

ern Critical

# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

## Genesis



# Genesis

*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

*Sterling Professor of the Humanities*

*Yale University*



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# Editor's Note

This book brings together essays in literary criticism upon Genesis, though I have interpreted "literary criticism" in the widest possible sense, because the Bible demands no less. The essays are arranged here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Hillary Kelleher for her devoted care in helping to research and edit this volume.

The editor's introduction follows the scholarly influence of the late Ephraim Speiser by arguing for the separate authorial presence of the Yahwist or "J writer," judged here to be the strongest and most original of all ancient Hebrew writers. Erich Auerbach's account of the Akedah, or attempted sacrifice of Isaac, acutely analyzes the singular representation of reality that is wholly characteristic of the Bible.

What Kenneth Burke calls his "logology" is applied by him, with grand high-spiritedness, to aspects of the first three chapters of Genesis. A very different vision is manifested by the eminent scholar of political philosophy Leo Strauss, in his contrast of Hebrew and Greek ideas of origin. Altogether less normative than Strauss, Martin Buber gives an interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge that is consonant with his idealizing mythology of dialogue.

Robert Alter, a pioneer in reading biblical narrative by literary means, tries to suggest the "composite artistry" by which the redactors were able to fuse the all-but-contradictory visions of the J writer and the Priestly author.

Two opposing readings of Wrestling Jacob follow, starting with the celebrated textual analysis by Roland Barthes, and continuing with my own rather antithetical interpretation. James S. Ackerman's exegesis of the Joseph saga illuminates not only the exemplary figure of Joseph but the more problematic Judah as well. Finally, Meir Sternberg's intricate structural investigation of the wooing of Rebekah reveals the complex perspectival relations that are so crucial to the narrative patternings of Genesis.

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# Introduction

To my best knowledge, it was the Harvard historian of religion George Foot Moore who first called the religion of the rabbis of the second century of the Common Era “normative Judaism.” Let me simplify by centering on one of those rabbis, surely the grandest: normative Judaism is the religion of Akiba. That vigorous scholar, patriot, and martyr may be regarded as the standard by which any other Jewish religious figure must be judged. If your faith and praxis share enough with Akiba’s, then you too are a representative of normative Judaism. If not, then probably not. There is a charming legend in which Moses attends Akiba’s seminar, and goes away baffled by the sage’s interpretation—of Moses! But the deepest implication of the legend, as I read it, is that Akiba’s strong misreading of Moses was in no way weakened by the Mosaic bafflement.

The Great Original of the literary and oral traditions that merged into normative Judaism was the writer scholarly convention rather wonderfully chose to call “J.” Since Kafka is the most legitimate descendant of one aspect of the antithetical J (Tolstoy and the early, pre-Coleridgean Wordsworth are the most authentic descendants of J’s other side), I find it useful to adopt the formula “from J to K,” in order to describe the uncanny or antithetical elements in J’s narratives. The J who could have written *Hadji Murad* or *The Tale of Margaret* was the inevitable fountainhead of what eventually became normative Judaism. But this first, strongest, and still somehow most Jewish of all our writers also could have written “The Hunter Gracchus” or even “Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk.” Indeed he wrote uncannier stories than Kafka lived to write. How those stories ever could have been acceptable or even comprehensible to the P authors or the Deuteronomist, to the Academy of Ezra or the Pharisees, let alone to Akiba and his colleagues, is a mystery that I have been trying to clarify by developing a critical concept of what I call “facticity,” a kind of brute contingency by which an author’s strength blinds and incarcerates a tradition of belated readership. But here I primarily want to describe the uncanniness of J’s work, so as to break out of facticity, insofar as I am able to do so.

By "the uncanny" I mean Freud's concept, since that appears to be the authentic modern version of what once was called the Sublime. Freud defines "the uncanny" as being "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression." Since I myself, as a critic, am obsessed with the Sublime or Freud's "uncanny," I realize that my reading of any Sublime work or fragment is always dependent upon an estrangement, in which the repressed returns upon me to end that estrangement, but only momentarily. The uncanniness of the Yahwist exceeds that of all other writers, because in him both the estrangement and the return achieve maximum force.

Of course J himself is considered to be a fiction, variously referred to by scholars as a school, a tradition, a document, and a hypothesis. Well, Homer is perhaps a fiction too, and these days the slaves of critical fashion do not weary of proclaiming the death of the author, or at least the reduction of every author to the status of a Nietzschean fiction. But J is pragmatically the author-of-authors, in that his authority and originality constitute a difference that has made a difference. The teller of the tales of Jacob and of Joseph, of Moses and the Exodus, is a writer more inescapable than Shakespeare and more pervasive in our consciousness than Freud. J's only cultural rival would be an unlikely compound of Homer and Plato. Plato's contest with Homer seems to me to mark one of the largest differences between the ancient Greeks and the Hebrews. The agon for the mind of Athens found no equivalent in Jerusalem, and so the Yahwist still remains the mind of Jerusalem, everywhere that Jerusalem happens to be.

I do not believe that J was a fiction, and indeed J troubles me because his uncanniness calls into question my own conviction that every writer is belated, and so is always an inter-poet. J's freedom from belatedness rivals Shakespeare's, which is to say that J's originality is as intense as Shakespeare's. But J wrote twenty-five hundred years before Shakespeare, and that timespan bewilders comparison. I am going to sketch J's possible circumstances and purposes, in order to hazard a description of J's tone, or of the uncanniness of his stance as a writer. Not much in my sketch will flout received scholarship, but necessarily I will have to go beyond the present state of biblical scholarship, since it cannot even decide precisely which texts are J's, or even revised by others from J. My attempt at transcending scholarship is simply a literary critic's final reliance upon her or his own sense of a text, or what I have called the necessity of misreading. No critic, whatever her or his moldiness or skepticism, can evade a Nietzschean will to power over a text, because interpretation is at last nothing else. The text, even if it was written that morning, and shown by its poet to the critic at high noon, is already lost in time, as lost as the Yahwist. Time says, "It was," and authentic criticism, as Nietzsche implied, is necessarily pervaded by a will for



revenge against time's "it was." No interpreter can suspend the will to relational knowledge for more than an isolated moment, and since all narrative and all poetry are also interpretation, all writing manifests such a will.

Solomon the King, nowhere of course overtly mentioned by J, is the dominant contemporary force in the context of J's writing. I would go further, and as a pious Stevensian would say that Solomon is J's motive for metaphor. The reign of Solomon ended in the year 922 before the Common Era, and J quite possibly wrote either in Solomon's last years, or — more likely, I think — shortly thereafter. One can venture that Solomon was to J what Elizabeth was to Shakespeare, an idea of order, as crucial in J's Jerusalem as it was in Shakespeare's London. The Imperial Theme is J's countersong, though J's main burden is a heroic and agonistic past represented by David the King, while his implied judgment upon the imperial present is at best skeptical, since he implies also an agonistic future. J's vision of agon centers his uncanny stance, accounting for his nearly unique mode of irony.

How much of J's actual text we have lost to the replacement tactics of redactors we cannot know, but biblical scholarship has not persuaded me that either the so-called Elohist or the Priestly redactors provide fully coherent visions of their own, except perhaps for the Priestly first chapter of Genesis, which is so startling a contrast to J's account of how we all got started. But let me sketch the main contours of J's narrative, as we appear to have it. Yahweh begins his Creation in the first harsh Judean spring, before the first rain comes down. Water wells up from the earth, and Yahweh molds Adam out of the red clay, breathing into the earthling's nostrils a breath of the divine life. Then come the stories we think we know: Eve, the serpent, Cain and Abel, Seth, Noah and the Flood, the tower of Babel, and something utterly new with Abraham. From Abraham on, the main sequence again belongs to J: the Covenant, Ishmael, Yahweh at Mamre and on the road to Sodom, Lot, Isaac and the Akedah, Rebecca, Esau and Jacob, the tales of Jacob, Tamar, the story of Joseph and his brothers, and then the Mosaic account. Moses, so far as I can tell, meant much less to J than he did to the normative redactors, and so the J strand in Exodus and Numbers is even more laconic than J tended to be earlier.

In J's Exodus we find the oppression of the Jews, the birth of Moses, his escape to Midian, the burning bush and the instruction, the weird murderous attack by Yahweh upon Moses, the audiences with Pharaoh, the plagues, and the departure, flight, and crossing. Matters become sparser with Israel in the wilderness, at the Sinai covenant, and then with the dissensions and the battles in Numbers. J flares up finally on a grand scale in the serio-comic Balaam and Balak episode, but that is not the end of J's work, even as we have it. The Deuteronomist memorably incorporates J in his chapters 31 and 34, dealing with

the death of Moses. I give here in sequence the opening and the close of what we hear J's Yahweh speaking aloud, first to Adam and last to Moses: "Of every tree in the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there." Rhetorically, the two speeches share the same cruel pattern of power: "Here it is; it is yours and yet it is not yours." Akin to J's counterpointing of Yahweh's first and last speeches is his counterparting of Yahweh's first and last actions: "Yahweh formed man from the dust of the earth," and "Yahweh buried him, Moses, in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day." From Adam to Moses is from earth to earth; Yahweh molds us and he buries us, and both actions are done with his own hands. As it was with Adam and Moses, so it was with David and with Solomon, and with those who come and will come after Solomon. J is the harshest and most monitory of writers, and his Yahweh is an uncanny god, who takes away much of what he gives, and who is beyond any standard of measurement. And yet what I have said about J so far is not even part of the truth; isolated, all by itself, it is not true at all, for J is a writer who exalts man, and who has most peculiar relations with God. Gorky once said of Tolstoy that Tolstoy's relation to God reminded him of the Russian proverb "Two bears in one den." J's relation to his uncanny Yahweh frequently reminds me of my favorite Yiddish apothegm: "Sleep faster, we need the pillows." J barely can keep up with Yahweh, though J's Jacob almost can, while J's Moses cannot keep up at all. Since what is most problematic about J's writing is Yahweh, I suggest we take a closer look at J's Yahweh than the entire normative and modern scholarly tradition has been willing or able to take. Homer and Dante, Shakespeare and Milton hardly lacked audacity in representing what may be beyond representation, but J was both bolder and shrewder than any other writer at inventing speeches and actions for God Himself. Only J convinces us that he knows precisely how and when Yahweh speaks; Isaiah compares poorly to J in this, while the Milton of *Paradise Lost*, Book III, hardly rates even as an involuntary parodist of J.

I am moved to ask a question which the normative tradition—Judaic, Christian, and even secular—cannot ask: What is J's stance toward Yahweh? I can begin an answer by listing all that it is not: creating Yahweh, J's primary emotions do not include awe, fear, wonder, much surprise, or even love. J *sounds* rather matter-of-fact, but that is part of J's unique mode of irony. By turns, J's stance toward Yahweh is appreciative, wryly apprehensive, intensely interested, and above all attentive and alert. Toward Yahweh, J is perhaps a touch wary; J is always *prepared to be surprised*. What J knows is that Yahweh is Sublime

or “uncanny,” incommensurate yet rather agonistic, curious and lively, humorous yet irascible, and all too capable of suddenly violent action. But J’s Yahweh is rather *heimlich* also; he sensibly avoids walking about in the Near Eastern heat, preferring the cool of the evening, and he likes to sit under the terebinths at Mamre, devouring roast calf and curds. J would have laughed at his normative descendants—Christian, Jewish, secular, scholarly—who go on calling his representations of Yahweh “anthropomorphic,” when they should be calling his representations of Jacob “theomorphic.”

“The anthropomorphic” always has been a misleading concept, and probably was the largest single element affecting the long history of the redaction of J that evolved into normative Judaism. Most modern scholars, Jewish and Gentile alike, cannot seem to accept the fact that there was no Jewish theology before Philo. “Jewish theology,” despite its long history from Philo to Franz Rosenzweig, is therefore an oxymoron, particularly when applied to biblical texts, and most particularly when applied to J. J’s Yahweh is an uncanny personality, and not at all a concept. Yahweh sometimes *seems* to behave like us, but because Yahweh and his sculpted creature, Adam, are incommensurate, this remains a mere seeming. Sometimes, and always within limits, we behave like Yahweh, and not necessarily because we will to do so. There is a true sense in which John Calvin was as strong a reader of J as he more clearly was of Job, a sense displayed in the paradox of the Protestant Yahweh who entraps his believers by an impossible double injunction, which might be phrased: “Be like me, but don’t you dare to be too like me!” In J, the paradox emerges only gradually, and does not reach its climax until the theophany on Sinai. Until Sinai, J’s Yahweh addresses himself only to a handful, to his elite: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and, by profound implication, David. But at Sinai, we encounter the crisis of J’s writing, as we will see.

What is theomorphic about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph? I think the question should be rephrased: What is Davidic about them? About Joseph, everything, and indeed J’s Joseph I read as a fictive representation of David, rather in the way Virgil’s Divine Child represents Augustus, except that J is working on a grand scale with Joseph, bringing to perfection what may have been an old mode of romance.

I have called Solomon J’s motive for metaphor, but that calling resounds with Nietzsche’s motive for all trope: the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere. For J, the difference, the elsewhere, is David. J’s agonistic elitism, the struggle for the blessing, is represented by Abraham, above all by Jacob, and by Tamar also. But the bearer of the blessing is David, and I have ventured the surmise that J’s Joseph is a portrait of David. Though this surmise is, I think, original, the centering of J’s humanism upon the implied figure of David is not,

of course, original with me. It is a fundamental postulate of the school of Gerhard von Rad, worked out in detail by theologians like Hans Walter Wolff and Walter Brueggemann. Still, a phrase like Wolff's "the Kerygma of the Yahwist" makes me rather uneasy, since J is no more a theologian than he is a priest or prophet. Freud, like St. Paul, has a message, but J, like Shakespeare, does not. J is literature and not "confession," which of course is not true of his redactors. They were on the road to Akiba, but J, always in excess of the normative, was no quester.

I find no traces of cult in J, and I am puzzled that so many read as kerygmatic Yahweh's words to Abram in Gen. 12:3: "So, then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you." The blessing, in J, simply does not mean what it came to mean in his redactors and in the subsequent normative tradition. To gain a blessing, particularly through the blessing that becomes Abraham's, is in J to join oneself to that elitest agon which culminated in the figure of the agonistic hero, David. To be blessed means ultimately that one's name will not be scattered, and the remembered name will retain life into a time without boundaries. The blessing then is temporal, and not spatial, as it was in Homer and in the Greeks after him, who like his heroes struggled for the foremost place. And a temporal blessing, like the kingdom in Shakespeare, finds its problematic aspect in the vicissitudes of descendants.

Jacob is J's central man, whose fruition, deferred in the beloved Joseph, because given to Judah, has come just before J's time in the triumph of David. I think that Brueggemann is imaginatively accurate in his hypothesis that David represented, for J, a new kind of man, almost a new Adam, the man whom Yahweh (in 2 Sam. 7) had decided to trust. Doubtless we cannot exclude from our considerations the Messianic tradition that the normative, Jewish and Christian, were to draw out from those two great contemporary writers, J and the author of 2 Samuel. But J does not have any such Messianic consciousness about David. Quite the reverse: for him, we can surmise, David had been and was the elite *image*; not a harbinger of a greater vision to come, but a fully human being who already had exhausted the full range and vitality of man's possibilities. If, as Brueggemann speculates, J's tropes of exile (Gen. 3:24, 4:12, 11:8) represent the true images of the Solomonic present, then I would find J's prime Davidic trope in Jacob's return to Canaan, marked by the all-night, all-in wrestling match that concentrates Jacob's name forever as Israel. The Davidic glory then is felt most strongly in Jacob's theomorphic triumph, rendered so much the more poignant by his permanent crippling: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip."

If Jacob is Israel as the father, then David, through the trope of Joseph, is Jacob's or Israel's truest son. What then is Davidic about J's Jacob? I like the late E. A. Speiser's surmise that J personally knew his great contemporary, the

writer who gave us, in 2 Samuel, the history of David and his immediate successors. J's Joseph reads to me like a lovingly ironic parody of the David of the court historian. What matters most about David, as that model narrative presents him, is not only his charismatic intensity, but the marvelous gratuity of Yahweh's *hesed*, his Election-love for this most heroic of his favorites. To no one in J's text does Yahweh speak so undialectically as he does through Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16:

When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will chastise him with the rod of men and the affliction of mortals; but I will never withdraw My favor from him as I withdrew it from Saul, whom I removed to make room for you. Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever.

The blessing in J, as I have written elsewhere, is always agonistic, and Jacob is J's supreme agonist. But J makes a single exception for Joseph, and clearly with the reader's eye centered upon David. From the womb on to the ford of the Jabbok, Jacob is an agonist, and until that night encounter at Peniel by no means a heroic one. His agon, as I've said, is for the temporal blessing that will prevail into a time without boundaries; and so it never resembles the Homeric or the Athenian contest for the foremost place, a kind of topological or spatial blessing. In J, the struggle is for the uncanny gift of life, for the breath of Yahweh that transforms *adamah* into Adam. True, David struggles, and suffers, but J's Joseph serenely voyages through all vicissitudes, as though J were intimating that David's agon had been of a new kind, one in which the obligation was wholly and voluntarily on Yahweh's side in the Covenant. Jacob the father wrestles lifelong, and is permanently crippled by the climactic match with a nameless one among the Elohim whom I interpret as the baffled angel of death, who learns that Israel lives, and always will survive. Joseph the son charms reality, even as David seems to have charmed Yahweh.

But Jacob, I surmise, was J's signature, and while the portrait of the Davidic Joseph manifests J's wistfulness, the representation of Jacob may well be J's self-portrait as the great writer of Israel. My earlier question would then become: What is Davidic about J himself, not as a person perhaps, but certainly as an author? My first observation here would have to be this apparent paradox: J is anything but a religious writer, unlike all his revisionists and interpreters, and David is anything but a religious personality, despite having become the paradigm

for all Messianic speculation, both Jewish and Christian. Again I am in the wake of von Rad and his school, but with this crucial Bloomian swerve: J and David are not religious, just as Freud, for all his avowedly antireligious polemic, is finally nothing but religious. Freud's overdetermination of meaning, his emphasis upon primal repression or a flight from representation—before, indeed, there was anything to represent—establishes Freud as normatively Jewish despite himself. Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it, the sage ben Bag Bag said of Torah, and Freud says the same of the psyche. If there is sense in everything, then everything that is going to happen has happened already, and so reality is already in the past and there never can be anything new. Freud's stance toward psychic history is the normative rabbinical stance toward Jewish history, and if Akiba is the paradigm for what it is to be religious, then the professedly scientific Freud is as religious as Akiba, if we are speaking of the Jewish religion. But J, like the court historian's David of 2 Samuel, is quite Jewish without being at all religious, in the belated normative sense. For the uncanny J, and for the path-breaking David, everything that matters most is perpetually new.

But this is true of J's Jacob also, as it is of Abraham, even Isaac, and certainly Tamar—all live at the edge of life rushing onwards, never in a static present but always in the dynamism of J's Yahweh, whose incessant temporality generates anxious expectations in nearly every fresh sentence of certain passages. This is again the Kafkan aspect of J, though it is offset by J's strong sense of human freedom, a sense surpassing its Homeric parallels. What becomes theodicy in J's revisionists down to Milton is for J not at all a perplexity. Since J has no concept of Yahweh but rather a sense of Yahweh's peculiar personality, the interventions of Yahweh in primal family history do not impinge upon his elite's individual freedom. So we have the memorable and grimly funny argument between Yahweh and Abraham as they walk together down the road to Sodom. Abraham wears Yahweh down until Yahweh quite properly begins to get exasperated. The shrewd courage and humanity of Abraham convince me that in the Akedah the redactors simply eliminated J's text almost completely. As I read the Hebrew, there is an extraordinary gap between the Elohist language and the sublime invention of the story. J's Abraham would have argued far more tenaciously with Yahweh for his son's life than he did in defense of the inhabitants of the sinful cities of the plain, and here the revisionists may have defrauded us of J's uncanny greatness at its height.

But how much they *have* left us which the normative tradition has been incapable of assimilating! I think the best way of seeing this is to juxtapose with J the Pharasais Book of Jubilees, oddly called also "the Little Genesis," though it is prolix and redundant in every tiresome way. Written about one hundred years before the Common Era, Jubilees is a normative travesty of Genesis, far

more severely, say, than Chronicles is a normative reduction of 2 Samuel. But though he writes so boringly, what is wonderfully illuminating about the author of Jubilees is that he totally eradicates J's text. Had he set out deliberately to remove everything idiosyncratic about J's share in Torah, he could have done no more thorough a job. Gone altogether is J's creation story of Yahweh molding the red clay into Adam and then breathing life into his own image. Gone as well is Yahweh at Mamre, where only angels now appear to Abraham and Sarah, and there is no dispute on the road to Sodom. And the Satanic prince of angels, Mastema, instigates Yahweh's trial of Abraham in the Akedah. Jacob and Esau do not wrestle in the womb, and Abraham prefers Jacob, though even the author of Jubilees does not go so far as to deny Isaac's greater love for Esau. Gone, alas totally gone, is J's sublime invention of the night wrestling at Peniel. Joseph lacks all charm and mischief, necessarily, and the agony of Jacob, and the subsequent grandeur of the reunion, are vanished away. Most revealingly, the uncanniest moment in J, Yahweh's attempt to murder Moses en route to Egypt, becomes Mastema's act. And wholly absent is J's most enigmatic vision, the Sinai theophany, which is replaced by the safe removal of J's too-lively Yahweh back to a sedate dwelling in the high heavens.

J's originality was too radical to be absorbed, and yet abides even now as the originality of a Yahweh who will not dwindle down into the normative Godhead of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Because J cared more for personality than for morality, and cared not at all for cult, his legacy is a disturbing sense that, as Blake phrased it, forms of worship have been chosen from poetic tales. J was no theologian and yet not a maker of saga or epic, and again not a historian, and not even a storyteller as such. We have no description of J that will fit, just as we have no idea of God that will contain his irrepressible Yahweh.





# The Sacrifice of Isaac

*Erich Auerbach*

The genius of the Homeric style becomes [especially] apparent when it is compared with an equally ancient and equally epic style from a different world of forms. I shall attempt this comparison with the account of the sacrifice of Isaac, a homogeneous narrative produced by the so-called Elohist. The King James version translates the opening as follows (Gen. 22:1): "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! and he said, Behold, here I am." Even this opening startles us when we come to it from Homer. Where are the two speakers? We are not told. The reader, however, knows that they are not normally to be found together in one place on earth, that one of them, God, in order to speak to Abraham, must come from somewhere, must enter the earthly realm from some unknown heights or depths. Whence does he come, whence does he call to Abraham? We are not told. He does not come, like Zeus or Poseidon, from the Aethiopians, where he has been enjoying a sacrificial feast. Nor are we told anything of his reasons for tempting Abraham so terribly. He has not, like Zeus, discussed them in set speeches with other gods gathered in council; nor have the deliberations in his own heart been presented to us; unexpected and mysterious, he enters the scene from some unknown height or depth and calls: Abraham! It will at once be said that this is to be explained by the particular concept of God which the Jews held and which was wholly different from that of the Greeks. True enough—but this constitutes no objection. For how is the Jewish concept of God to be explained? Even their earlier God of the desert was not fixed in form and content, and was alone; his lack of form, his lack of local habitation, his singleness, was in the

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