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A FORUM ON *The Book of J*

SOME NOTES OF A ON *The Book of J*

Alicia Ostriker

We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavenly and the earthly world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too, and talks His inside business.

Zora Neale Hurston

I

To read exuberantly, personally, yes. To de-institutionalize the text, to lift it from its canonized shackles, to make it naked and new. To strip three millennia of interpretive glosses like tacky layers of varnish from its surface, to reveal the original crooked rough and living wood, yes. To take the Book away from the grip of “the rabbis, priests, ministers and their scholarly servants,” yes. To release it from the systematizing theologians, yes. To show how little it has in common with orthodox Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. To celebrate it as powerful narrative, that is storytelling, yes. To assert that the height of its great argument by no means justifies the ways of God to men, but announces a Blessing which “is more life, and the promise of yet more life, into a time without boundaries” (44); to demonstrate its humor; to examine its characters; to notice its earthy sexuality; above all to declare openly that the Jahweh of the J text is no pious abstraction but “an outrageous personality” (294). That is the project of *The Book of J*.

And to lay one’s cards on the table. Harold Bloom reads as a literary critic, a secular Jew, a male. Fond of polemic and not ashamed of it. Drawn to figures of agon, combat, wrestling, human and divine vitality. Hostile to piety, orthodoxy, and weakness. Bloom writes as an ancient advocate of Romanticism and William Blake ought to. One remembers Blake’s lines in *Jerusalem*: “I must Create a System or be enslav’d by another Man’s. / I will not reason and compare. My business is to create.”

He writes also as an Emersonian. “Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist,” Emerson remarks. Bloom is admirably unafraid to represent himself in the act of reading, of responding actively not passively to what he reads, of making up his mind and even changing it. Nor does he pretend to objectivity:

As we read any author, we necessarily create a fiction or metaphor of its author. That author is perhaps our myth, but the experience of literature depends upon that myth. With J, we have a choice of myths, and I boisterously prefer mine to that of the biblical scholars. (19)

I consider this wonderful. For why should a text that provokes forceful and contradictory responses from one’s whole being be read impersonally, dispassionately, as a mere philological or historical puzzle?

My cards, briefly: I write as a literary critic, a poet, another old Blakean, a non-observant (not exactly secular) Jew, and (to be sure) a woman. Whoso would be a woman must be a nonconformist. I too am fond of argument and contention, though also of conciliation, and “only connect” is among my mottoes. I dislike hardening of the categories, and prefer both/and to either/or. When I read the Bible I read it with simultaneous anger, love, pain, delight, identification and rejection.

The people of Israel are my people, for better and worse. The patriarchs and matriarchs are my own ancestors. The God is my God, whether I like him or not; and much of the time I do not. The text records the triumph of monotheistic patriarchy in a region formerly polytheistic; monotheism seems to me an intellectual and spiritual necessity, patriarchy an intellectual and spiritual abomination which I must struggle to transform. I adore the Creator of the Universe, who is coterminous with the universe, whose energy is eternal delight, who is beyond prediction or predication and can never be squeezed into moral or theological systems: the being who in Isaiah 45:7 says, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” I love the God who has a picnic in the shade with Abraham, followed by an ethical bargaining session; the God who wrestles with Jacob; the God who gives Moses a lifetime of *tsuris*, but also speaks to him face to face, and repents of his intention to destroy Israel when Moses rebukes him. The God who in the Book of Job

both rejects and rewards the agonized challenger of his justice. I am pleased to learn that the name “Jahweh” is related to a Sanskrit term for “overflowing,” just as I am pleased at the notion that the couple “Abram” and “Sarai” might at one time have been Brahma and Sarasvati.

The exclusionary tribal Noboddaddy is another matter. Him I desire to overthrow. He is the Jealous One whom Sylvia Plath calls “Herr God.” He has defeated the mother, he is a Man of War preoccupied with his own glory and righteousness. He sponsors paranoid rigidity within the community and the self, and hatred and fear of the Other. Conquest is his meat and drink. I recognize with deep grief his historical necessity, for he is also the self-protection without which no people survives. Without him there would be neither Judaism, nor Christianity, nor Islam.

II

“Turn it and turn it,” the rabbis say of Torah, “for everything is in it.” Including contradiction—which is as it should be. The Bible is an endlessly provocative, endlessly multiple text, held together by the force-field of monotheism; as Robert Alter observes, its portions are often in tremendous covert war with each other, for the redactors were more interested in the literary and spiritual vigor of the text than its consistency.¹ Among the wonderful qualities of the Biblical God is the quality of overwhelming creative and destructive energy, never-to-be-grasped, never-to-be-tamed. This energy coexists, marvelously, with an insistence on a love relationship toward a people. Yahweh is a transcendent divinity who nonetheless behaves intimately and uncannily like a person, demanding that we be persons in response. As Bloom puts it, he is both “a mothering father and a vengeful judge” capable of “shocking harshness” (185), yet his “essence is surprise” (227). That paradox already inheres in the J text; later layers of text elaborate it. For this and other reasons, it seems to me self-evident that the J text like the rest of the Bible is a composite work developed through retellings over vast tracts of time, though a single aristocratic hand may have performed the final polishing.

For Bloom, it is self-evident that J is a single author, a writer of individual genius comparable to Shakespeare and Chaucer. He derides the notion of “that curious scholarly fiction, an oral tradition.” (18) Yet he also

asserts “I hear in J an ever early freshness, long preceding all the other voices in the Pentateuch” (22), and in an off-moment allows that the figure of Yahweh in J is probably composite:

Archaic Judaism is all but totally unknown to us. We know the rabbinical Judaism that has been dominant since the second century C.E. . . . What we do not know is the Judaism that was available to the Yahwist, and the history, or mythology, of that Judaism. All that I can see is that the Yahweh of the Yahwist has very little to do with the God of Ezra or the God of Akiba. I cannot see whether her Yahweh came to her from her people’s past or their beliefs in her own day, or from her own humorous and subtle imagination. Most likely, an amalgam of the three formed in her work, and remains with us still, despite the revisionary labors of normative Judaism. (33–34)

Why “despite?” Why not “with the help of?” Surely the J text would never have survived without a priesthood, an orthodoxy, an institutionalized religion — which did what orthodoxy always does to revelation, tamed and stabilized it. But the main point which Bloom here almost inadvertently suggests is that an artist’s voice is always in part the voice of an ethos. Were it not for his investment in the romantic concept of the genius, Bloom would surely recognize the kinship between the Yahwist’s style of narration and the narrative forms common to pre-literature cultures. The vigor, humor, compression, the absence of sexual prudery, the representation of both men and gods as trickster figures — all these qualities which he acutely recovers in the Biblical text are also present in, for example, Native American storytelling.²

III

We come now to the vexed question of gender. That of the work, that of the author. Was J a woman? The idea is charming, although no historical evidence exists one way or another. Bloom thinks she was because the J text contains forceful and fascinating female characters; but then perhaps

the creator of *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Winter's Tale* was a woman too, along with the writers of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, not to mention the inventor of the Wife of Bath. Further, he thinks J was a woman because her male characters are childish. The creator of Achilles, then, was a woman? Most interestingly, Bloom argues that J's evident detachment from official Israelite cult seems female to him. We cut close to the bone here, although the feminine "irony" Bloom hears in J's tone might derive from the clash of that tone with ideologies and dogmas invented centuries later. An anthropomorphic and wilful God would have been no scandal in the time of the Davidic or Solomonic monarchy, nor would the lively vagaries of patriarchal personality have troubled the sons of Israel. Only in the rabbinic period does it become necessary for the chosen ancestors to have been models of virtuous behavior. Only then, and not earlier, is God recast as "a kind of heavenly university president" (281).

But if we assume the J text to include truly archaic material, other issues emerge. The story of Adam and Eve encodes (among other things) the defeat of a great goddess who once presided in her garden—accompanied by her tree, her animals, and her snake—when monotheism defeated Canaanite polytheism.³ Several other of J's stories similarly encode female defeat. So recurrent is this pattern, in which initially powerful women are disempowered, eliminated from the plot, and/or killed off before an episode's closure, as to convince one that the J subtext is, precisely, an account of the slow downfall of divine and human female authority coincident with the establishment of a male covenant. Or, yet more radically, one might say that the J text obsessively repeats the erasure of a mother who refuses to remain quite erased. Eve, as Bloom correctly observes, is a more vital figure than Adam; is that why she is more severely punished than he? Sarah, a powerful and commanding figure, dies immediately after the Binding of Isaac—an episode which dramatizes the death of mother-right. Rebecca ensures that Jacob obtains the blessing and continues the lineage through her own kinsfolk, then vanishes from the narrative. Rachel and Leah, whose sexual rivalry provides the future Israel with its future twelve tribes, disappear from the Jacob cycle after the birth of the last son. Potiphar's aggressive wife disappears early. The Joseph cycle which concludes the Book of Genesis contains in fact almost no women,

whereas the early part of Genesis is full of vivid females. The Exodus saga follows a similar design. At its start, a set of transgressive women virtually collude across class and ethnic lines, in violation of Pharaonic decree, to preserve the life of the hero. The midwives refuse to kill Hebrew babies, Moses' mother places him in the basket among the bulrushes of the Nile, the daughter of Pharaoh adopts the baby she knows to be Hebrew, and the sister of Moses cleverly fetches Moses' own mother to be his wetnurse. A bit later, Moses' Midianite wife saves him from Jahweh's night-attack at the inn on the way to Egypt. Of Zipporah we hear no more until we learn in Exodus 18:12 that Moses has "sent her away." The Exodus proper, and the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, includes no material featuring female characters, save Miriam's song at the Red Sea and her humiliation at God's hands, where she (but not Aaron) is struck with leprosy for challenging Moses' authority; shortly afterward, Miriam dies. From a woman's point of view, the Exodus is like a second Fall.

Should we then read the J text as a conscious or semiconscious narrative of female disempowerment, so well veiled that it becomes possible to unveil it only three thousand years later? Should we see it as undermining the masculine privilege it purports to accept?

Still another perspective invites consideration. Bloom does not mention it, though he comes close when he remarks on "J's vision of human reality as familial rather than royal or priestly" (32). It is this: the J text is familial rather than royal or priestly *or military*. For me the astonishment lies here. The J text of the Hebrew Bible constitutes perhaps the only national, epic-scale myth in world literature whose heroes are not warriors. Compare the males in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh*, *The Mahabarata*, and *Ramayana*, with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. The three patriarchs are shepherds and family men; their dramas are essentially domestic. Joseph begins as a shepherd and ends as a prime minister. Moses leads a national liberation movement. None of them engages in war.⁴ All are portrayed as conflict-avoiders, all are depicted as initiating negotiation in situations with violent potential, so that conflict is deflected. If anyone wants to make a case for the survival of a female perspective within the overwhelmingly patriarchal ethos of the Hebrew Bible, that is where it should be made.

IV

Bloom's desire to liberate the J text from its pietistic interpreters colludes with mine. Both of us, I suspect, retain a moral subtext which may or may not be relevant. Bloom cares profoundly that the J text should be read as literature and *not* as Scripture, because he wants to retrieve it for secular purposes:

Few fixed ideas are as difficult to dislodge as the notion that the Bible is a holy book. The stories of the Creation, of the Patriarchs, of Joseph, of Moses, were not for her holy tales, not at all. . . . The fountainhead of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam simply was not a religious woman. (31)

When script becomes Scripture, reading is numbed by taboo and inhibition. (35)

I do not believe that J's interests were either theological or political. They were what we would now call imaginative or literary, and concerned the elite image of the individual life, rather than the relation between Yahweh and the Israelites. (46)

But do these distinctions make sense? It is only recently in the history of human culture that imagination divides itself from spirituality. The founding periods of culture are periods in which they are not separated. Great writers are typically writers for whom religion is alive. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Blake are examples; so are Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. So is Kafka, whose irony toward the sacred is still a form of awe. Even in so secular a writer as Shakespeare, the human drama resonates with supernatural, preternatural, and cosmic mystery. To secularize is always to approach decadence. A wholly secularized art would be an art wholly trivialized—as would an art confined to the so-called “individual life” minus the matrices of politics and history. Attempting to define “literature” in a vacuum chamber purified of the defilements of religion, Bloom has re-invented the seductive half-truth of art for art's sake.

The absence of politics from Bloom's account of J is as striking as his repudiation of religion. My own desires to release the Bible from its institutional swaddlings are political. For religious authority like all authority

requires obedience rather than inquiry, and ignores the God who rewards rebels; but the God in whom I believe is indifferent to worship and in love with the transgressors by whom life is extended. Second, upholders of religious institutions need to believe that all the truth we need is already known. Certitude, always available to justify oppression and bloodshed, frankly repels me. Humanity as a species is inclined toward violence, dominance, control of the earth, control of others. We invent our religions in part to justify our desires; we claim God is on our side. To me the idea that we—creatures of an eyeblink within cosmic history, a fleck within cosmic space—can *know* the ultimate will of our creator, is the high road to evil. Finally, only by ignoring official religion, which remains disastrously androcentric, may I hope to recover the divine and human female power which the Biblical texts imperfectly erase. Whether or not J was a woman I cannot guess. Yet, like Harold Bloom, I hear something womanly in that text, between or through its lines, which I hope others will come to apprehend with me. For what I hear is sacred.

Notes

1. See Robert Alter, "Introduction," Alter and Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
2. We do well to remember that the oral tradition, far from being a scholarly myth, is alive in many cultures today. Leslie Silko in *Storytelling* stresses the Native American artist's adaptation of traditional material to an immediate audience and social or political need, as well as the artist's ability to "make it new" through free invention. It is not difficult to imagine these processes at work in the production of Biblical narrative.
3. For detailed discussion of the priority and characteristics of the goddess figures prior to Israelite religion, see Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess*, Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman*, Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Goddesses in ancient Near Eastern religions are of course creatrixes; but they also represent law and learning, make war, preside over economic prosperity, etc.
4. Genesis 14, in which Abraham briefly goes to war, is not in the J text; neither is Exodus 32:25–29, in which Moses orders a massacre of those who had worshiped the Golden Calf.