



Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine

Harold Bloom

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"The most controversial, explosive, and important book yet from the renowned author and critic." Harold Bloom uses his unsurpassed skills to examine the character of Jesus: the inconsistencies, the contradictions, and the Gospels' flaws of logic. He also explores the character of Yahweh, who Bloom argues has more in common with Mark's Jesus than he does with God the Father of the Christian and rabbinic Jewish traditions. In fact, Bloom asserts, the Hebrew Bible of the Jews and the Christian Old Testament are very different books with very different purposes. At a time when religion has taken center stage in the political arena, Bloom's controversial examination of the incompatible Judeo-Christian traditions will make readers rethink everything they take for granted about what they believe is a shared heritage.

Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine Details

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BlackOxford says

Mixing Metaphors Is Dangerous Business

Theology, Harold Bloom recognises, is a style of poetry, mostly bad and often dangerous, especially when it starts up-ending established metaphors. Christian theology presents itself as commentary on foundational texts called the Bible. But these foundational texts are also poetic; they are theology not uninterpreted description. This is something which causes consternation to the theologians who wish to 'stabilise' sacred scriptures by fixing their meaning in order that theological thought can move on.

Literary criticism in the hands of a master like Harold Bloom breaks through the limits imposed by the discipline of theology. Specifically, literary criticism ignores theological intention. It doesn't care about faith or foundational texts. All texts are derivative. All texts are infinitely interpretable. The text, its characters, the coherence of its plot, its stylistic merits are the phenomena of interest, not its purported referent, God.

The question that Bloom poses is therefore literary: How does the mischievous, slightly insane character of Yahweh, one of the Hebrew divine names, become the sedate, unseen, somewhat redundant God the Father and his stand-in, Jesus the Christ, of the New Testament?

From a literary perspective, Yahweh is the supreme fiction created by any civilisation, anywhere, at any time. The only rival, according to Bloom, is Shakespeare's King Lear, who is clearly modelled on him. Yahweh is the protagonist of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, but not of the Christian Old Testament, which has high-jacked Yahweh as a character and re-cast him entirely.

The co-optation of Yahweh was possible because of the poetic nature of scripture. The dominant trope in theology is metaphor. Metaphors are malleable. Twist one component and the relationship among terms shifts in myriad ways. Yahweh of the Tanakh is a warrior, a somewhat irascible, often needy entity, who comes and goes without explanation. During his period of guiding the Israelites through the desert to the promised land he appears to go a little mad. He stands, sword in hand with Joshua at Jericho and directs the destruction of thousands of innocents from time to time. This is the God, Yahweh, of irony and hyperbole.

Shift the emphasis from war and unpredictability to unlimited power, however, and there is a totally transcendent entity with only the most distant relationship with his creation. Re-interpret petulant jealousy as fatherly concern and frustration with his children, we then have an intense regal love which is constant. Understand that apparent mass murder is part of a grand master plan and the bloodshed is subsumed within an eternal mystery in which we must maintain faith. This is God the Father of the Christian Trinity, a God of omnipotence, omniscience, and of total impassivity. Not the character Yahweh. Different play. Different script.

This poetic process of metaphorical transformation applies equally to the person of Jesus. Bloom counts at least seven different Jesuses in the New or, as he prefers, Belated Covenant. Jesus is, among others, the pious Jewish man who continues the traditions of the Tanakh as suggested in the Epistle of James. He is visibly transformed through the mysterious and ambiguous metaphor Son of God in the gospel of Mark. And most dramatically he is cast as the overwhelmingly metaphoric Word, the eternally present companion of God in the gospel of John.

This last metaphor is sufficiently powerful to replace even the Tanakh itself as the focus of worship. Bloom is quite explicit in his appreciation of the intent: "The entire argument of the Belated Testament is that a man has replaced scripture." And not just scripture: Jesus's remark "Before Abraham was I am" is a clear literary dig at Yahweh himself who self-identified in the Tanakh as *ehyeh asher ehyer*, "I am Who am."

The literary process reaches another local high point in the gospel of John. As Bloom correctly notes, "There is very little basis in the Synoptics [the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke] for the runaway Christianity [and anti-Semitism] of John....The central irony, for anyone who is not a Christian believer, is that the living Jesus of the Synoptics does NOT believe he is the Incarnation of Yahweh, and least of all at the moment of his death..." Thus there is a great deal of necessary back-filling theologically speaking, which will continue for several hundred years.

This process of literary transformation is triggered by Paul of Tarsus, a Jew who had never met Jesus but created a movement in his name. Jesus of Nazareth is entirely replaced by Paul with Jesus Christ, who is not to be known but simply 'believed on.' He has neither biography nor history that we can rely on.

As the protagonist of the New Testament Jesus Christ eclipses, or upstages, God the Father. The script laid out by Paul doesn't even have the Father in a walk-on part. Paul in fact conducts a very forceful aesthetic war, not against Yahweh whom he dares not attack, but against the vulnerable Moses, his go-to guy.

In Paul's hands Moses doesn't even rate second-billing. He's yesterday's news. Paul mis-quotes where he can and slanderously mis-interprets where he can't. Bloom can't resist Frederick Nietzsche's take on Paul:

"Paul is the incarnation of a type which is the reverse of that of the Saviour: he is the genius in hatred, in the standpoint of hatred, and in the relentless logic of hatred...What he wanted was power: with St. Paul the priest again aspired to power."

Bloom's own opinion of Paul is only slightly less heated: "Paul is an obsessed crank, who confuses anyone attempting a dispassionate stance toward him."

Bloom's objective in the book is to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, and Yahweh are three totally incompatible literary personages. That he succeeds is without doubt. He leaves the theological implications of this incompatibility largely to the reader.

Addendum

The day after posting this review an interesting academic pre-quel showed up in my internet feed. Although written from a theological not a literary perspective, it confirms Bloom's hypothesis of the metaphorical development of the idea of Yahweh out of the previous names of God in the ancient Middle East:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/1...>

This is the abstract:

It is often taken for granted today that the differing terms for God in the Hebrew Bible function as synonyms, although, originally, not all terminology used for God referred to the same deity. This article provides an overview of the terms El, Yahweh, and Elohim, which are all equated today, and a hypothetical reconstruction of when these terms came to prominence in Ancient Israel. After plotting and considering the contribution of each term to the development of monotheism in Israel, which ultimately laid the foundation

for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the following analysis considers some of the ensuing implications for communities of faith today when relating to their differing faith traditions.

Annick says

This book makes for some very stimulating reading. Combining philology, history, theology, psychoanalysis, and, of course, literary criticism, Bloom presents a reading of the bible that is much needed. Challenging and provocative, his approach appears to be inspired in large part by the rise of the special brand of Protestantism that is unique to the US. Bloom considers the contradictions that are inherent in the various NT representations of Jesus (Mark's, Matthew and Luke's, John's, Paul's, James', etc.), as well as in some of the non-canonical early testimonies about Jesus and his teachings, and the further contradictions that can be found when the Christian god of Christ (not the same entity, in Bloom's eyes, as the historical Jesus of Nazareth) is compared to the Yahweh of the Hebrew bible. In addition, Bloom takes the time to analyze the seeds of Antisemitism that are present in the gospels, particularly John. His approach to both Christianity and Judaism is iconoclastic, but ultimately, rather convincing.

Like other readers, I admit to being quite lost in the last part of Bloom's study, where he begins to discuss Kabbalah, but overall, the book is a pleasure to read. There is something particularly delightful about Bloom's surprising, mordant humour -- serious theological reflections are followed by dry, sarcastic comments. The book is dense, certainly, but not unmanageable.

Jena says

Harold Bloom es el crítico literario más famoso de los Estados Unidos, ha escrito más de 25 libros y en este caso entra al estudio de "Jesús y Yahvé. los Nombres Divinos," desde su muy particular punto de vista, ni como filósofo, ni como teólogo, sino como literato y judío.

El ensayo está dividido en 2 partes, la primera está dedicada al Jesús histórico y a los Evangelios que fueron escritos para divulgar sus enseñanzas. Afirma que realmente la vida de Jesús está contenida en 2 líneas en la "Historia de los Judíos" del mentiroso Josefo, y en los Evangelios que relatan parte de su vida, pero que fueron escritos por personas que ni de segunda mano lo conocieron, empezando por el Evangelio del supuesto san Juan, escrito 100 años después de la Crucifixión. Para el autor, el más interesante y misterioso es el de Marcos en donde se relatan las parábolas, cuyo significado es ininteligible o enigmático; para muestra léase Marcos 4:II-12, aun en la Biblia Católica, cuando les dice a los Apóstoles "Se les ha dado el secreto del reino de Dios, pero para los otros todo viene en parábolas, para que puedan ver pero no percibir, para que puedan oír pero no entender..." Aunque Marcos parece no saber de quién son estas palabras, el autor nos informa que provienen de Isaías.

La segunda parte corresponde a Yahvé. Nos cuenta el origen del Dios como Dios de la Guerra, de su forma de hablar diferente a la de Jesús, del rechazo a la subsumisión de Yahvé al Dios padre cristiano. La personalidad de Yahvé es diferente a la del Dios viejo que forma parte de la Trinidad. Para hacer más clara esta situación Bloom nos cuenta que el verdadero Jesús era fidelísimo a la Ley judía, que jamás pensó hacer una nueva religión y que en ella participasen los gentiles. Y por lo que hace al misterio de la Trinidad, este fue inventado por Atanasius, un poco antes del Concilio de Nicea en donde fue aceptado como dogma. En fin, que el estudio termina pidiendo una nueva alianza con Yahvé, misma que debe ser cumplida por ambas partes, tanto por Yahvé como por su pueblo elegido.

Bill says

A work studded with extraordinary and unsettling insights -- Christianity an usurpation rather than excrescence of Judaism? The new testament as deliberate misreading of the hebrew bible?

In this slim, dense volume, Harold Bloom, the septuagenarian Yale humanities professor who did not shrink from declaring that grade school children should rather read nothing at all than read "Harry Potter," sets his sights on even larger game -- the Godhead Him/Her/It/Themselves.

A life of literary study and criticism has left Bloom seemingly bereft of any approach to Yahweh and Yeshua other than as literary characters. But then, as he had already made clear in his "Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human," Bloom considers all of *us* literary characters, too -- or, worse luck, poor parodies of such characters.

In his at times too-cryptic aphorisms and the way he interpenetrates the personal with the cosmic, Bloom reminds me of no one so much as another great nay-sayer: Frederick Nietzsche.

Carol says

Bloom is brilliant and has read everything and incorporates everything he's read into everything he writes. I did not, finally, agree with all of his conclusions but found him fascinating and am glad I read his book for his many interesting leads into other texts. I especially appreciated his discussion of Kabbalah. Will return to this book from time to time.

Kevin Fuller says

I recently read Harold Bloom's 'Jesus and Yahweh the Names Divine'.

Bloom confuses me. To be fair, any literary critic applying the literary lense to Divinity would confuse me.

Literary criticism for me ultimately is two dimensional. Ultimately, the critic judges words on paper, not living, breathing characters.

As I believe both Jesus and Yahweh are each living and presumably breathing, I believe any two dimensional analysis is incomplete.

But Bloom seems to believe this sort of judgement is complete. Does he have a personal relationship with Jesus? Does Bloom pray? Does Bloom worship?

The most Bloom will own up to is that he views Gnosticism to be the religion or worldview of Great Literature.

Bloom, analyzing Jesus and Yahweh, each on terms I think they would find absurd, allows Divinity to be created by the 'Old Covenant' and 'Belated Covenant' writers, as if they were two characters out of any popular novel.

As a result, there is no unified theory for Jesus or Yahweh. Mark's Jesus is different than Matthew's Jesus, etc. etc. etc.

But for me, human personality transcends literary criticism, as it's aspects are more than manifold and too numerous to literally count.

And if human personality is manifold, how much more so is the Divine Personality?

Where I see Jesus and Yahweh as being greater than human understanding, and as a result only grappled at by the best means possible, Bloom finds literature to be the know all be all Truth.

I am of the mind that the Biblical Literature serves to illumine the modern day Christian, not to replace saving Faith for the modern day Christian.

Jesus spoke in a dynamic way, his parable anchored in the dynamism of Nature and the Pastoral. His Gospel was decidedly to be rooted in action for the early Church, not to be rooted in intellectualism. Yahweh, whether commanding Abraham to sacrifice his only son, or destroying the twin cities of Tyre and Sidon is utterly incomprehensible to me as a literary character. Motivation, environment, parentage and political circumstances, just a few of the literary devices, simply do not apply to the Creator.

Bloom is not going to answer if the 'Old Covenant' and the 'Belated Covenant' are spiritually true, only if they are existentially true. And I am of the persuasion that God chose not to reveal Himself in these terms.

If God had wanted to be critiqued literally, I believe He would have chosen the urbane Greeks and Romans to write His story as opposed to the disciples, most of whom were uneducated in rhetoric, grammar and so forth.

I think Bloom gets the cart before the horse. The Scriptures are there to serve the Faithful, and not vice versa, and I don't see much Faith in Bloom.

Noustian says

For those who really know how to read what's on the page (including the Bible). It's fascinating to see how "all too human" Yahweh first turns into God the Father and then into a retired entity of gaseous nature . And how Joshua of Nazareth is transformed into a theological God of the Gentiles.

Joseph says

I went through a brief Bloom phase shortly after college, reading a few of his more accessible books, and flattering myself to think that I had the capacity to understand and critique his arguments. If ever such a window was open, however (and I think it unlikely that it ever was), I have to conclude that it has long since

closed. The truth is that, regardless of intellect, I lack the context to properly keep up with what he's saying here and elsewhere, and given that I have no interest in devoting years of study to literary criticism, kabbalah, and gnostic mysticism, I never will. All of which is just to say that everything I say from here on out should be taken with the appropriate half pound of salt.

First of all, I'm not sure what Bloom's purpose here is. His volume is neither introductory nor comprehensive, and his argument is so scattershot that I really have no idea what his conclusion is, or if he even intends one in the first place. If it's biographical, why does he wait until he's twenty pages from the end to begin discussing Yahweh's psychology? If it's literary, why is there so little close analysis of actual biblical text? If it's historical, why does he bounce around chronologically? As near as I can figure, his primary point seems to be that the god of the Old Testament is different from the god of the New Testament, who is in turn different from the god worshiped by (primarily American) Christians today, thus suggesting that our Judeo-Christian society bears no resemblance to actual Judaism or Christianity (although if you ask me, that argument was made to much better affect in Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy*).

On the other hand, I do kind of understand the point of the book (albeit in a rather cynical, nasty way). Because when I think about Bloom, I think about his obsessions: namely his idea that human personality as we know it is a literary construction (which I find believable, if a bit strange) and his habit of connecting everything (and I mean everything) to Shakespeare, especially the characters of Hamlet and Falstaff (although Lear seems to have supplanted Falstaff in this volume, whether as a more decorous choice for a book about divinity, or as a symptom of Bloom's own changing feelings, I cannot say). With that in mind (and I'm certainly not the first to posit this), I suspect Bloom sees himself as Falstaff's heir. Personally, however, I've always seen his true literary antecedent as Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty. Humpty's (Mr. Dumpty if you're nasty) insistence that when he uses a word that its meaning depends on what he wants it to mean is an act of pure ego, and Bloom seems to capture that comical impulse in a serious way. His conjectures become facts upon which he can further conjecture, and this is most apparent when speaking about both Shakespeare and the Bible, two areas where facts are in such short supply. I'm not saying that it's a bad thing, and it can be entertaining, but there always seems to be a moment where I find myself wondering whether what I'm reading is anything more than cleverly-spun webs of bullshit. So that's my opinion of Bloom: that his writing is a pure manifestation of his ego, deducing the existence of a world that fits his conclusions and then willing it into being. Put another way, I don't think it's a coincidence that the cover of this book reads "Jesus and Yahweh / Harold Bloom / The Names Divine".

That's the broad strokes for me, although I feel like there's more that I can/should say, although a lot of it boils down to my own religious obsessions and skepticism. For example, I'm not sure I understand Bloom's own faith. He clearly believes the Bible, as we know it, to be a text constructed and assembled, by distinct people, since its first appearance (appearances), for many and varied reasons, often far from spiritual. Yet at the same time, he seems to treat it as an abstract truth, its flaws and inconsistencies a part of its inherent design, rather than a consequence of its slipshod manufacture. The nearest analogy I can think of would be trying to analyze the personality of Batman, while treating all his varied incarnations as part of a unified whole, rather than as completely separate entities created by a multitude of writers. Instead of boiling them all down into a skeleton of the "essential Batman", however, he seems to be rationalizing the inconsistencies, treating the goofy, campy 1960's TV character as the same person as Frank Miller's bitter, violent Dark Knight, and trying to explain their coexistence as a symptom of the creation, rather than the creators.

Yeah, maybe I should have stopped with "Bloom thinks he's god" rather than "I think Bloom thinks that god is Batman."

Gabriel says

This is a really well written, critical look at both Jesus Christ and Yahweh, the two main characters of modern day Christianity and Judaism respectively. Harold Bloom makes an excellent case showing how the "Father in Heaven" as depicted by modern day Christians bears little resemblance to the Yahweh of the Tanakh. I'm not sure either Jews, Christians, or Muslims will *like* what he has to say, but he definitely takes a very critical look at how we have come to understand these characters, and where this understanding has come from. I constantly found myself disagreeing with him on a dogmatic level, which slowly turned into agreement as I opened up to my own preconceived notions.

I don't want to make it sound like Harold Bloom is a staunch supporter of Judaism while only critical of Christianity, he is not. He identifies w/Judaism only in that he was born and raised Jewish, and has a very objective voice, and is critical of much of the aspects of both of these traditions.

While at times hard to follow, if you are a student of religious traditions, you will most likely get quite a bit from this book and I can easily recommend it.

Owlseyes says

I've watched/listened to several interviews* Bloom gave and took some notes. But you must never forget that Bloom has got a cultural Jewish back ground.

1- It's interesting his model of viewing biblical figures as "literary characters". Jesus, and Jacob, even God, are viewed as "literary characters".

2- Jesus is viewed as Hamlet ... "unpredictable...and abrupt"; there are (according to the counts of Bloom) at least 7 versions of Jesus. Mark's (Gospel) version is the one that's assimilated to Hamlet.

3- God/Yahweh is like King Lear: "intense and irascible".

4- To Bloom, there's uniqueness in the American Christianity. It has its roots in the work of Emerson; it started "ecstatically" in 1801 in Kentucky.

5- As for the God/Yahweh, in present times, Bloom says "he has chosen to be absent". I am referring the times of "Benito Bush" (Bloom's expression).

6- As a personal "staggering" experience, Bloom recalled his talks with some Americans (in the south) who say they talk with Jesus on a daily basis.

7- On his work he had recourse to the Geneva Bibles.

8- There's a *mismatch* between Yahweh and Jesus.

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PNV3...>

James says

A difficult but fascinating examination of the two most impenetrable literary characters of all time: Yahweh and Jesus of the Gospel of Mark. Bloom also examines the various other versions of Yahweh (Allah, God the Father) and Jesus (the mysterious but historical Yeshua of Nazareth, the other synoptic Gospels, John, the Gnostics). Now, the very fact that more multiples of these mysterious and endlessly compelling figures exists may surprise those immersed in the rhetoric and teachings of the Christian right and modern theology, but Bloom, as he states many times, is writing for exactly that reason; he seeks to expose falsehoods that are accepted as fact by most Americans. And who better to take on these characters than Bloom, the greatest living writer on Shakespeare, the Bard being the only writer to create characters that rival Yahweh and Jesus in depth and aesthetic eminence. As Bloom's books so often do, Jesus and Yahweh refers heavily to Shakespeare and Freud as well as to a number of religious sages, philosophers, and modern academics most of whom were unfamiliar to me. Essentially, Bloom's central thesis is that Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally irreconcilable religions, but this has been obscured to the point where it is sacrilege to support this idea, for which Bloom provides extensive evidence. Bloom also makes the controversial but very welcome point that from a literary point of view there should be no distinction between sacred and religious texts. All of the typical joys of Bloom's work are present here: a beautifully rendered and engaging prose style, wit, extensive research and a knowledge of literature that is truly second to none, resistance to popular but malignant trends in academe, etc. It also had the flaws, minor as they are, most notably a tendency to repeat certain ideas more than is necessary, in chapter after chapter. But that is a minor point.

This is one of the most thought provoking books on religion that has been written in recent years, and Professor Bloom's ideas are sure to cause disquiet in both the religious and secular. He reveals how mistaken the majority of both groups are in their assumptions about Jesus and Yahweh, the two most central and undefinable figures of Western literature.

Michel Siskoid Albert says

a comparison of the two from a literary standpoint, i.e. as literary characters. I knew a lot more about Jesus than Yahweh going in, being well versed in my catechism, but the God of the Tanakh (what Christians call the Old Testament) was a revelation (no pun intended). As usual, Bloom has his mannerisms (like repeating his thesis way too often), but I've always found his rambling criticism to be much like my own, and he always always makes me want to reach for whatever books he's discussing, and that's a good thing.

Jacob says

Yeshua. I've finished this now. Bloom makes some very interesting observations, but I felt all the way through that he sort of missed that there are actual humans inventing the human and so he ends up either writing about literature as if it's real or about real people as if they're literary inventions. I dunno, maybe I need to read some of his other works to get the hang of his thinking.

David says

Fascinating book that takes theological and historical research on Jesus and the Tanakh and uses the tools of literary criticism to explore vast difference between the Jewish G-d and the Christian Christ. With echoes of his *Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom essentially sees Christ and Christianity as founded on creative "misreadings" of YHWH and the Jewish scriptures.

Jim says

i first read Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine several years ago. At that time I rated it four-stars. I have recently reread it and have a much better grasp of Bloom's ruminations than I did before. This book is truly a (and I quote) "brilliant and provocative character study of Jesus and Yahweh." Five stars.
