



## The Book of J

*Harold Bloom (Interpreter) , David Rosenberg (Translator) , Jahwist*

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J is the title that scholars ascribe to the nameless writer they believe is responsible for the text, written between 950 & 900, on which Genesis, Exodus & Numbers is based. In The Book of J, Bloom & Rosenberg draw the J text out of the surrounding material & present it as the seminal classic it is. In addition to Rosenberg's original translations, Bloom argues in several essays that "J" was not a religious writer but a fierce ironist & a woman living in the court of King Solomon. He also argues that J is a writer on par with Homer, Shakespeare & Tolstoy. Bloom also offers historical context, a discussion of the theory of how the different texts came together to create the Bible & translation notes. Rosenberg's translations from the Hebrew bring J's stories to life & reveal her towering originality & grasp of humanity.

## The Book of J Details

Date : Published November 30th 2004 by Grove Press (first published January 1988)

ISBN : 9780802141910

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Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Religion, History, Nonfiction, Judaism, Theology, Literature, Criticism

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# From Reader Review The Book of J for online ebook

## Ruth Shulman says

"J" is how Biblical scholars refer to one of the authors of the first five books of the Jewish Bible (which many know as the "Old Testament"). There are others, but using the text of a recent translation of J's work, Bloom submits that J was an educated woman. The translation forms the first part of the book, followed by Bloom's gradual unfolding of his thesis. He makes a convincing case. A very good read, even for atheists.

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## Alonzo says

Bloom shares his interesting ideas about the parts of the Torah/Pentateuch which were written by the Yahwist, whom he calls J. Rosenberg's translations of these parts is amazing; really bringing out the irony that Bloom mentions so often in this book.

Religion doesn't play a part in this project, in fact, Bloom makes the argument that J should be considered blasphemous when taken in conjunction with the orthodox views of God, Yahweh, or whatever one happens to call this character; that is what Yahweh is to J: a character.

Knowing something of the Bible is more than helpful; and actually, I can't imagine anyone who doesn't know the Bible fairly well being interested in this book. Even lit geeks, if a knowledge of the Bible is lacking, may have trouble with most of what Bloom says about the sections which scholars believe were written by J.

Bloom discusses J, E, P, D and R: writers and redactors who had a hand in what we now call the Torah or the Pentateuch. Some religious believers don't like this, because the Bible itself says that Moses is the author. However, scholars have been able to recognize different styles, and certain aspects of an earlier writer which were missed inadvertently by a later one.

I will spare the details, because Bloom does a much better job of expounding them. But, he doesn't go into depth with any writer, except J.

My interest in this book was from a textual comparison point of view; I have been fascinated by the differences, often glaringly contradictory, in many translations of the Bible (as well as other books). This is evidence that translations do indeed usually signify interpretation. Therefore, no translation can be 100% accurate, as even the original is open to interpretation. This can become a thorny mess and has led to many arguments, which thankfully, Bloom doesn't spend too much time on. His interest is mostly literary, so he avoids much of the theological/philosophical arguments concerning the meanings, etc. This also gives him freedom to take off the "rose colored glasses" of religious interpretation, which often blind readers to what is actually written.

If you are at all interested in the history of the text of the Tanakh/Old Testament, specifically the Torah/Pentateuch/Books of Moses; or in textual comparison, interpretation, criticism, etc.; then, I recommend this book. It does lack a scholarly apparatus, as many of Bloom's books do, making it difficult to do further research, etc. from this text. It is, however, a good place to begin, and (as it was meant to be) to be enjoyed by the lay reader/general public.

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## **WT Sharpe says**

Some sections are highly speculative in nature, such as the suggestion that The Yahwist was a woman who lived in the the courts of those who succeeded King Solomon and the suggestion that her work was perhaps meant to be understood as a fictional account rather than be accepted as Holy Writ, but wherever such speculation appears it is clearly labeled as such, making this book is a valuable resource to all serious students of the Bible. It certainly increased my appreciation for the unknown author who penned so many of the fascinating and wonderful stories in the Pentateuch.

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## **Red Shoes says**

I have a love of the art of translation, and to watch as these scholars dissect the language of the most-read and least-understood books, and extrapolate on their origin, was awesome.

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## **Lee Harmon says**

Here's another of my favorites, published back in 1990. If you haven't read it yet, it's a must read, for the sheer pleasure of it.

Most scholars now accept that the Torah was written by at least four different authors. The first strand of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers was written by an author that scholars call "J," who lived in the tenth century BC. This is your chance to read J's story as it was written, extracted and reassembled from the Bible. Bloom admires J on the level of Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy, and wonders if J wasn't a woman. J's story abounds in unforgettable characters and subtle irony, including a God (Yahweh) whose personality is unmatched by any later writers.

In the first half of the book, the text of J is translated brilliantly by Rosenberg, who brings the scripture to life. Then, Bloom takes the reins and provides commentary in the second half. If you have never read any of Bloom's writings, you're in for a treat. Wry and fresh, Bloom is one of my favorite authors.

J, as Bloom points out multiple times, is no moralist. Sin is not one of J's concepts, but contempt is. Irony is. J will stoop to puns and rise to heroism if it helps portray her characters. You'll forget you're reading the Bible as you get lost in the storytelling, I promise. I can't think of enough good adjectives to describe this one.

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## **Andreas says**

Very enlightening book on J, the enigmatic writer of the most original and imaginative parts of the Hebrew Bible. Bloom is his own speculative self, but his guesses are very entertaining and they seem to make sense. If you think the Bible is stuffy and boring, read this and you'll be in for a surprise.

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## **Robert says**

David Rosenberg's translation is beautiful and his appendices are interesting. The majority of the book consists of several essays by Bloom in which he lays out his ideas concerning the translation. Some of these are nearly incoherent and his arguments are more often flights of fancy, but other essays are considerably better assembled and quite interesting. I highly recommend reading the translation and am neutral on the rest.

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## **Mark says**

5 Stars for the translated and extracted J Source of the Torah.

2 Stars for Harold Bloom's kooky commentary on it. Harold Bloom, you think you can tell that a woman as opposed to a man wrote this almost 3,000 year old Hebrew text???

You are not just full of tears and fat, Mr. Bloom; you are also full of shit!

Leave the ancient Hebrew analysis to the experts like Richard Elliott Friedman.

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## **Peter Crofts says**

If you like Stephen Mitchell's gross distortion of Gilgamesh, translation as revision (granted, Mitchell admits as much in the introduction to that work), you might want to give this a try. I picked it up to read a direct translation of Hebrew into English. I'm not sure where current scholarly consensus is about the J writer these days, but as far as I know, there is still agreement about the general idea. Rosenberg takes great liberties in his version. Some of them based on Bloom's literary hunches. So if you are alright with that you'll greatly enjoy what he's done.

As for Bloom, the usual rewriting of someone else's work.

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## **Cynthia Machata says**

A very interesting view on history, religion and a disruption to the way 'things are suppose to be' ... such as women in position of authority - imagine that.

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## **Elizabeth says**

I am not the organized religion type and so I am open to possibilities. This is a very interesting book and the

fact that the author and translator are able to pull the work of one author from the text fascinates me. Bravo! The fact that it may have been written by a female of the day made it more interesting for me still because I have wondered since childhood why women were not represented in the books of the Bible. A more enlightened society and possibly computer algorithms may prove the medieval males wrong about the supposed minor role women played long ago. Hurray! Read this book and be sure to read the authors' notes and forwards etc. We all know the stories but this book puts a different slant or twist to them. Thank you.

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## **BlackOxford says**

### **Literary Chutzpah**

Biblical scholars have been arguing for two and a half centuries about who wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Several things are agreed upon: it wasn't Moses. It wasn't a single individual. And it wasn't written over a single lifetime. Beyond that things get sticky.

One of the hypothetical writers (four, or more if one counts all the editors) recognised by scholars is known as the Yahwist, or J for short. But no one is sure if J's was the core around which others added. Nor is there agreement about which parts of the Pentateuch are firmly attributable to J. And there are alternative views that range over as much as 500 years about when J wrote. In fact, it is apparently impossible to determine if J is one person or many people writing in a similar style. Despite intense academic scrutiny there has been increasing divergence rather than growing expert consensus in recent years.

Given all this fundamental uncertainty about J, from his (or her) existence to his contribution, one might suppose that a modern literary critic who is not an expert in the subtleties of ancient Middle Eastern language, history and religious culture might be hesitant to express a professional opinion about him. But that's only because they don't know Harold Bloom.

Bloom believes he knows precisely who J is: an educated woman of standing in Judaic society. He knows when she wrote: during the reign of King Solomon as a participant in his court. And he knows why she wrote: to establish a particular view about dynastic legitimacy. He also detects other things generations of scholars have failed to see: most importantly a pervasive irony in J's writing which is the key to her real intention.

There can be little doubt that Bloom has a justified confidence in his skill in the interpretation of literary texts. It is unlikely that anyone has had a greater impact on the understanding of most of the major texts in the English language. But the jump he makes from the world of modern English to the ancient world of Hebrew and Greek texts in his conclusions about J seem more than a bridge too far.

Bloom wrote the book in collaboration with David Rosenberg, a scholar who selected what he believes are the fragments of J scattered in the Pentateuch (mainly in the book of Genesis). This he translated and included in Bloom's book. As a critique of this translation, Bloom's observations are perhaps warranted. However, as an interpretation of key parts of the Pentateuch, Bloom's is simply a pretence.

Bloom's conclusions can't be considered as anything more than poetic but unschooled fancy. His argument is an interesting narrative, but it ignores the mass of information that has been assembled by dedicated

professional people for over two hundred years. He uses this information selectively and, often tendentiously, where he uses it at all.

Although the Pentateuch is certainly a literary document it is unlike any work of modern literature. It has been worked and re-worked, cut and pasted, edited (often badly) and more or less forced into the form we have received. Its purposes, political as well as theological, style and language are so heterogeneous that it is unlikely that the scholarly project to unravel its original bits will ever be completed. Bloom hasn't changed that situation in the least.

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## **Steven Peterson says**

My sense in this review is that I am close to "in over my head." Readers differ greatly on their evaluation of this work, including how well the translation is done, historicity of Bloom's speculation, and so on. But I'll "wade in" anyway, realizing that I can't directly assess the accuracy of the translation or the strength of Bloom's knowledge on the matter. Bloom's focus in this work is encapsulated by his statement that (Page 9): "In Jerusalem, nearly three thousand years ago, an unknown author composed a work that has formed the spiritual consciousness of the world ever since. We possess only a fragmentary text of that work, embedded within what we call Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, three of the divisions of Torah, or the five books of Moses."

First, Bloom's rendering of the Book of J is interesting. He and many others speculate that the Torah was a set of works written by different people, with someone (an editor) pulling the various parts together. J is for Yahweh, which term J uses when mentioning God. Another author, E, uses another term for God, Elohim. Thus, two of the purported authors are J and E. Other authors are P (Priestly), D (Deuteronomist), and R (Redactor, the editor who pulled the various pieces together).

Bloom hypothesizes that J was actually a woman, in or near Solomon's son's court. There is not much evidence one way or another for this suggestion, however. One wonders why he makes the argument given that it is pretty much pure speculation.

Second, there is the Book of J itself, translated from Hebrew by David Rosenberg. Bloom and Rosenberg both see the author as ironic and witty (Bloom uses the term "a dramatic ironist" [Page 317:] to describe J), very different stylistically from the other alphabetized purported authors. And, in fact, if the translation is accurate, it is a wonderful read of someone who was a very talented writer. Familiar tales are told in a very different way (e.g., the Creation, the escape of Israel from Pharaoh, Moses and the wandering in the desert, the story of Joseph, and so on). Again, a number of reviewers on Amazon believe that Rosenberg took considerable liberty in his translation. As already noted, I can't address that. But the translation as presented is riveting reading.

Third, there is a brief but rewarding afterward in which the translator describes his method.

Bloom concludes by identifying J as one of the great authors of all time. He says (Page 316): "By common consent, the Yahwist [that is, J:] is one of the small group of Western authors we identify with the Sublime, with literary greatness as such. J's peers are Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Tolstoy, Proust, and only a few others." While I can't address some of the serious criticisms raised by other reviewers, I can say that the Book of J itself, as translated by Rosenberg, is rich and rewarding to read.

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## Aaron says

In this book Harold Bloom is as pompous and full of himself as ever, and Shakespeare is mentioned on nearly every page, but he says some fascinating things about the Bible.

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## Kate says

I wish the rating system was out of more stars - I think I'd like 12 or so to better subdivide reviewing into various degrees of liked it/loved it/you should read it.

This book is essentially an essay or dissertation on the authour's idea that the "Yawist" (the original authour of the early parts of the Torah/Bible such as genesis) was a woman of court in the era of Rohoboam (David's grandson) and that she was not a religious scholar, but actually one of the first literary greats. It includes a new translation of the books which are filled with the irony and play-on-words that are referenced often in the dissection.

I can't imagine the complicated science of trying to infer an authour from their writings and have no idea about the resulting burdens of proof that would distinguish this book as scholarly as opposed to mere observation but it was to me a unique perspective on something I had never considered. I (almost) always love that kind of mental curve-ball and so, would recommend this book.

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## Lisa says

The worst thing about the book was Harold Bloom. Yes, I know he's a titan in the field of literary criticism. But he's become so big that he doesn't bother with the mundane task of proving his positions with, say, the text. He just asserts endlessly and the reader, knowing who he is, is supposed to bow down and tell him "You're right; you're so right!" in a suitably-awed whisper. Even his effusions about Shakespeare, of whom I am a fan, can't save his analysis of the text. Apparently only J and Shakespeare are truly one with the great literary deity in the sky. Only they truly fulfill what literature ought to be. Or something like that. In any case, even the effusions have a superior tone about them, because if you dare to disagree with Bloom then you are obviously under-educated, under-literary, or some other under- beneath his notice. He's so tedious. Reading this translation of J, however, was intriguing. You could feel the difference of J without the P, E, or D portions of the text. Nuances that have been lost due, primarily, to the redactor. The translator's word choices feel ... amazingly fresh yet authentic. I greatly enjoyed reading the translator's brief notes and only wish there was more of that information, about choices in the translation. Alone, the translator and translation would easily get 3 stars, but with Bloom dragging him down, it's only 2 for my torment.

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## B. Hawk says

In my estimation, the central premises of *The Book of J* would have been better off written as a novel than in the form that Bloom presents as scholarly non-fiction. If that were the case, it could have been a compelling,



provocative, and fascinating book; yet, as it stands, this book is a subjective, over-wrought, and frustrating speculation on one of the greatest works of Western literature as it might have been.

It is clear that Bloom's work is meant largely to goad religious traditionalists (esp. Jews and Christians), and not to write a scholarly study that contributes to larger examinations of the Bible. (Here may even be an appropriate place to note the annoyance one may experience from Bloom's lack of citations or notes, even for direct quotations from other scholars.) This goading, however, is not what ultimately bothers me, but the fundamental flaws in Bloom's presentation of the theories.

The foremost problem with this book is that it seeks to do what scholars have attempted (and failed) for a number of great literary works: to strip down the work as it has been passed on to us to what may be conceived of as the "pure" and "original" work as it was written by the first author. Such attempts have been discredited among literary scholars elsewhere—e.g. with attempts to find the "pure" "origins" of Homer's works, Old English literature (esp. *Beowulf*), or (closer to Bloom's topic) the gospels (n.b. there is also a significant connection between these connections and notions of traditional oral literature, which Bloom vehemently denies in his study). Yet Bloom insists on this project, claiming in an off-handed manner that "All I have is to remove the Book of J from its *context* in the Redactor's Torah and then to read what remains" (16, emphasis mine). Bloom even situates himself as the hero of his book, deeming the contexts as "varnish" that must be stripped away (47-8). This task (for any piece of literature) is, of course, both futile and highly anachronistic. For the purposes of the rest of this review, I will set aside this inherent flaw in the book to address other concerns that are equally glaring.

I have no inherent problem with Bloom's claims that the writer of the "Book of J" was a woman—in fact, it is an enticing fictional proposal, and could be imagined in relation to any piece of great literature (I myself have reflected on this issue about many anonymous and pseudonymous works of literature). Yet the problems with Bloom's claims for J as a woman develop out of a continual assertion that her literary artistry is "ironic," especially in the sense that it opposes patriarchy, polygamy, Israelite traditions, the norms of her society, and the religion that became Judaism. The problem with all this, however, is what Bloom himself acknowledges: "Her major ironic stance is very different and must be regarded as her own invention" (25), to the point that Bloom cannot even define this irony. Yet he continues to use "irony" as the defining characteristic. Although it may be a glib analogue, one may even hazard to say that "irony" is for Bloom like the word "inconceivable" is for Vizinni in *The Princess Bride*: I do not think it means what he thinks it means. Instead, a reader may come away with the feeling that, for Bloom, "ironic" is somehow synonymous with "genius," even if he cannot define it.

On a mere level of annoyance is Bloom's continual insistence that "J's cognitive power is unmatched among Western writers until Shakespeare" (16). This claim is implicit throughout, as Bloom persistently parallels the two writers. Given the thousands of years of Western literature and the abilities of many of the writers within that span, this is a bold claim that takes his reading well beyond scoffable subjectivity.

Unfortunately, Bloom uses this subjectivity to provide only general claims about the "Book of J" as worthy of admiration, but cannot substantiate these literary traits for others to follow. Bloom (remember, he is the hero of this story, as he "reclaims" J for the world) essentially bases all of his thoughts on his "experience over half a century as a reader" (21), and not on any identifiable literary approach other than his own reader-responses. What do end up being J's literary merits in Bloom's opinion are some of the same traits that others deem great in the whole of Genesis (and, further, the Pentateuch and Old Testament)—but which Bloom casts aside in his beliefs that there is no theology or politics in the work, only an imaginative literary aesthetic. It seems to me that, in setting his own theories in such bold contrast to every scholarly approach to the Bible, Bloom doth protest too much—and this is the fundamental flaw in his all-too-insistent

presentation.

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### **geraldo rivera says**

This is a wonderfully original interpretation of what biblical scholars believe to be the earliest writings from the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Bloom has an annoying tendency to use superlatives to describe the author's (J's) genius, rather than just giving his interpretation of J's literature and letting the reader decide whether or not this is the greatest author until Shakespeare. But his analysis, when he gets down to it, is insightful. More importantly, he does what literary criticism should do: he invites you to read the original text in a whole new light, thereby enhancing your appreciation of the author's work.

As a bonus, *The Book of J* also includes a new translation of what scholars believe to be J's writings (hence the title ... the Book of J). It is hard to be sure of what is actually J's, since the final editor of what came to be the Torah masterfully interwove the writings of 4 or 5 authors from different time periods. But if Bloom and his translator - David Rosenberg - are even largely on the right track, then the inventor of such powerful stories as the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Jacob wrestling with the angel of God, and the epic tale of Joseph, was a masterful storyteller with a mischievous eye for irony and a passion for those who live life to the fullest.

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### **Austin Murphy says**

I don't really get it. The claim is that this translation is somehow "purer" in recognizing the irony of the original text, but it just reads like a less fancy version of the same tales told in the King James Version. What am I missing?

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### **Max Maxwell says**

The short version of this review is, "I liked it a lot."

In order to understand the longer version, you'll need to know a bit about the subject matter. Modern biblical criticism holds that the Torah, otherwise known as the Pentateuch, Chumash, or Five Books of Moses, and constituting the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, that is (listed here in their Anglicized forms) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, weren't really composed by Moses, as Jewish tradition would have it. Rather, they were composed by four different authors or sets of authors, each with a distinct tone and focus. Those authors were J (Jahwist or Yahwist), who wrote the stories that make up the literary backbone of the Torah, and focused on Yahweh, that is, God, and his antics; E (Elohist) who focused on the Angels or Elohim of God; D (Deuteronomist) who wrote Deuteronomy; and P (Priestly), who focused on laws, and was the author most likely to have actually been more than one author. These four were combined into the modern Torah, quite seamlessly, it might be added, by a fifth editor figure, R (Redactor). As stated, it is possible to separate, to some degree, the different texts, and that is what Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg have done here, isolated the J text, translated it, and slapped on some savvy commentary.

Both were quite controversial at the time of their publication, and today read quite shockingly to those among us familiar with the King James Version or a similar translation, myself included. Ralph Waldo

Emerson noted that the religion of one age is the literary entertainment of the next, but what Bloom proposes here is that J's M.S., making up most of Genesis and Exodus, and some of Numbers, was never intended to have a religious significance, but was *intended* as literature. And literature it is. I found it very readable, the translation something akin to Stephen Mitchell's translation of The Book of Job, which I read earlier this year: a nice modern translation, truly attempting to peel off layers and layers of retroactive religious grime. What's underneath? A Moses that hardly lives up to the Patriarchal picture painted in the KJV, and an impish Yahweh, more reminiscent of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than of any "man in the clouds," that truly lives up to Richard Dawkins's words:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

The heroes in J's vision are Jacob and his son Joseph, but I won't summarize plots here. I should mention that the other major heresy in Bloom's vision is that he proposes that J was a woman, a sophisticated socialite writing in the reign of Rehoboam, an inept king following Solomon and David, whom to J are sacrosanct. Bloom actually makes a *very* persuasive case for this. Finally, Bloom helps with an understanding of Genesis' stories by honing in on the major themes in Rosenberg's translation: boundaries and the Blessing exist in a sort of dynamic tension, that is, Yahweh's Blessing is passed from generation to generation, but those that receive it are kept from fully realizing its benefits by waves of difficulty, usually in the form of an exile.

Read *The Book of J*, by all means. It's probably Harold Bloom's best work outside of *The Anxiety of Influence*, and the translation lets you see the Torah in a whole new light, whether Jewish or atheist or what have you.

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