

## HOW NOT TO READ THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Not the assertion that J was a woman but the manner in which Bloom interprets J's Yahweh is what is truly provocative about *The Book of J*. As Bloom sees it, J's Yahweh is: "impish," "outrageous," "irascible," "a lively fellow," "childlike," "a bungler," "overwhelmingly self-contradictory," "a mischief-maker," "an intensely nervous leader," and "outrageously volatile." By the time Bloom sums up his presentation by observing that J's Yahweh encompasses Lear, Hamlet, Prospero, and "even a Falstaff," the reader understands that this is no hyperbole designed to draw our attention to what follows. This is "what follows." Instead of Yahweh, David is J's hero because his life-giving, life-enhancing vitality lifts him above such distinctions as the good and the bad. Bloom is aware, of course, that David the great warrior king is also depicted not only as a freebooter but as a liar, adulterer, and murderer. What Bloom believes J finds so attractive about David is not his moral fiber but his exuberant vitality. And it is in line with this vital life force that J, according to Bloom, frames her character sketch of Deity, a sketch that has been persistently misread. David, whom J never explicitly mentions but who is always suspended above her narratives, is what J's Yahweh is striving to be. "J's Yahweh is not endowed with such rabbinical attributes as holiness, purity, goodness. . . . His leading attribute is zeal or zest, so that the zestful David is clearly the most theomorphic of humans."

No doubt then that Bloom's thesis is vivid. No doubt either that Bloom is convinced he is onto something that traditional exegetes have missed, blinded as they are by the normative readings of sacred writ and to something, moreover, that Higher Critics have also missed because they lack Bloom's feel for J's genius and boldness. I am sympathetic to the way in which Bloom compares the biblical author he calls J to other great writers of fiction. And I certainly applaud his insistence that "a difficult text" must be understood through "a sympathetic and imaginative reading."

Bloom's reading is "imaginative" enough. But is it "sympathetic"? What I would take to be a sympathetic reading would entail the assump-

tions that we share a common universe of discourse with the work and that the work as it presents itself is intelligible on its own terms. While Bloom certainly assumes a common universe of discourse with J, he fails on two counts to give that writer a sympathetic reading. In the first place, he virtually ignores the context in which this supposed source appears. And second, since he assumes that this source has been censored, revised, even mutilated, his presentation is filled with hypotheticals. Bloom claims to have a “feel” for J. He claims not only to be able to recognize J but to be able to notice the ways in which the Redactor both embellished the J source and excised from it. “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.” Thus while Bloom, for the most part, follows what most biblical scholars take to be J, he does not hesitate to part company with them. Bloom pays particular attention to Gen. 22, the enigmatic story in which Elohim commands Abraham to burn his son to a crisp, and concludes that originally this was J’s tale and therefore that it was Yahweh and not Elohim who gave the command. Bloom is certain that this tale resonates with J’s spirit and rewrites the manner in which Abraham and Sarah die in accord with that spirit. Bloom repeats this procedure throughout his commentary. He rewrites portions of the Noah and Joseph stories and does the same with the story of Moses.

Bloom’s treatment of the Garden of Eden story is a parade example of his ignoring chief aspects of context and coasting on speculations that suit his “feel,” by which process he casts aside central elements of the story — the Tree of Life, for example — that should bear upon our interpretation of the whole. In so doing, he ignores as well the rich implications of the first human presence divided, unlike Yahweh, into male and female.

Bloom prefaces his commentary with the following quotation from Kafka, who, he claims, “caught the essence of J’s sense of Paradise”:

The expulsion from Paradise is in its main significance eternal. Consequently the expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in this world irrevocable, but the eternal nature of the occurrence (or temporally expressed, the eternal recapitulation of the occurrence) makes it nevertheless possible that not only could we live continuously in Paradise, but that we are continuously there in actual fact, no matter whether we know it here or not.

“‘Paradise,’ Bloom goes on to say, “is always ‘there,’ and our knowing is ‘here,’ but our being is split off from our knowing, and so it is possible that we still abide in Eden.” Bloom tells us that the key to the Eden story is a determination of the significance of those two trees located in the middle of the garden: the Tree of the Knowledge of the Good and the Bad and the Tree of Life. Bloom remarks that “many thousands of exegetes” who have read “J’s ironic narrative as a story of sin or crime and its appropriate (or incommensurate) punishments” have misinterpreted the function of these two trees.

Pragmatically they are [one], since only the Tree of knowing good and bad is involved in the catastrophe, and also is J’s own invention. The Tree of Life is prevalent in the literature of the ancient Middle East, and I suspect that J interpolated this traditional tree into her text as an interpretive afterthought. Knowing good and bad seems quite enough; to touch the tree is to be touched the same day, by death. (178)

But what, in addition to being “touched” by death, does the fruit of this tree impart? Not, Bloom claims, consciousness of sexuality, because J has “too healthy a view of human sexuality for such a reduction to be relevant or interesting.” The knowledge of good and bad, according to Bloom, is “no less than everything, freedom and the limits of freedom, self-knowledge, angelic, almost god-like. . . . When you know yourself, you know your own nakedness, but the consequent shame has no sexual overtones.”

Rather than leaning so much on a supposed insight of Kafka, Bloom might have given more consideration to that “interpretive afterthought,” the Tree of Life, which is indeed “prevalent in the literature of the ancient Middle East.” In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a plant called “Man becomes young in old age” is given prominence. That plant has been interpreted not as a one time elixir of life but as a tonic of rejuvenation. A serpent also appears in that tale, robbing Gilgamesh of the great prize which the hero had intended to share with others. In *Gilgamesh*, also, the transformation of the savage, Enkidu, is telling, for he is, as it were, civilized by the act of sexual intercourse. Moreover, Enkidu is told, “You are wise, Enkidu, and now you have become like a god.”<sup>1</sup> The writer whom Bloom calls J uses

these very words to refer to the transformation of her characters. Bloom's highly literate J surely would have had access to a piece of literature which goes back to the originators of civilization in Mesopotamia and which has been found in a variety of recensions and translations. Bloom might have paid more attention to the context suggested by these and other allusions in the Eden story to *Gilgamesh*. Then he might have given pause before concluding that the Tree of the Knowledge of the Good and the Bad is unrelated to sexual awareness or that the Tree of Life is inessential to the story.

Since Bloom makes so much of both the woman's and the snake's parts in the Eden story it is surprising that he does so little with the breathtaking conversation between them. To compound the problem, Rosenberg's translation is an impediment rather than a help. Rosenberg's very brief notes on his translation (325–335) contain no hint of the extent to which he plays fast and loose with the Hebrew. Rosenberg, for example, in the Eden story renders *elohim* as "The God" where the Hebrew is without the definite article. There are examples aplenty in Scripture when the definite article is applied to *elohim*, but this is not one of them. In fact, neither Bloom nor Rosenberg comments on what is surely a significant literary curiosity, that both the woman and the snake use *elohim* in their conversation while the narrator uses the anomalous phrase "YHWH-*elohim*" to refer to Deity. Rosenberg, for reasons never explained, drops the *elohim* from the phrase.

Furthermore, this conversation turns on two hyperboles which Rosenberg's translation effectively conceals from the reader. The serpent, whom the author introduces by punning on his chief characteristic—the serpent is the most *arum* or "cunning" of all beasts and it will be the serpent who will initiate a process whereby the first human couple will become aware that they are *arum* or "naked"—asks "Did *elohim* really say that you could not eat of the fruit of any of the trees of the garden?" One might suspect the serpent of irony. If so, his irony takes the form of a deliberate exaggeration: is it true that there is no sustenance in Eden? or, better, is there nothing which gives life in Eden?

The woman, for her part, responds with hyperbole of her own, "We can eat from the fruit of the trees of the garden except for that tree which is in the middle of the garden for *elohim* said that we must neither eat from

it nor touch it lest we die.” YHWH-*elohim* in his command or warning did not add the word “touch.” Nor did YHWH-*elohim* say anything about that other tree in the middle of the garden, the Tree of Life. Bloom ignores the issue altogether, presumably because he is certain that for J the Tree of Life is merely “an interpretive afterthought.” Is it not a reasonable hypothesis that YHWH-*elohim* said nothing about the Tree of Life because only the Tree of the Knowledge of the Good and the Bad is relevant in the command or warning? In Eden, Adam and Eve were not denied access to the Tree of Life, and this is why dying and death were not a part of human existence there. The Tree of Life would be comparable to the plant that makes one young again in *Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh, though he already has eaten of the plant, is reduced to despair when it is taken away by the serpent.

Eve’s own hyperbole suggests that in Eden life is nourishing except for one death-dealing tree which must be avoided at all costs. Not only must we avoid eating its fruit, but we must avoid touching it. The snake’s response, which is corroborated by none other than YHWH-*elohim* (cf. 3:5 with 3:22), is that *elohim* Himself knows that far from being a death dealer the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of the Good and the Bad makes one like *elohim*, Who knows the good and the bad. The serpent’s position is that the choice facing the first human couple is clear: a living death in Eden where there is nothing of substance to do and therefore no chance to matter, or to seize the possibility of creative activity, activity which is imitative of *the creator, elohim*.

Rosenberg’s translation does not accurately convey what it is the woman sees when she looks at the Tree of Knowledge after considering the snake’s retort. Here is how Rosenberg renders the Hebrew: “Now the woman sees how good the tree looks to eat from, how lovely to the eyes, lively to the mind.” And here is what the Hebrew says: “Then the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes and desirable as a tree to make one wise.” Rosenberg obscures the force of the words which I translated “delight” and “desirable,” words that in the Hebrew frequently denote the delights of the body and of the soul, the very things which are absent in Eden.<sup>2</sup>

Adam and Eve took from the Tree of Knowledge for good reason: the fruit of that tree made them like *elohim*. But unlike *elohim*, whose divinity

includes life forever as well, the humans will be subject to death and dying. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge activated humankind's sexuality which will lead to procreation (the first story outside of Eden begins: "Now Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain"), which will not only function now as the antidote to the death of the human species but which, for obvious reasons, cannot coexist with deathlessness. There is nothing "mystical" about the Tree of Life; inside Eden it was the antidote to death when the human community consisted of one woman and one man. The first human couple must be evicted from the Garden because their newly acquired creativity, of which procreation is a part, necessarily entails finitude.

Bloom's comment on 3:22 that YHWH-*elohim* (Rosenberg, of course, leaves out *elohim*) is speaking to "godlike beings" when He observes that the humans have become "like one of us" requires additional attention. The term *elohim*, when it refers to the God of Israel, denotes a singular being. However, the *im* ending is the normal sign of masculine plurality and, in fact, *elohim* is an amphibolous term in that it can refer to the shades in Sheol (the abode of the dead), powerful human rulers, to the gods of other nations, and so on. However, there are three instances in Genesis in which plurality is connected with the singular God of biblical Israel. Two of these occurrences (one in Eden, the other in the Babel story) are in what Bloom and Rosenberg refer to as the J source. In each instance Bloom and Rosenberg maintain that the plurality points to a conversation between "Yahweh" and other divine beings.<sup>3</sup>

Bloom's comment on the Tower of Babel story is particularly instructive:

Speaking presumably to the other Elohim, his angels, or perhaps even to himself, Yahweh decides to descend, to make one of his familiar terrestrial inspections, and once there makes mischief, baffling language into languages, confusion, ruin, scattering. We have been given J's largest insight into the psychology of Yahweh: he sets limits, boundaries, contexts, for his creatures, and he does not allow presumptuous violations of limits, whether by Adam and Eve, Cain, the builders of Babel, or even the Patriarchs and Moses, let alone Pharaoh and the Egyptians. (294)

This, I think, is an instance in which Bloom's conviction that J's Yahweh is uncanny, irascible, impish, etc. causes him to miss a nuance in the text which, in fact, is crucial in revealing aspects of Deity's psychology. Neither Bloom nor Rosenberg asks why in precisely these two contexts (Gen. 3:22; 11:7) plurality appears in reference to the one God of biblical Israel. And since both of them restrict themselves to the so-called J document, they do not speculate on what the plurality may mean in Gen. 1:26 which reads: "And *elohim* said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" Gen. 1:26 is particularly interesting because after the "us" both "image" and "likeness" are singular.

If one looks at these three instances of plurality (one involving *elohim*, one YHWH-*elohim*, one YHWH) one sees that in each there is an explicit comparison and an implied contrast between the divine and human realms. The first concerns the creation of the humans. The second deals with their expulsion from Eden, while the third occurs in the Tower of Babel story in which YHWH intervenes to stop the ascent of the sky-scraping tower.

The first of those passages emphasizes the uniqueness of the human, the only being created in Deity's likeness. But its context also points to a basic contrast between *elohim* and the human; for while humans are created "male and female" (the only creature in Gen. 1 in which this sexual distinction is explicitly noted), the implication is that *elohim* is not defined or limited by sexual distinctions.<sup>4</sup> Only because of Adam and Eve (alone created in the likeness of *elohim*) could one think that a similar distinction exists in *elohim*. Thus the writer might have introduced the unexpected plural form ironically: it alerts the reader to the fact that this most basic of all human divisions is absent in Deity, or to put it another way, that Deity comprehends all division.

The issue of maleness and femaleness is, no matter how one interprets it, at the heart of the Garden of Eden story. In the resolution of this story it is clear that both YHWH-*elohim* and Adam and Eve possess the creative capacity associated with the Tree of the Knowledge of the Good and the Bad whereas only YHWH-*elohim* has the Tree of Life. Once again, the plurality points toward a comparison and contrast between the divine and human realms. While only Adam and Eve have the godlike capacity to create their destiny, they, unlike Deity, are subject to dying and death.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, Deity's inherent singularity is contrasted similarly to the disunity in the human community. At Babel, YHWH fragments the human community, but we are given to understand that these divisions do not suggest any division in YHWH. We are also to understand that although there are divisions in humankind they are, as it were, conventional and not natural. All human beings are still presumed to be created in *elohim*'s own image and to have access to the fundamental norms (the "good" and the "bad"). Perhaps this explains why there are celebrated examples of noble pagans in the Hebrew Bible (Tamar, Ruth, Uriah the Hittite).

Comparison of these passages in their varying contexts allows us to give the following characteristics of the biblical God: "He" is asexual, creative, eternally vital, and by nature indivisible. And, as one biblical story after another makes explicit, this Deity has an interest in humankind. But of what does this interest consist and what does this Deity expect of human creatures? Bloom's answer is that to the extent Yahweh is not uncannily he is irascible and impish. Again and again, Bloom's uncritical acceptance of the Higher Critical dogma that the Torah can and should be divided into sources not only involves him in conjectures which do not clarify the text, but leads him to reductive readings that separate an episode from the very contexts without which it cannot be understood. Thus when Bloom reads the story of the first brothers (Gen. 4), he insists that Cain's "crucial quality is not evil but an implied resentment against Yahweh. He, after all, and not Abel, the shepherd, takes up Adam's curse and tills the soil. . . . J offers no motive for Yahweh's choice."

Reflect for a moment, however, on the manner in which the story of the first brothers proceeds. Cain and Abel bring offerings to YHWH. Cain, the farmer, brings from the "fruit of the earth." Abel, the shepherd, and here let us listen to Rosenberg's translation which at this point is quite true to the sense of the Hebrew, "brought an offering, from the choicest of his flock, from its fat parts." That is, Cain simply brings an offering while Abel brings the best of his best. Bloom is quite wrong that "J offers no motive for Yahweh's choice." YHWH prefers Abel's offering because it speaks of real devotion. When Cain reacts in anger and jealousy, YHWH unambiguously indicates a way out of his discomfiture: "If you do right, there is uplift [you will feel better]; but if you do not do right,

sin is the demon at the door, whose urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.” Cain, however, utterly rejects this revelation, murders his brother in cold blood, and displays no remorse—“Am I my brother’s keeper?” he asks, when confronted by YHWH. If Cain is not depicted as “evil” then what is he?

Bloom’s treatment of Tamar, who, according to him “in proportion to the narrative space she occupies, is very much the most vivid portrait in J,” fails also to come to grips with the only context in which she appears (Gen. 38) and fails completely to place this episode in its broader framework. Bloom asserts that Tamar’s outstanding characteristic is her vitality and that “the elliptical J gives us no psychological or spiritual portrait of Tamar, no account of her motive or of her will.” For Bloom, Tamar’s story is yet another indication that “the quality of being blessed has clearly more to do with the wholeness of being than with right judgment or moral behavior.”

While an exposition of Tamar’s story is beyond the scope of this paper, I urge the interested reader to consult Herbert Chanan Brichto’s “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife: A Biblical Complex,”<sup>5</sup> which reveals the ways in which the obligations of the living to the dead lie at the heart of this and many other biblical stories. In the light of these obligations, it is precisely Tamar’s “right judgment” and “moral behavior” which are esteemed. Bloom’s own treatment of Tamar corresponds to what he does throughout his book. He praises J’s literary genius in creating the “vivid” Tamar, but he devotes little more than a page to her story.

Bloom’s commentary depends not on a carefully considered textual reading but on hypotheses for which, by their very nature, there is no evidence. Was J a woman? Did she live in the days of Solomon and Rehoboam, and was her outlook conditioned by those times? What, in any case, do we know of Solomon’s and Rehoboam’s reigns? Did the Redactor change J, and if so where and how and why? These questions are or should be secondary to the first order of business of a literary critic, a confrontation with a text as it presents itself.<sup>6</sup>

Bloom’s praise of J is often at the expense not only of other biblical writers but also of post-biblical interpreters who, according to him, lacked J’s vision. Bloom particularly sets his sights on the great Rabbi Akiba. Bloom places Akiba in what he calls the “normative” tradition while his J

stands with Kafka and Shakespeare. In the vast literature devoted to the explication of the Hebrew Bible there is, to be sure, much which would fit Bloom's view as to that which is normative. I gather this would include a belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. For Bloom, normative readers have consistently and persistently misread J. He associates the normative with a veneration which is both blinding and naïve. But Bloom himself neither shows sufficient veneration for the biblical text (I mean nothing pietistic here; rather, I refer to Bloom's shoddy exegesis of what he himself calls a great text) nor does he give enough credit to Rabbi Akiba.

In regard to the latter, consider the following story preserved in the sacred literature of the Jews (Babylonian Talmud Menahot 29b):

When Moses climbed Mt. Sinai he found God sitting there and fashioning little hooks and crowns for the letters. Moses asked: "Lord of the World, for whose sake are You doing that?" God replied: "There is a man who will one day present heaps and heaps of doctrines concerning every little hook." Then Moses said to God: "Lord of the World, show him to me." God replied: "Turn around." Then Moses turned around and sat down behind the eighth row in Akiba's academy but Moses did not understand their conversation and was dismayed. When Akiba came to a point about which his students asked him how he knew, he replied to them that this was a doctrine given to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai. Then was Moses calmed. Moses turned back and stepped before God and said further: "Lord of the World you have such a man and give the Torah through me!" God replied: "Be still, that is how it entered My mind." Then Moses said to God: "Lord of the World, you have shown me his knowledge of the Law, show me his reward too." God said: "Turn around." Then Moses turned around and saw Akiba's flayed flesh [Akiba was executed by the Romans] being weighed in a butchershop. Then Moses said to God: "Lord of the World, this is the Torah, and this its reward?" God replied: "Be still, that is how it entered My Mind."

The elliptical density of this tale generates speculations about issues ranging from the quest for wisdom to the psychology of God. There is also the pathos of the interlinked destinies of Moses and Akiba, who both die in the service of God with vigor and vitality intact. More to the point is the interpretive paradigm championed by the tale. This Talmudic story begins with a hyperbole that is itself hyperbolized. Not only is God depicted as being the literal “author” of the Torah, He is portrayed taking such care in His work that a critic wishing to fathom authorial intent would have to scrutinize not only context, paragraph, sentence, word, and letter, but even each letter’s calligraphy. It bears mentioning here that Akiba, whose interpretive capacities are legendary, never, of course, examined all the “hooks and crowns.”

Bloom’s overstatements; conversely, bespeak of the hubris of an interpreter who makes a text conform to poorly thought through theoretical constructs. I would suggest that when one confronts the Hebrew Bible, the most elementary rules of exegesis demand the initial assumption that those who produced the biblical record had good reason for presenting it in the manner in which they did. They may have drawn from sources, but they did not divide their text into sources; they did not provide very much in the way of socio-economic data about their time; and they did not identify themselves. Any exegesis, therefore, which indulges in speculations about such matters in the place of a close textual reading is presumptuous to the extreme. This would seem to be especially true in regard to the Hebrew Bible, given its majestic place in western civilization. “In the end,” as H. S. Nyberg put it, “we should remember a good old philological rule: when one does not understand something, one should first mistrust oneself and not the text.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Notes

1. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by N. K. Sandars (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 65.
2. See *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by F. Brown, S. R. Drivers, and C. Briggs, pp. 16, 326.
3. Pp. 54, 73, 294.

4. See pp. 291f. where Bloom readily concedes this for J's Yahweh, who ". . . stands beyond sexuality."
5. *Hebrew Union College Annual* LXIV (1973), pp. 1-55.
6. See Bloom's excellent observation about "oral tradition" on p. 274. Bloom himself, however, seems much of the time to be looking for that which is not there.
7. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 385.