

Academic Roundtable

Each spring issue of *Expositions* will feature an Academic Roundtable, in which three scholars from different fields review a contemporary work of criticism or scholarship.

Harold Bloom. *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*. New York: Riverhead, 2005. 238 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 1-57322-322-0.

I. Jacques D. Berlinerblau, Georgetown University

Harold Bloom's *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* is so whimsically argued that it makes his oft-criticized 1990 study, *The Book of J*, read like a Heidelberg dissertation. With his most recent foray into biblical scholarship the popular—though not necessarily popularizing—Yale Professor has produced a disheveled work. It abounds in booming proclamations, dramatic conclusions and autobiographical asides. As usual, he shuns the specialists. Instead, he chooses to rely mostly on the writings of a few dear friends and, to use Kafka's term, "ale-house cronies." In a new twist, Bloom appears to have become possessed by that evil spirit that has possessed so many humanists of late: the Demon of Political Engagement. He comments so caustically (and unoriginally) on the war in Iraq, the current president, and the Religious Right that one almost expects him to flash a "FREE MUMIA ABU-JAMAL" sign halfway through his tome. In other instances, he seems to have set for himself the peculiar goal of making negative generalizations about Islam while engaging in as little substantive analysis as possible.

This having been said, I was often charmed and captivated by *Jesus and Yahweh*. By way of full disclosure, I confess that I have always had a bit of a soft spot for its author. I am forever indebted to Bloom for one devious aside in *The Book of J*. The remark in question, so consonant with what I have elsewhere termed "secular hermeneutics," reads as follows: "Since I am aware that my vision of J will be condemned as a fancy or a fiction, I will begin by pointing out that all our accounts of the Bible are scholarly fictions or religious fantasies, and generally serve

rather tendentious purposes” (Bloom 1990, 9; cf. Berlinerblau 2005). The audacity of this observation continues to astound me. Bloom understood that God has left us no empirical tools that can objectively validate our interpretations of His perplexing writ. Permit me to extrapolate: hermeneutics is no hard science. We could even say that it is an art form. And if this is the case then interpretations of sacred Scripture should be judged not on their verisimilitude *but on their ability to entertain*. In fields of inquiry where little can be decisively proven it is better to be interesting than to be absolutely correct.

And interesting Bloom is! For all of its flaws *Jesus and Yahweh* dares to ponder the broader civilizational relevance and ramifications of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This is a task that professional Bibli-cists have all but forsaken. While one can—and should—disagree with virtually every claim Bloom makes, his imagination and erudition can never be denied. Again and again, he gives us the intellectual razzle-dazzle—and given the monastery-like demeanor of our field we could use a few sequins in our eyes. Nor should we overlook his penchant for making mischief. Here he is comparing American Jewry to post-exilic Babylon (*Jesus and Yahweh* 191). Here is speaking of not the “New,” but the “Belated” Testament (14). Here he is dubbing Allah “a suicide bomber” (237). How this conforms to his disclaimer in the introduction that he hopes “only to clarify ... and not to give offense” (237) is anybody’s guess.

This reviewer, then, professes to both like and dislike the work under consideration. Leaving a discussion of Bloom’s treatment of Christianity and literature for the two distinguished scholars who are participating in this roundtable, I will concentrate mostly on his remarks on the Hebrew Bible and Judaism in general.

The aforementioned *Book of J*, published fifteen years ago, is actually the theoretical preface to *Jesus and Yahweh*. The title of that much-discussed work portended nothing new or controversial. For centuries scholars have posited the existence in the Pentateuch of a distinct J document. Various exegetes had already attempted to tease out this source and read it in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Nor was the hypothesis that the author of J was a woman, writing in the “post-

Solomonic Enlightenment,” original (though Bloom seemed to have thought it was).¹ Fortuitously, these conjectures are not frequently rehearsed in *Jesus and Yahweh*. Yet Bloom’s admiration for the artistry and insight of J has, if anything, grown over the intervening fifteen years.

Like so many professors of literature and poetics who have written about the Bible, Bloom is awed and mesmerized by the aesthetic merits of Scripture.² The writer J, he argues, has vexed posterity with a literary character named Yahweh, the “uncanniest personification of God ever ventured by humankind” (5). “If Yahweh is a fiction,” writes Bloom, He is “the most disturbing fiction the West ever has encountered” (117).

The deity is depicted as freighted with “human, all-too-human traits of personality and of character” (2). No open book, J’s Yahweh is “paradoxical” (7), “a character . . . rich in contraries” (130), “jealous” (138), “turbulent” and “unpredictable” (143). In a memorable turn of the phrase, He is described as “bad news incarnate” (170). Railing against the idea of Yahweh’s anthropomorphism, Bloom lingers on J’s descriptions of a “human god” (195), a man, adorned with a big, brutalizing body (197–99).

Having established the spectacularity of J’s fictional creation, Bloom is positioned to engage in a compare-and-contrast operation of epic scale. J’s impish deity serves as a baseline against which a series of comparisons will be drawn. To the best of my knowledge few have even thought of making such contrasts and this is what makes *Jesus and Yahweh*, when all is said and done, a bold and intriguing work. First and foremost, Bloom wishes to identify differences between Yahweh of the *Tanakh* and God the Father of the Christian Bible. The latter, he insists, “has only the slightest resemblance” to the former (232). (A sub-theme in this work focuses on the lack of similarity between Jesus Christ and Jesus of Nazareth who Bloom calls a “more or less historical person” (1)). This leads naturally to a second analytical gesture, the juxtaposition of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Finally, the preceding two lines of analysis unfold into broader comparisons of Judaism and Christianity.

What Bloom finds is not continuity between the Abrahamic faiths and their foundational texts, but bitter, radical irreconcilability. The idea of a shared Judeo-Christian heritage is dispensed with swiftly as the two religions are described as “enemy brothers” (166). Such a verdict befits an author who repeatedly refers to the Hebrew Bible as “the captive prize” of Christianity (113).

But while Judaism is shown to have been victimized by Christianity’s appropriations and misreadings, a pronounced Jewish triumphalism characterizes this work. One can’t help but notice that Yahweh and Judaism (and to a lesser extent “the more-or-less historical Jesus”) keep coming up aces. The Christian Father, by contrast, emerges as something of a bore—white bread, to Yahweh’s crusty focaccia. Yahweh is fearsomely dynamic, his Christian counterpart is static (234). Yahweh cannot be loved, cannot be known, cannot be counted on. Yahweh is interesting. The Father is a bland theological abstraction.

The same boosterism can be seen in Bloom’s remarks on Scripture. The New Testament (with the exception of Mark’s Gospel) is consistently held to be inferior to its predecessor. Its historical veracity is often questioned. (Though, for some reason, Bloom concludes that the apocryphal report of Jesus’ sojourn in India is trustworthy.) But what is historical accuracy to an aesthete anyway? The real defect of the Belated Testament lies in its deficient artistry. Like Nietzsche, but unlike the Patriarchs, Bloom clearly prefers the older brother: “In the aesthetic warfare between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, there is just no contest, and if you think otherwise, then bless you” (86). Be that as it may, he insists “the Christian Bible has defeated and refashioned the *Tanakh*” (156).

The victory of the New Testament was a hollow one indeed. Its misreading of the Hebrew Bible has given birth to Christology, unceremoniously described as “weird science” (154). Christianity, as evidenced by its historical treatment of Jews, has betrayed the message of the historical Jesus. Christians, for their part, do not come off much better. They search for their Jesus Christ but invariably fail; what they find at the end of their quest is themselves. Rounding out these un-ecumenical sentiments is Bloom’s contention that Christians are unaware that

the Jesus Christ they worship is irreconcilable with the more-or-less historical Jesus.

Before unleashing further provocations, it must be noted that there is one glaringly manifest difficulty with this line of analysis. This concerns Bloom's isolation of the J source at the expense of all other scriptural materials. Assuming that the J source exists, it must be recognized that *J's Yahweh is not synonymous with the Hebrew Bible's conception of God*. In classic documentary hypothesis J is but *one* document in the Pentateuch. It was recombined, repositioned, refracted and often drowned out by three other sources (i.e., E, D and P) as well as large swaths of the Prophets and the Writings. J's Yahweh is not necessarily the God that Jews have venerated any more than the E source's Elohim is. The image of God in Hebrew Scriptures is an unruly, multifaceted, multi-valent thing. His overall portrait is a hodge-podge of varying conceptions of the divine scattered across twenty-four scrolls, each written and redacted across centuries. Thus, to draw inferences about the differences between Christianity and Judaism on the basis of the J source alone seems a specious endeavor.

Yet by conflating the God of the Jews with the God of the J source Bloom wanders into a variety of intriguing existential and theological dilemmas. He confronts them in starkly personal terms and these encounters comprise some of the most poignant sections of the book. Scholarly writing rarely features anything that could be labeled as narrative. But this appears to be precisely what we have in *Jesus and Yahweh*—a narrative with full-blown character development. The central character: Professor Harold Bloom. The development: the protagonist's coming to Yahweh.

At the beginning of *Jesus and Yahweh* the God of the Hebrew Bible is referred to as a fiction. Yet as the plot advances, we begin to wonder. Picking up clues from the *Genesis* legends, Bloom identifies those flaws in Yahweh's character that have caused undue suffering for His subjects. J offers us a portrait of a deity with no allegiance to his handiwork, one who retains a "highly ambivalent attitude toward his own creation" (213). Bloom lashes out at the God of the Jews for staying true to biblical form in his later dealings with His people. Here is a de-

ity that has exiled himself and thus permitted the catastrophes of Jewish history. Fleshing out the rudiments of (a Gnostic) post-Holocaust theology Bloom asks about Yahweh's abandonment of the children of Israel. The world, he observes ruefully, is a place from which Yahweh has withdrawn. The deity, it is suggested, should be convicted on the charge of desertion.

Mindful of his approaching seventy-fifth birthday, Bloom seems to have resigned himself not only to Yahweh's character flaws, but to His non-fictional nature. Halfway through the work he declares: "Whether you regard him as 'a literary character' or as your creator scarcely matters in this struggle to reach the unreachable" (131). But does the following candle-lit passage sound like the musings of someone who sees Yahweh as a mere literary character?

I very much want to dismiss Yahweh as the ancient Gnostics did, finding in him a mere demiurge who had botched the creation so that it was simultaneously a Fall. But I wake up these days, sometime between midnight and two A.M., because of nightmares in which Yahweh sardonically appears as various beings, ranging from a Havana-smoking, Edwardian-attired Dr. Sigmund Freud to the *Book of Daniel's* silently reproachful Ancient of Days (236).

Increasingly haunted by the deity, he confesses to an "uneasy waning of skepticism in regard to Yahweh" (234). Elsewhere, Bloom argues, with no discernible wink or nod, that the Jewish God returned to Israel in 1948. The narrative ends with Bloom wondering aloud if He will make a covenant with humanity that He both can and will keep.

"Where shall transcendence be found?" is the question posed in the final stanzas of *Jesus and Yahweh* (235). Bloom's answer, "the arts," strikes me as eminently plausible. Even more plausible is his recognition that this form of transcendence only appeals to elites. The majority is not about to experience the divine (or something approximating it) upon reading *Hamlet* or listening to the Jazz pianist Eric Reed. It is more likely that they will submerge themselves in what Bloom refers to as "the blood-dimmed tide" of Scripture. And for these reasons secularists who ignore sacred texts do so at the risk of completely misreading their own societies.

In its own strange way, *Jesus and Yahweh* attempts to offer secular transcendence to the select few. For this work aspires to be beautiful, a work of art in and of itself. Although it often fails in this regard, and although the ideas it advances are not always convincing, it does sometimes succeed in provoking and entertaining with a luminous originality. Looking at the Big Picture is no small feat and for this we should laud Professor Bloom in his seventy-fifth year.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the lack of originality in Bloom's writings on J see the impassioned critique of Richard Elliot Friedman (1991).
2. "Bible as Literature" scholars are the Intelligent Design theorists of modern Old and New Testament research: while they posit a preternaturally gifted author as the source of the text, they cannot rationally prove that this author actually existed. See Berlinerblau 2004.

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II. John Gager, Princeton University

Is it really true that all scholarship is a form of projection, of autobiography; that we are all caught in a tangled web of narcissistic self-reflection? In the early 20th century, Albert Schweitzer, in his monumental work on the history of lives of Jesus, wrote that no task so reveals an era's, or one might just as well say in individual's, self-understanding as the attempt to write a life of Jesus. He was surely right in this obser-

vation but never paused to consider whether his fundamental insight (we might also call it an iron law) applied to his own work as well. Did he believe, as I suspect must be true, that the German myth of *Wissenschaft*, of history as the domain of objective, unbiased, presuppositionless inquiry, enabled him to transcend the theological trap that had ensnared all of his predecessors?

Harold Bloom's "quirky, unforgivable, but deliciously provocative book" (Berlinerblau 2006, B12) embodies Schweitzer's law, but much more as well. It comes full circle from Bloom's hugely influential *The Anxiety of Influence*, first published in 1973, but does so in a way that finally lets the cat out of the bag. As one insightful critic, indeed a former student of Bloom at Yale, has put it,

Who really cares ... that Stevens "misread" Shelley ... ? But the battle between the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible is a struggle over religious truth that goes to the core crisis in Western civilization, and in Bloom himself. It helps explain why, in Bloom's agonistic literary universe, literature, despite his genius for explaining it, can seem oddly irrelevant. *It is religious truth that matters.*" (Rosen 2005)

My one complaint about this otherwise brilliant insight into Bloom's own anxiety of influence—of a passionate Jew living in, or at least at the end of a Christian civilization—is that for Bloom there is finally no distinction between literature and religion. For the most part, the figure of Yahweh has no existence apart from its embodiment in the J material of the Hebrew Bible. Likewise, and again for the most part, the figure of Jesus has no embodiment apart from the gospels of the Christian scriptures.

Indeed, the parallels go well beyond this simple observation. For Bloom, there are unmistakable similarities between the Yahweh of J and the Jesus of *Mark*. Bloom's characterization of his Yahweh would do just as well for his Jesus: ambivalent creator and destroyer (the fig tree episode in *Mark* 13); uncanniness; trickster; enigmatic; a personality without a sexual component; and so on. Moreover, the subsequent traditions of ancient Israel and early Christianity found Yahweh and Jesus to be completely unacceptable and thus subjected them to radical revision, making their rough places plain. The underlying issue of

influence becomes clear in Bloom's remark that "Jews have a negative relationship to Christ, but not necessarily to Jesus, who is scarcely responsible for what supposed Christianity has done in his name" (27). In short, Jesus belongs not to Christianity but to Judaism, more precisely to authentic, Yahweh-inspired Judaism. The Christianity that has dominated Western civilization, and not so coincidentally the Jews, for 20 centuries is thus an inauthentic version not just of authentic Israel (the Yahweh variety) but of its own supposed founder. Of course, much the same can be said of later, post-Yahweh Judaism, but that is largely beside the point inasmuch as it is Christianity and not Judaism that has been the primary cultural influence on all of us. But for Bloom it remains fundamentally true that "Christianity (and Judaism) no longer are biblical religions" (172).

Much of what Bloom says along these lines is familiar stuff. Jewish scholars, among whom one may cite Martin Buber (in his *Two Types of Faith*, [1951] 2003) as one example among many others, have long argued that Jesus was a Jew, pure and simple; his followers misunderstood and misrepresented him from the very beginning. Much of recent Christian scholarship on Jesus follows a similar line, but with one important difference. Whereas Jewish scholars tend to see in Jesus a Jew who remained faithful to his tradition from start to finish, with no hint of reform or rebellion, Christian scholars, including those who emphasize Jesus' Jewishness, seem unable to resist the temptation to find some point in Jesus' life where he departs from or undermines Judaism in some fundamental fashion. In these cases, the underlying motivation is surely to reclaim Jesus, at whatever price, for Christianity, and to proclaim him as the true founder of the new faith. For me, the desire to find a point of departure from Judaism in the life of Jesus rests on a fundamental misuse and misreading of the early gospels, some of which (*Luke* in particular) are heavily invested in making Jesus the founder of Christianity, while others (here *Matthew* is the parade example; see Anthony Saldarini's remarkable *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (1994)) are read as Christian only with the aid of a profound ignorance of ancient Judaism.

But there is another tendency in Bloom's work on Jesus that betrays

both his status as an amateur in the field and at the same time his reliance on an unfortunate trend in all forms of Jesus scholarship—the tendency to slip from gospel stories to ‘facts’ about the real Jesus. The tendency is understandable enough in a broad sense. We all want to know something reliable about the figure of Jesus. We are all susceptible to *horror vacui*. True enough. Both professionals and amateurs in any field are open to gaffes of many kinds. Yet in this case, Bloom’s is all the more surprising in that his take on the gospels, and especially the *Gospel of Mark*, is shaped by the work of another amateur, Frank Kermode in his magisterial Norton Lectures on *Mark, The Genesis of Secrecy* (2006). “Rereading Kermode’s book, after a quarter century, I am stimulated to augment his pioneer analysis by swerving into surmise as to the psychology of Jesus” (Bloom 31). What surprises in this swerve is that Kermode insists throughout his lectures that we need to concentrate on what is written, i.e., the gospel stories and how they are told, and turn aside from what is written about, i.e., the real story of the historical Jesus. Thus when Bloom asks, “Did Jesus believe in the *originality* of his message?” (32), he slips back, if only momentarily, into a mode of inquiry that is curiously out of place, not just in professional Jesus-scholarship but in his own literary domain. What we have is stories, versions and nothing more.

Following his denial that Jesus intended to establish a new religion, Bloom locates the true founder of Christianity in the figure of Paul (27). Today this seems like an odd claim. While it is certainly true that Paul dominates the New Testament, the conclusion to be drawn from this is not that Paul was the founder of Christianity but rather that the makers of the New Testament, centuries after his death, made him the founder of their religion. They were Christians. If Jesus was not, as Bloom rightly avers, neither was Paul. He became a Christian only through the New Testament.

If Jesus somehow appeals to him, perhaps as a distant echo of Yahweh, Paul puzzles. On the one hand, Bloom can hold that “For Paul, the Resurrection, or Christ-event, proclaimed the death of Torah” (42). Yet only a few pages later, he comes to strikingly different conclusions: “The vehemence and violence of the Apostle’s personality are revealed

through his letters, which are mostly argued against Jewish Christians, rather than against Jews and Judaism ... Pharisees, the hated opponents of Matthew, are not a target for Paul" (53). Strike the phrase "Jewish Christians," substitute for it something like "other Jewish believers in Jesus," and recall the earlier statement that Paul "devoted the remainder of his life to the conversion of Gentiles" (52)—with these modifications, the words about "the death of Torah" simply could not have been written or at the very least would have to be modified to read that "Paul proclaimed the death of the Torah in the sense that its regulations, most notably circumcision, were not incumbent on Gentile believers in these last days of history." Something new had happened. But to Gentiles. And that new thing can certainly not be summed up as "the death of the Torah."

It is true that Paul is a difficult figure, perhaps even an unlikable one, but this is no reason to give up trying to make sense of his thinking. We may not like him, but we should not rush to judge him as one who "confuses anyone attempting a dispassionate stance toward him." Here Bloom has taken the easy way out, perhaps under the influence of his Yale colleague, Wayne Meeks, who appears to have convinced him of Paul's Protean, i.e., essentially unstable and contradictory, character. We may well be "left baffled by him," but it is surely not because "We know too much about him" (57).

I suspect that much of our puzzlement about Paul is due to our inability to wash away the centuries of sludge that Christianity has piled upon him. As *the* Apostle of Christianity, he has been hailed as the founder of every conceivable orthodoxy and heresy, including notably Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Bloom is well aware of this but like many modern readers of Paul he fails to break completely free of these traditions.

At the same time, Bloom is an extraordinary reader. He comes remarkably close to a complete break with the hundreds of post-Pauline Pauls. As noted earlier, the chief stumbling block remains his use of the term "Christian" with reference to the apostle. This term, which never occurs in any of Paul's letters, is increasingly out of place today. What is now taken for granted of Jesus (he was not a Christian in

any sense of the term) is now widely held to be true of the apostle as well. On the other side, Bloom has no truck with the old, and sadly still prevalent view that Paul preached the divine rejection of Israel. "Yahweh and Israel, Paul implies, will work out the Chosen People's Redemption" (56). Nor will he accept the notion that Israel's final redemption will take the form of accepting Christ or, in Bloom's terms, becoming Christians like Paul. "Did Paul ... really believe that Israel would accept Christ at *that* moment?" (56). Characterizing his basic disposition, he comments that "His ways of thinking and feeling essentially remained Pharisaic." And finally, of the Pharisees, he "does not regard them as particularly prone to sin, nor, as their student, does he think of himself that way" (53). Here I wish that Bloom had paused to draw out the consequences of these penetrating insights, for they contain the seeds of a truly radical reassessment of the apostle. But the last step is frequently the most difficult one to take.

Of course, with Bloom, one gets much more than the title promises: bits of Shakespeare, the *Gospel of John* (a lot here), Kierkegaard, Milton, Maimonides, Gnostics (no surprise), Kabbalah and Jewish-Christian dialogue (not a good thing). But in the end this is a book, as the title announces, about Jesus and Yahweh. Or rather about books about Jesus (gospels) and Yahweh (Torah). Or better yet, whether these books create these two figures, bring them into being by naming them, or whether in some way they reflect a prior existence in some realm other than the purely literary.

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III. Milton L. Welch, North Carolina State University

In his 1939 lectures “Idea of a Christian Society,” T.S. Eliot argues that a Christian State is the sole alternative to totalitarianism when democratic majorities become tyrannical and liberalism declines in free societies. He opens by remarking,

I am not writing for scholars, but for people like myself; some defects may be compensated by some advantages; and what one must be judged by, scholar or no, is not particularized knowledge but one's total harvest of thinking, feeling, living and observing human beings (Eliot 1940, 5).

That Eliot's “total harvest” is uncritical of bland racial generality—“the Anglo-Saxons display a capacity for *diluting* their religion, probably in excess of that of any other race” (20, my emphasis)—indicates a source of the agonistic spirit with which Harold Bloom has approached Eliot's critical work until quite recently. In his more than fifty years of writing, Bloom has helped to overturn Eliot's judgments on the Romantics, to argue for alternate traditions of modernism, and has developed a controversial theory of influence that undercuts Eliot's basic premise in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that literary works contribute to literary tradition as monuments.

Bloom's work in religious criticism vies, finally, to displace the traces of Eliotic social thinking, and has from the start addressed how religious value and political value influence one another in the present day. For instance, the first sentence of *The American Religion* (1992) reads: “Freedom, in the context of the American Religion, means being alone with God or with Jesus, the American God or the American

Christ” (15). In Bloom’s contemporary America, spirit and culture are tangled in a Gordian Knot that becomes a noose when capacities for critical appreciation vanish, leaving behind political and religious myopia. For this reason, Bloom’s latest book, *Jesus and Yahweh*, belongs to his continuing challenge to the conservative mode of criticism and social thought that Eliot helped to entrench in twentieth-century literary criticism.

One unfortunate consequence of the culture wars may be that Harold Bloom’s work on behalf of undermining Eliot’s cultural geneticism is lost (see also Gates 1992). This geneticism sees culture as racial genetics—for the Eliot of *Four Quartets*, racial ancestry even drums the rhythms of poetry with ghostly “[f]eet rising and falling” in “East Coker” (Eliot 1991, 56). Bloom’s trajectory from *Map of Misreading* to his infamous essay, “They have the numbers; we the heights,” charts a rising tide of polemics: other scholars, and, subsequently, prominent literary figures objected to Bloom’s stinging—and as critic Roy Sellars has pointed out, allusive—attacks against trendiness in critical and academic reading. And yet Bloom’s attacks were issued in an era that unknowingly witnessed the gradual collapse of university publishing (see MLA 2002) and the erosion of buying power in U.S. academic libraries, two major scholarly crises of today (Greenblatt 2006). Even in the public, if reading is indeed at risk as an NEA study (*Reading at Risk*) announced in 2004, the conditions of that risk emerged during the culture wars, as Bloom’s writing coursed into fever pitch. Culture wars threw the humanities into a still acknowledged crisis (Cohen 2005), and perhaps only by ignoring academic history do Bloom’s polemics on the unique disciplinary grounding of literary study read as reactionary politics to students of literature. Bloom’s unfortunate (and inaccurate) caricature as a reactionary also ignores the force of Bloom’s pun on Andrew Marvell’s phrase “ruin the sacred truths,” which becomes a Nietzschean imperative for literary criticism to expose what Francis Bacon—and after him Melvin B. Tolson—called the Idols of the Tribe (see the poem by that name in Tolson 1999). Such ruining is the phobia of Eliotic conservatism. Bloom is, however, one to be thanked if criticism has become less accommodating to, among other things, the

casual anti-Semitism of Eliot's droll chauvinism in *After Strange Gods*, his 1933 Paige-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia.

If *The Anxiety of Influence* is right, *Jesus and Yahweh* may be Bloom's phase of *apophrades* with Eliot—what Bloom once called the return of the dead, a writer's late reckonings during which she will fail or flourish. Bloom's new book is his most vigorously daring criticism in years, but his readers will recognize one of the book's central claims as one that has appeared throughout his religious criticism—Jesus Christ in the New Testament and Yahweh in the Old Testament and Tanakh, whatever else they may be, are literary characters. As a work of criticism, one of the questions *Jesus and Yahweh* raises is, however, what "literary character" may mean, and whether the term must devalue spiritual matters. In a recent interview (2005), Bloom claimed among others things that Yahweh "haunts" him, and at a point in the book Bloom makes an extravagant cultural prophecy that Yahweh has already returned to Earth (233). If literary character means a branded personality, then we should be puzzled—puzzled enough to consider assumptions about the roles literature and its characters may play in our lives. Bloom defines "literary character" as "the vital protagonist, the principle of apotheosis, the hope for transcendence" (13), and concludes his study asserting "God's unknowability" (219), a literary judgment that is also a spiritual position, albeit a rare position in the U.S., where according to a Gallup Poll oft-cited by Bloom, almost nine in ten believe in God's personal love for them.

"I remember composing a section," Bloom discloses about *The Anxiety of Influence* in the current book, "on the New Testament's anxiety of influence in regard to the Hebrew Bible, which is the subject of this chapter" (46). *Jesus and Yahweh's* claim that the Judeo-Christian tradition is misnamed is a topic that shaped his theory of influence, and is also rejoinder to Eliot's conservatism. Bloom's antithetical mode of criticism here applied to the idea of a Judeo-Christian tradition is iconoclastic and at odds in every way with Eliot's avowed spiritual and political stances. In Eliot's vision of tradition as race, the greatness of the individual talent's monument—which is to say of literature—is its honoring both whiteness and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The

shocking challenges Bloom puts to his reader are the historical and textual grounds for such a tradition, and subsequently, the further challenge of considering “Who was, who is Yahweh?” (131). Bloom offers that Yahweh is “a planter of gardens, and is happy to picnic in the shade of a terebinth tree” (150). This description recalls Wallace Stevens’ portrait of the artist as an *anthologist* (Stevens 2003, 252–3), in that word’s etymological sense of studying flowers:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
 Pink and white carnations. The light
 In the room more like a snowy air,
 Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
 At the end of winter when afternoons return.
 Pink and white carnations—one desires
 So much more than that. (“The Poems of our Climate” 1.1–7)

Is Stevens writing about God as well here? Is this poem or its image of arranging flowers a spiritual experience? Can we learn about God from reading literature? In reading the Tanakh or the Bible, have we already done so? *Jesus and Yahweh* can be admired for its thought-provoking take on religion and literature. It will certainly provoke theological discussion in academic and public circles, but only coterie of literary academics will talk about it. The latter situation is unlucky because this book is also a remarkable meditation on the uses of literary experience.

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