ‘the earthling sees like one of us . . . And now he may blindly reach out his hand . . .’” Where Rosenberg has the verb *sees*, the Hebrew has *hayah*, becomes. Where he has the adverb *blindly*, the Hebrew has nothing.

These few examples from only two chapters of Genesis show Rosen-

berg radically altering the content he purports to translate. They also display problems with English syntax, style, and sense. Appalling errors permeate the entire work. However one judges the language, it exceeds the boundaries of translation. A reliable witness to J it is not. In striking juxtaposition, the authorized version used by Ellis and the new rendition prepared by Coote and Ord, though hardly exciting, at least provide faithful interpretation.

POINT OF VIEW

Like content and translation, point of view shows the accents, idiosyncrasies, and inaccuracies of *The Book of J*. In contrast to current literary trends, Bloom's analysis keeps central the concept of author, rather than of text or reader. J is an individual personality writing with specific intention. She cares little for nomadism, patriarchy, and polygamy. Her interests are urban and aristocratic. Royal decorum and perhaps a concern for personal safety prevent her speaking openly of the great monarch David; yet he embodies her ideal, "the elite image of the individual life." J addresses then not the general public but those who long for the enlightened Davidic age. (How this adulation for David squares with the insistence that only women are heroic in J, Bloom never makes clear.) She writes in friendly rivalry with the male Court Historian, her contemporary who penned most of 2 Samuel. Though biblical research recognizes connections between the J document and the Court History, it has not explored the personality of either author. Lack of evidence thwarts an endeavor that Bloom nevertheless pursues for J.

The distinctive tone and style of J's work is ironic. This particular irony, "the clash of incommensurates," plays itself out in a comic mode. Bloom cannot claim too much for his thesis. Not only is J "at once the greatest and the most ironic writer in the Hebrew Bible" but even "the greatest of all ironists."

Yahweh is her protagonist. She presents him as a literary character, "a very complex and troublesome extended metaphor." He is not gentle, righteous, holy, or transcendent. But he is lively. He gives Blessing, which Bloom designates Vitality, more and more life. Yahweh also rants and rages. Zeal, exuberance, and self-contradiction mark his portrait.

Confusion, if not contradiction, marks Bloom's attempt to discuss the

gender of this deity. “Yahweh is clearly male” and the “ultimate humanizing trope” for him is fatherhood. J “has heroines, ironically enough because Yahweh, her antithetical imp of a God, is a man and not a woman.” Yet elsewhere Bloom maintains that this “he” stands beyond sexuality and gender. “J casually takes it for granted that Yahweh is not a sexual being. He [*sic*] has no gender.” Doubletalk prevails. In this regard many biblical scholars do no better.

J deliberately tells a scandalous story. At the beginning Yahweh is an imp. Much as a child at play, he makes a mud-pie and calls it man. On the second try, he does a better job, becoming an artificer who builds “a much more elaborate and fairer structure” called woman. This imp is also a mischief-maker, demolishing the tower that his own children have built, scattering them, and inventing the bafflement of tongues. He enjoys a picnic at Mamre, sitting under terebinth trees, devouring calf and curds, and reproving Sarai, but soon thereafter he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah for showing contempt toward him. (Contempt, not sin, constitutes the greatest offense against Yahweh.) Possibly he wrestles Jacob by night. Certainly his “dark side” emerges when he seeks to kill Moses. Bloom calls this incident “the uncanniest act in J.” The imp and mischief-maker has become potential murderer.

By the time Yahweh gets to Sinai, he is almost out of control because he regards the murmurings of the people as contempt. He warns Moses to keep the rabble away lest he kill them. Direct confrontation brings the crisis: the potential transition of Yahweh’s Blessing from elite individuals like Abram and Jacob (ironically in light of Bloom’s viewpoint, males, not females) to the Israelite masses. The transfer happens, and Yahweh withholds violence from the people. A picnic (biblical scholars call it a covenant meal) seals the event at Sinai. Thereafter Yahweh and Israel journey uneasily through the wilderness.

In this scandalous story Yahweh has changed considerably. From being the uninhibited protagonist of the primeval period throughout patriarchal times, he has become the “intensely nervous leader of an unruly rabble of Wilderness wanderers.” The difference results from his fury at contempt. At the beginning Yahweh, impish and playful, gives Adam life; at the end Yahweh, punitive and anxious, gives Moses death. “By normative standards, Jewish or Christian, J’s portrayal of Yahweh is blasphemous,” con-

cludes Bloom. By scholarly standards, Jewish, Christian, or whatever, Bloom's portrayal of J is ridiculous.

A COUNTER POINT OF VIEW

"Normative" is the controlling, yet slippery, word in Bloom's denunciations; "blasphemous" the controlling, yet slippery, word in his appreciations. He uses both *ad nauseam*, along with "the clash of incommensurates," but never explains them. He seems unaware that the normative tradition contains blasphemy. In the prologue of Job, God the tester renders Job and his family pawns in a game with the satan. This deity casually murders sons, daughters, and servants. In the book of Hosea, outrageous anthropomorphic images mingle with theomorphic. Yahweh is metaphorically a wife-abuser who threatens to strip naked his spouse Israel and kill her with thirst (Hos. 2:3). The deity is also a shepherd who attacks his own sheep. He turns on them to become a devouring lion, leopard, and she-bear (Hos. 12:5-8). For Jeremiah (the prophet whom Bloom deems "abominable") Yahweh is none other than seducer and rapist. The shocking language of confession says explicitly, "Oh Yahweh, you have seduced me and I am seduced; you have raped me and you have prevailed" (Jer. 20:7).³ All the Pentateuchal sources, not just J, depict the irrational fury of Yahweh, most especially in the wilderness traditions. Tamed under the rubric of retribution, divine fury also saturates prophetic literature. Blasphemous portraits of Yahweh persist throughout the canon; they belong to the normative tradition.

If the blasphemy Bloom finds in J is unexceptional, so are the anthropomorphisms. Even the priests (whom Bloom detests) describe God speaking, seeing (Gen. 1 *passim*), and resting (Gen. 2:2f) at the creation. They also portray the wind of Elohim as a bird fluttering over the face of the Deep (Gen. 1:2). As in Hosea, theomorphic imagery mingles with anthropomorphic. Further, a priestly hymn declares that God made Leviathan the sea-monster for his own toy, surely an impish touch (Psalm 104:26). And in adjacent verses (27-29) it portrays God as the giver of life (Blessing) and death, perhaps an allusion to the fragile dust and breath of the J account. Another psalm addresses a sleeping Yahweh, urging this quite human deity to wake up, surely a clash of incommensurates (Ps. 44:25-26).

Moreover, J has no monopoly on comic and ironic modes of writing.

Like the story of Joseph, the book of Ruth offers a romance tale free of Yahweh's direct intervention. The Blessing of more life comes in the gift of food, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, and the birth of a child. No section of the Bible, including J, surpasses this narrative in its positive and prominent depiction of women. The way Ruth and Boaz work out their own salvation yields high irony. Indeed, a rhetoric of irony liberally seasons the canon. Biblical critics know well its presence and power.⁴

If what Bloom calls "the other side of J"—ironic, scandalous, and outrageous—is not unique in scripture, for him it has become the whole. His anti-religious bias has eliminated theological struggle. Where, for instance, is the conversation between irony and grace? between the God who condemns Cain for the murder of his brother but later guarantees him protection from his own potential murder? the God who decrees the total obliteration of humankind but saves Noah? who through Abram blesses in multiples but curses only in the singular and who kills Egyptians but delivers slaves? While Bloom denies a literary distinction between secular and sacred texts, ironically he has imposed this distinction upon J. He has repudiated the sacred. To separate literature (aesthetics) from religion in an overtly theological text is fallacious.⁵ And perhaps not even Bloom gets away with it. What he deplores in one form he subtly introduces in another. His God-talk becomes the religion of Sublimity and Vitality, the more and exuberant life.

Exuberance does not extend, however, to facts. Besides numerous problems already cited, scattered items require correction. The canonization of the Hebrew Bible was completed around 90 C.E., not B.C.E. Abraham did not "invent" monotheism. The Hebrews and the Habiru are not the same. J does not "always use 'Elohim' as a name for divine beings in general, and never as the name of God." Unlike the judgment upon the serpent and the ground in Genesis 3, there is no "Yahweh's curse against the woman." The Hebrew *nephesh* does not mean flesh. And the terms Jews and Judaism do not apply to pre-exilic Israel; they appear later.

THE BOOK OF B

Purporting to interpret the book of J, Bloom misreads it to produce the book of B. With an ironic reversal of meaning, he bowdlerizes J by deeming offensive and so removing anything perceived as normative, tradi-

tional, or sacred. He acknowledges that he may be accused of creating his own J. In defense he accuses biblical theologians of the same sin, albeit with differing results.

The book of B is bold, boisterous, and bombastic. To argue from its own (mistaken) premise of essentialism, it sounds like a man, not a woman. It exalts the agonistic life. Totally different from J, its style is neither elliptical nor economical. Ramblings and repetitions, particularly in the last chapters, induce boredom. An avowed attempt to recover J the female writer of the tenth century B.C.E. yields B the male reader of the twentieth C.E. Thus unintended irony prevails over against the intended.

But the Bible in Bloom flourishes. Its vitality comes primarily from a fertile imagination, not from biblical scholarship. More fantasy than fiction, its insubstantiality nourishes the marketplace. Under the published title, *The Book of J*, B enjoys a great press. Book stores display it, secular journals review it, literary gatherings celebrate it, and talk shows interview the author. The book has made the best-seller list, outstripping its more worthy predecessors in a growing industry. Thanks to all of them, however, the Bible is back in the news.

Best-sellers, be they the Bible or books about the Bible, have their day and cease to be. Like the grass, they wither; like the flower, they fade. They bloom only to perish. But the word of the Lord endures forever.

Notes

1. See R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch* (1987); Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel* (1987).
2. See Norman Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (1971); Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (1975).
3. James L. Crenshaw has compared this shocking imagery to the story that Bloom deems "the uncanniest act in J," Yahweh's attempt to murder Moses (*A Whirlpool of Torment*, 1984, p. 38).
4. See Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (1981).
5. Cf. the remarks of George Steiner in a review of *The Literary Guide to*

the Bible (*The New Yorker*, January 11, 1988): “The separation . . . between a theological-religious experiencing of Biblical texts and a literary one is radically factitious. It cannot work.”