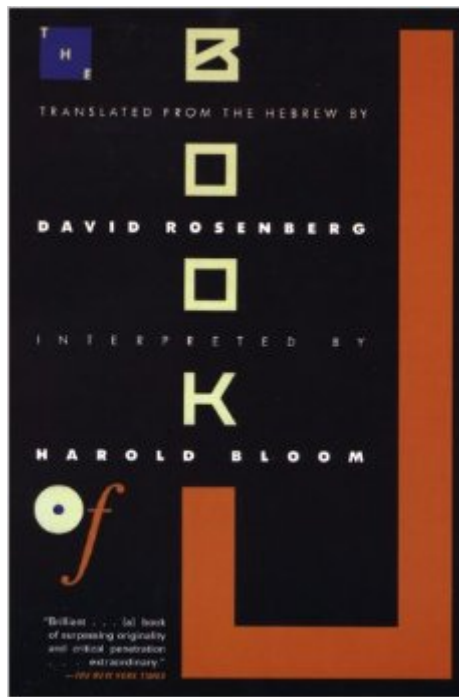


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The Book Of J



Synopsis

J is the title that scholars ascribe to the nameless writer they believe is responsible for the text, written between 950 and 900 BCE, on which Genesis, Exodus and Numbers is based. In *The Book of J*, Bloom and Rosenberg draw the J text out of the surrounding material and present it as the seminal classic that 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 and a woman living in the court of King Solomon. He also argues that J is a writer on par with Homer, Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Bloom also offers historical context, a discussion of the theory of how the different texts came together to create the Bible, and translation notes. Rosenberg's translations from the Hebrew bring J's stories to life and reveal her towering originality and grasp of humanity.

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Customer Reviews

Harold Bloom's 'The Book of J' caused quite a stir when it first was published. The book contains both introductory essays on authorship, a discussion of the theory of different texts being used to make up the books of the Bible (the Documentary Hypothesis), some historical context, and translation notes. The bulk of the book consists of David Rosenberg's new translation of the J text, that text having been separated and isolated from the other source texts of the Torah (first five books of the Bible). The concluding section contains essays by Bloom on different characters and themes in the text, as well as some modern theoretical analysis of the text, isolated as it is in this volume from the greater mass of material in the Bible. There is a brief appendix by Rosenberg with

notes specifically geared toward translation issues and difficulties, as well as source materials. First, for a little background: since the 1800's, much of Biblical textual scholarship and analysis has subscribed to the theory that most books were not first written as integrated wholes, but rather, consist of a library of amalgamated texts, largely put together by a person who goes by the title Redactor, or R, for short. This was (in terms of Hebrew Bible timelines) a relatively late occurrence. Prior to this, there were various sources, including the J (J for Jehovah, or Yahweh, which is what God is called in these texts), but also E (Elohist, which is what God is called in these texts), P (Priestly, which largely comprises Leviticus), and D (Deuteronomist). The separation of these strands is controversial, and will probably never cease to be. But with literary and linguistic analysis, certain traits can be discerned of each of the particular strands.

If you have a King James version of the Bible, the next time you read Genesis, pay attention to how God is referred to. Sometimes He's called "God" and sometimes He's called "The Lord". The reason for this is that the original Hebrew text uses two different names for God, and the translators were careful to preserve this. When the Hebrew text uses "Elohim" it is translated as "GOD". When the Hebrew text uses "Yahweh", it is translated as "The Lord". If you carefully read Genesis, you'll notice that when Genesis refers to God as "Yahweh", he seems to be very different than when he is referred to as "Elohim". For example, Elohim is invisible--he never appears to anybody nor can he be seen by anybody--but Yahweh talks face-to-face with people all the time: with Abram, to Jacob, and to Moses and the 40 elders. Elohim seems remote and regimented, whereas Yahweh comes across as mischevious and irascible. This has prompted some to propose the so-called "Documentary Hypothesis" which posits that Genesis was formed by editing together two or more different books, each book using a different word for God and each book presenting a different picture of who God was and what He was all about. The book of J is the hypothesized book which used 'Yahweh' as the name of God. Scholars try to reconstruct this book by bringing together all of the passages in the first 5 books of the Bible which refer to God as "Yahweh". The result is startling: the same stories you've heard all your life (The tower of Babel, Joseph going to Egypt, Abram bargaining with God over Sodom and Gomorrah), when read together like this, take on a whole different level of meaning.

Harold Bloom has never been shy of making bold assertions, and in his *The Book of J* we have the boldest - that is that the central core of the Pentateuch is the work of single writer - the J Writer - living during the Davidic or Solomonic dynasty. He speculates that the J Writer is probably of noble

birth, of unparalleled education and literary talent and is probably a woman. In a later work (I think in his "The Western Canon"), he further speculates the J Writer to be Bathsheba, the fateful love of David's life. The implications, of course, are that the Books of Moses are of late origin and essentially a work of the imagination arising from the Shadowland of History. This work must be taken for what it is - a patchwork translation of the Torah by a fine poet with an historical introduction written by a renowned literary critic and Shakespearean authority. I personally am a great admirer of the work of Professor Bloom, but here, I think, he strays into ground where he is (by his own admission) at best an amateur. Some additional random thoughts: 1. There is considerable weight of authority on the side of Professor Bloom as to the stepwise redaction of the Tanakh by writers and editors in late Old Testament times, though scant authority for his imaginative view of the personal characteristics of the J Writer herself. However, the entire field of Biblical scholarship and criticism is so volatile and fluid at present, that any "authority" on the subject represents only one scholar's private opinion at any given time. 2. The current popular view is that the Bible is essentially a profound literary creation assembled by the hands of some late master from early "primitive" narratives.

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