BRETT DELPORTO is a reporter for the Deseret News.
“If I had the book back in my hands, I don’t mind telling you or anyone else, since it’s become such a red herring in the discussion of the book, that I would suppress that [the claim that J was a woman] completely. It is a book about God and about the representation of God and about the scandal of the J text, which I’m trying to bring forward.”

That’s not to say Bloom recants the claim that J was female. In fact, he says he’s more confident than ever, on “aesthetic or psychological” grounds, that the J writer was a woman. For example, he points out that almost all of the major female characters—from Eve through Sarai and Tamar—are stronger and more vivid than the men. And Eve, he notes, was created after Adam, and “surely J’s ironic point is that the second time around, Yahweh has learned better how the job ought to be done.”

Those are strong and, for many, outrageous claims. One may wonder how Bloom can speak with such confidence about the gender of a writer who, if he/she existed at all, lived and died 3,000 years ago. Indeed, one may wonder how Bloom or other biblical scholars can be so sure that there was a J text. For we must remember that the J text was not, like the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Gnostic Gospels, literally unearthed and restored after being lost for thousands of years. In fact, the J text is a reconstruction based on the sense of Bloom, Rosenberg, and other scholars that there is a single, identifiable voice underlying the Pentateuch.

The notion that the Bible is composed of various documents—the so-called Documentary Hypothesis—dates back to the nineteenth century when scholars identified several different biblical voices. Besides the J text, scholars have also isolated at least three additional sources: the Elohist, or E, which is identified by portions of the Pentateuch where God is referred to as Elohim; the Priestly author, or P, who is believed to have written the first part of Genesis; the Deuteronomist, or D, who wrote most of the Book of Deuteronomy. And, finally, there is the Redactor, or R, who wove the various sources together in about 400 B.C.E.

With typical brashness, Bloom admits J is a fiction, “although I point out that it is no more or less a fiction than the fiction that Moses is the author.” In reading the J text, Bloom is, in his own words, “imagining an author—the process through which a reader, perhaps only half consciously, constructs an author who speaks to the reader in a personal way.

“Wordsworth said literature is a man or, we might add, a woman in this case or in many cases, speaking to a man or a woman. One listens for a voice . . . I do not see how one can see, with very rare exceptions, is just a very bad literary critic.”

But it is true that Bloom’s career in Higher Criticism—the academic discipline of Bible interpretation—is of recent origin. And he might also admit that his subjective approach, however well-grounded in deep reading, contains a few biases. One such bias was stated succinctly in his 1989 book Ruin the Sacred Truths:

“The scandal is the stubborn resistance of imaginative literature to the categories of sacred and secular. If you wish, you can insist that all high literature is secular, or, should you desire it so, then all strong poetry is sacred. What I find incoherent is the judgment that some authentic literary art is more sacred or more secular than some other.”

For Bloom, sacred texts can, and perhaps should, be read as literature. This is so, he says, because the reasons a certain text becomes sacred have nothing to do with literary value. Such non-literary considerations came into play in the canonization of the Old and New Testaments. And, Bloom believes, it also happened with sacred writings of the LDS church.

“I think [the sacred/secular distinction] is based upon a political, social, and economic decision. The Pearl of Great Price, you know, of Joseph Smith has been canonized as a Latter-day Saints scripture. The King Follett Discourse by Joseph Smith has not been canonized. Both of them have, I think, some literary value, quite possibly more than the Book of Mormon does. Obviously, it was a political or social decision on the part of the Mormon church to say that the King Follett Discourse is not canonical and the Pearl of Great Price is. But it does not make either one of them more or less a work of literature.”

In The Book of J, Bloom pushes a similar line. In fact, he takes it a step further, claiming not only that the J text can be read as literature, but that its author intended it as such. “Of all the extraordinary ironies concerning J, the most remarkable is that this fountainhead of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam simply was not a religious writer,” Bloom writes.

(An interesting aside is that Bloom doesn’t question the intentions of Joseph Smith. “I would think that I would as soon question his sincerity as I would question [that of] St.
Paul. And I'm not being ironic. Who are we to presume to question the sincerity of figures who devoted their lives to a spiritual vision and indeed accepted martyrdom for it?)

If J was not a religious writer, then what was he/she up to? According to Bloom, J was a writer of great sophistication who wrote of Yahweh as a character in a narrative. The Yahweh of The Book of J is jealous, impulsive, and given to random outbursts of anger, as when he almost kills Moses in the desert for no apparent reason. Yahweh is also portrayed as a prankster who baffled the tongues of those constructing the Tower of Babel at least partly as a kind of cosmic practical joke. He's also a god who played favorites, preferring the fierce, cunning Jacob to the good-natured Esau and the inventive, exuberant Joseph to the reluctant Moses.

What's more, Bloom contends that J used a sophisticated, unique form of irony, something vaguely Kafkaesque in flavor. Any visitor to the macabre world of Franz Kafka—a land where men are inexplicably transformed into cockroaches and hunger artists last as a form of entertainment—may find this to be Bloom's wildest claim. But there is something to it. For what Bloom refers to as irony is not the usual sense of saying one thing and meaning something else. Rather, it is what Bloom calls the radical "incommensurateness" between humanity and God, but an incommensurateness that must sometimes yield to the inevitable similarities that result from men and women being made in the image of God.

"On the one hand, it's like the Freudian sense of the uncanny. It seems to be very familiar, something you encounter all the time, the way you encounter another person. Except you look at this person, at this personality, which also happens to be the God of major religions—that's the shock. That's the irony of this writer. Irony may not be the right word, but I don't know any other word to use for it."

You wouldn't expect someone who holds such views to be a church-goer, and, in fact, Bloom seems far from any mainstream religion. He describes himself as a "heretical Jew," one who is "irretrievably secular" in his thinking.

And yet, it's hard not to get the impression that he is, in some highly unusual way, deeply religious, or at the very least deeply interested in religion. After all, this is the man who was quoted in the Salt Lake Tribune as saying he might have become a Mormon if he'd lived in the nineteenth century. He's also said he views himself as a "gnostic," someone who, by the standard definition, attains knowledge through a direct, intuitive grasp of truth, generally religious truth. A gnostic is also, in the most general sense, "one who knows," in contrast to an agnostic, one who doesn't know.

So, if Harold Bloom is a gnostic, what is it, then, that he knows?

The key to Bloom's thinking may be his focus on Yahweh, the all-too-human God who creates man by breathing life into the adamah, the clay. Here, metaphors abound, and no doubt part of Bloom's appreciation for this passage is an admiration for the technique. Still, Bloom hints—and it is no more than a hint—that the metaphor is somehow more than metaphor, as though the power with which Yahweh animates the lifeless muck still moves within all of us, still fills our lungs in a way that is beyond our control or understanding. It is that kind of a deity, one who blows life into our bodies and renews us a thousand times a day, it is that God, the Yahweh of J—and perhaps even the God of Joseph Smith—in whom Harold Bloom would place his trust.

"I've said that to ask me to believe in a gaseous vapor, a floating spirit somewhere, does not greatly impress me. I would think that the question of belief or disbelief rises for me because it's like asking me to believe or disbelieve in my own breathing, since the Yahweh of the J writer is nearly identified with breathing. That is to say he is the God of vitalism and vitality, and it is very difficult to deny that."

What is a Bible scholar anyway? A Bible scholar, so far as I can see, with very rare exception, is just a very bad literary critic.