

The Struggle at the Jabbok: the Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative

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I

On the eve of his anxious reunion with his brother Esau, Jacob wrestles with a spectral stranger who, as the dawn breaks, both lames and names him:

ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר 25
וירא כי לא יכל לו ויגע בכף ירכו ותקע כף ירך יעקב בהאבקו עמו 26
ויאמר שלחני כי עלה השחר ויאמר לא אשלחך כי אם ברכתני 27
ויאמר אליו מה שמך ויאמר יעקב 28
ויאמר לא יעקב יאמר עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים ותוכל 29
וישאל יעקב ויאמר הנידה נא שמך ויאמר למה זה תשאל לשמי ויברך אתו שם 30
ויקרא יעקב את שם המקום פניאל כי ראיתי אלהים פנים אל פנים ותנצל נפשי 31
ויוזר לו השמש כאשר עבר את פנואל והוא צלע על ירכו 32
על כן לא יאכלו בני ישראל את גיד הנשה אשר על כף הירך עד היום הזה 33
כי נגע בכף ירך יעקב בגיד הנשה

(25) So Jacob was left alone.¹ A man wrestled with him till the break of dawn.² (26) When he saw he could not prevail, he touched the hollow of his thigh,³ so that the hollow of Jacob's thigh became dislocated⁴ as he wrestled with him. (27) He said, "Release me, for dawn has broken." He said, "I

1 Verse 25 is the narrative beginning of the story, 25a acting as a link to the context. The boundaries generally cited in scholarly literature, 32:24–33, reflect a certain source critical judgement of the adherence of the episode to its context.

2 Or "at dawn", a semantic extension of 'ad required by contexts like Judg. 16:3 ("as soon as"), Exod. 12:10 (the second 'ad), etc. At stake here is the duration of the battle.

3 Probably the hip socket. Whatever its anatomical reference, *kap* forms part of the play on the sounds of *ya'āqōb* noted below: *wayyagg' bēkap*, *wattēqa' kap*, etc. See below also on *šōlēa'* and *wattinnāšēl'*; and note also the proleptic anticipation of *gīd hannāšeh* in *haggīdā nā' šēmekā*.

4 For philological discussion see R. Polzin, "HWQY' and Covenantal Institutions in Israel." *HTR* 62 (1969), 236ff. *Yq'* in the *qal* is a hapax. The relationship to *nq'* of Ezek. 23:18ff. is unclear.

will not release you unless you bless me.” (28) He said, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” (29) He said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob⁵ but ‘Israel,’ for you have struggled⁶ with god and man and prevailed.” (30) Jacob asked, “Tell me your name!” He said, “Do not ask my name.”⁷ Then he blessed him there. (31) Jacob called the name of that place Peniel, “because I saw God face to face but my life was spared.” (32) The sun shone on him⁸ as he passed (from) Penuei—and he was limping on his thigh. (33) Therefore the descendants of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve,⁹ which is on the hollow of the thigh, to this day, because he touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh on the sciatic nerve.

This is a famously enigmatic story. The weird struggle in darkness and blessing in the twilight of dawn tempt normally sober exegetes to flights of allegory, often disguised as psychological symbolism: Jacob’s opponent was Jacob, his own crooked crafty self; or his terror of Esau, which he overcomes through spiritual combat. Others despair of ever finding coherent meaning in it: the tale is a palimpsest of traditions and reinterpretations of traditions no longer comprehensible to the final editors of the Pentateuch. It is a relic of obdurate antiquity.

No doubt the episode passed through several stages of literary metamorphosis from local tale to etiological legend in a developing national saga to fixed stone in the mosaic of canon.¹⁰ But many Pentateuchal narratives passed through similar stages; why are they not

5 Or “ought not to be.” Note that the placement of the negative emphasizes the verbal meaning of *ya’āqōb*: “not ‘he tricks/holds the heel’ will be your name . . .” Contrast the word order of Gen. 17:5, 35:10 (P).

6 On *šāritā*, see below.

7 On *lāmā* with negative force, see Jöüen 161h; cf. II Sam. 19:30, I Sam. 20:8, etc.

8 For the idiom see I Sam. 29:10; cf. Judg. 19:14.

9 LXX’s *neuron*, Vulgate’s *nervum* mean “nerve, tendon, muscle.” The exact sense of *gid* here is unknown, but there is no reason to think Hebrew was more precise than Greek and Latin (*IDB* states that Greek specialized the sense as ‘nerve’ after 300 B.C.E.). The sciatic nerve, which runs down the back of the leg, is what later Jews understood by *gid hannāseh*. *Nāseh* is undoubtedly Arabic *nasyun*, but the etymology and anatomical relationship to the Hebrew term are uncertain. In Job 40:17 *gidē pahādāw* may refer to the male organ; a point perhaps relevant to Gen. 32 (see below). It is also possible that *ya’āqōb* and *gid* form a pun: note *‘qbt tr* (2 Aqht vi:23); cf. Arabic *‘qb*—is the link the Achilles tendon? Suggestive but speculative is Gevitz’s surmise that *gid hannāseh* is a punning reference to the tribes of Gad and (Half)Manasseh, the boundary between whom was the Jabbok, “Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford,” *HUCA* 46 (1975), 33–45.

10 The passage certainly gives an impression of elements of great antiquity overlaid with later interpretation. Verse 31, in particular, looks like an attempt by later tradition to make the struggle conform to normative biblical religion. But just as it is impossible to isolate continuous narrative strands in the story (see below) so it is pointless to attempt to reconstruct the layers of tradition beyond those postulated already by older scholarship: folk legend, etiological tale, national epic, Pentateuchal canon; cf. Skinner, *Genesis (ICC)*, 411. Attempts to proceed beyond these generalities are mainly to be taken as exercises in method for its own sake; so, for example, G. Hentschel, who finds five strands of tradition, “Jakobs Kampf am Jabbok (Gen. 32, 23–33)—eine genuin israelitische Tradition?” *Dienst der Vermittlung* (Leipzig, 1977), 13–37. See also especially K. Elliger, “Zum Jakobskampf am Jabbok,” *ZTK* 48 (1951), 1–31, and, recently, B. Diebner, “Das Interesse der Ueberlieferung an Gen. 32, 23–33,” *Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament* 13 (1978), 14–52, and E. Blum, “Die Komplexität der Ueberlieferung. Zur diachronen und synchronen Auslegung von Gen. 32, 23–33, *Ibid.* 19 (1980), 2–55.

It must be stressed that the level of tradition relevant to this analysis is more or less that of the earlier Pentateuchal sources, J and, perhaps, E. The relationship of P to the story is uncertain. In 35:6ff. he presents his own account of the name change, a simple divine declaration. The latter passage then relates to Gen. 32: 25–33 more or less as Gen. 17 does to Gen. 15 and Exod. 6 to 3. On the other hand, *‘ōd* of 35:6 seems to imply another revelation. Unless added by a later editor, it can refer either to 32:25–33 or to 35:1ff. What P made of Gen. 32 is unclear. Since he locates his own name change story at Bethel, perhaps he meant to present a Bethel frame for the Jacob cycle, ch. 28–35. Perhaps he felt a revelation of the divine name in Transjordan alone was inappropriate; Gen. 32

also so darkly enigmatic and strangely unsettling? Sensitive interpreters have felt instinctively that it is the very obscurity of the story that is the source of its power; so, for example, von Rad:

... by the time of the Yahwist many interpretations of the story had been made and ... it had become quite broken in the tradition. But precisely because of its breaks and joints it received its essential spaciousness; precisely the looseness of the inner connection of the statements to one another makes room for many ideas; for the individual proceedings and words in the event, as every expositor senses, are not precisely limited with respect to their meaning and significance. And every exegete will likewise encounter something somewhere in this narrative which can no longer be interpreted.¹¹

Posited here is a link between form, the “breaks and joints,” the “looseness in the inner connection of the statements” and an effect, a feeling of “inner spaciousness.” It is the aim of this study to explore that link and to demonstrate through literary analysis the correctness of von Rad’s intuition. Specifically, I shall try to show that the clues to essential meaning are precisely those elements of the story “that can no longer be interpreted”; that the narrative is presented in a deliberately enigmatic manner to channel the reader’s imagination in certain directions. Since “enigma” presupposes a pattern of expectation, which is then frustrated, it is necessary to begin with a careful examination of the site of that dynamic pattern, the form of the story itself.

What are its external boundaries and internal divisions? Interpretation rests first on an accurate demarcation of basic structures, whose interconnection may then be demonstrated. The initial frontier of the episode is marked by a kind of literary hinge; for the first phrase of the narrative proper, *wayyē’ ābēq ’iš ’immô*, is grammatically parallel to the phrase *wayyiwwātēr ya’ āqōb lēbaddô*, its link to the larger narrative context, the reunion with Esau. The terminal boundary, on the other hand, marks a strong disjunction in the narrative, because the etiology of the *gīd hannāšeh* interrupts the context and represents a shift in perspective from the individual to the national plane of reference.

Within these limits, the episode falls into units determined by genre and type of discourse. Verses 25–26 consist of narrative; 27–30 of dialogue (except for the final phrase *waybārēk ’ōtô šām*). Verses 31–33 are more complex in structure but seem to consist of a

would then be a kind of foreshadowing of 35:6ff., a promise of a new name, as it were.

Also obscure is the relationship of Gen. 32:25–33 to Hosea 12:4–5, itself a very difficult passage. In general, Hosea’s treatment of Pentateuchal traditions is uncertain (cf. H. Wolff, *Hosea*, ad ch. 12). If it is free, as seems likely, he has little light to shed on Genesis. For example, can his *mal’āk* be related to an E-like interpretation of the identity of Jacob’s assailant? The main problems of Hosea 12:4–5 are the following:

(1) *šārā ’et* more or less corresponds to *šāritā ’im* of Gen. 32:30, assuming that *’et* is the preposition.

Wayyāšar ’el is problematic; not so much in regard to the verbal form as the shift in preposition. The use of two prepositions with the same verb in contiguous lines is certainly peculiar. Wolff suggests reading *’ēl*, omitting *mal’āk* as a later gloss: “God proved himself Lord and prevailed.” Andersen and Freedman read *wayyāšar ’ēl // mal’āk wayyūkal*, a strange couplet.

(2) Who implored whom? Wolff suggests Jacob supplicated God, after his defeat, a direct conflict with Gen. 32. The answer, he says, came at Bethel (*bēl’ēl yimxī ennū . . .*). But then he suggests that references to Bethel in the following verses are best viewed as a combination of the tradition of Gen. 28:10–22 (JE) with that of 32:23–33 (J), but also cf. Gen. 32:1–5, 7 (E). The assumption of such a pastiche of Pentateuchal traditions does not comport with the direct contradiction cited above. If Hosea is to be related to Gen. it is more likely Jacob’s opponent who begged (for release).

11 G. von Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary*, tr. by John H. Marks (Philadelphia, 1961), 319.

core of narrative (32) framed by etiology (31 and 33). The mention of Penuel in verse 32 links it to 31, the reference to the thigh (*yěřěkô*) to 33. Yet the etiology of Penuel is firmly rooted in the narrative context while that of the *gîd hannāšeh* represents, as noted, a national and diachronic frame of reference.¹² It is therefore also possible to oppose verses 31–32 to 33, viewing the latter as a distinct postscript to the episode. This sense of summary and completion is strengthened by the internal chiasm of verse 33 formed by the words *gîd hannāšeh . . . kap hayyārēk . . . kap yerek . . . bēgîd hannāšeh*.

Nevertheless, one's perception of the unity of verses 31–33 as a third section in a type of envelope structure formed by genre (etiology) is surely reinforced by the fact that the first two divisions of the story display quite clear examples of such a structure, determined by themes and the repetition of key words. Section one, verses 25–26, is encapsulated by the repetition of its opening words around a chiasmic reference to Jacob's thigh: *wayyē'ābēq 'iš 'immô . . . wayyagga' bēkap yěřěkô / wattēqa' kap yerek ya'āqōb / bēhē'ābēqō 'immô*. The high degree of phonetic correspondence strengthens one's sense of formal coherence. The use of alliteration is almost obtrusive. The phrases that form the frame are composed mainly of velars (' / ' / h), velar stops (k / g / q) and labials (b / p / m), as well as the glide y. Since these sounds evoke the name Jacob they serve to join that name to the injury to the thigh and, especially, to its replacement by Israel in section two. In addition, the sounds record the physical struggle almost onomatopoeically: the creaking of joints in the velar stops, the gasps and grunts of the wrestlers in the gutturals and glottals. Capping the effect, almost a surfeit of literary effect, is the pun Jacob–Jabbok–*hē'ābēq*. It was surely to achieve this verbal play that the latter term was chosen, since it is a *hapax*.¹³

Section two, verses 27–30, forms an even more distinct envelope through the cunning disposition of the themes of blessing and naming: *kî 'im bēraktānî . . . mah šēmékā . . . haggîdā nā šēmékā . . . waybārēk 'ōtô šām*. Tightly cocooned by this structure, sealed like the Holy of Holies in its enclosure of sacred precincts, is the name Israel.

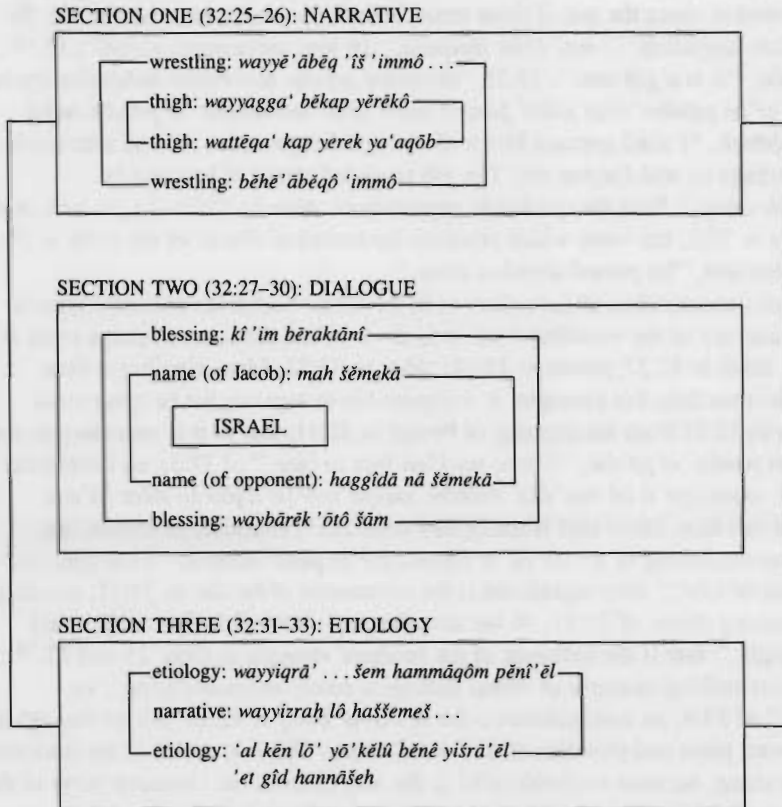
After such structures disposed in such a manner, it is possible that the sequence etiology–narrative–etiology in section three would also be heard as a kind of envelope formed by genre. At the same time, verse 33 can retain its climactic disjunctive effect. Also simultaneously, by the wonderful flexibility of language in literature, that very effect heightens one's feeling of the unity of the whole episode; for the echo of section one in the chiasmic repetition of *kap hayyārēk* in verse 33 reveals a larger *inclusio*: the middle section, with the name of Israel, is framed not only by section two but by the entire story (see diagram opposite).

That this disposition of the story around Israel serves to mark it as the spiritual as well as the physical core of meaning, can hardly be doubted. Also essential to meaning is the play of conjunction and disjunction; for the very elements that frame that central theme also mark the separate sections of the episode in such a way as to stress their distinctness within

12 The absence of an altar at Penuel perhaps reflects its Trans-Jordanian location. It may have been edited out by later tradition.

13 In addition to the other punning or alliterative word choices cited throughout this essay, notice also the plays of *š l/r* and *h/l* in *šallēhēnî kî 'ālâ haššahar* etc. and the internal chiasm of *šimékā . . . ya'āqōb . . . ya'āqōb . . . šimékā* in verses 28 and 29, respectively. On alliteration here see especially Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 10.

the larger structure. Paradoxically, it is possible to focus on the unity of the narrative only by simultaneously perceiving its separate parts. This dynamic is a key aspect of that pattern of expectation and frustration that forms the enigma of the story for, as will be shown, it creates a dialectic of isolation and integration, of positives and negatives, that does more than enliven the meaning of the narrative: it *is* the meaning. First, however, it is necessary to examine the equally remarkable formal relationship of the story to its narrative context.



The story of Jacob's wrestling bout is an episode in the account of his return from Paddan Aram and, more specifically, in the narrative of his meeting with Esau. The boundaries of the immediate context are 32:2, "Jacob continued his journey"; and 33:18ff., "Jacob arrived safe¹⁴ at the city of Shechem . . ." The narrative climax of the reunion is 33:4, "Esau ran toward him, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him . . ."

Running through the story is a set of *Leitwörter*, almost a model use of that device.

14 It seems unlikely that *šālēm* is a place name (LXX, Vulgate); see Skinner's comments in the ICC, *ad locem*. To be sure, *šālēm* as "safe" is otherwise unattested, but cf. the common *bēšālôm* (Sam. reads *šālôm* here). Perhaps *šālēm* refers back to *bēšālôm* of 28:21.

The most important are:

1. *mal'āk*, "angel" 32:2, 3; "messenger" 32:4, 7; note also *mēlā'kā*, "property" 33:14.
2. *maḥāneh*, "camp" 32:3, 9, 11, 22; and, as a pun, *minḥā*, "gift" 32:14, 21; 33:8, 10. Also *hānan*, "granted" in 33:5 and *hēn*, "favor" in 33:8 (with *maḥāneh*) and in 33:10 (with *minḥā*).
3. *šālah*, "send" 32:4, 6, 19.
4. *pānīm*, "face, presence" or as a preposition, "before" etc. 32:4, 19, 21, 23; 33:10, 14.
5. *'ābar*, "cross" 32:11, 22, 24; 33:3, 14.

Most impressive about the use of these terms is their frequent concatenation: so, for example, in 32:4: *wayyīšlah . . . mal'ākīm lēpānāw*, "he sent messengers ahead"; 32:19 *minḥā hī' šēlūhā*, "it is a gift sent"; 32:21: *'ākappērā pānāw bamminḥā hahōleket lēpānay wē'ahārē kēn 'er'eh pānāw 'ūlay yiśśā' pānāy. watta'ābōr hamminḥā 'al pānāw wēhū' lān . . . bammaḥāneh*, "I shall appease him with the gift that precedes me and afterwards see his face. Perhaps he will forgive me. The gift preceded ahead of him and he lodged . . . in the camp." Note the quadruple repetition of *'ābar* in 32:23–24, as well as the joining of terms in 33:3, the verse which precedes the narrative climax of the story in 33:4: *wēhū' 'ābar lipnēhem*, "he passed ahead of them."

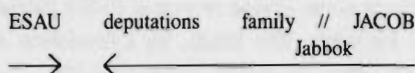
The greatest concentration of *Leitwörter* is in the verses which immediately precede 32:25–33, the account of the wrestling bout. It is obvious that the latter contains some of the key words: *šālah* in 32:27; *pānīm* in 32:31; *'ābar* in 32:32. More significant than number is interconnection. For example, it is impossible to separate the heaping up of forms of *pānīm* in 32:21 from the etiology of Penuel in 32:31; just as it is necessary to see in *rā'ītī 'ēlōhīm pānīm 'el pānīm*, "I have seen God face to face," of 32:31 an intentional echo of 32:2–3: *wayyipgē'ū bō mal'ākē 'ēlōhīm. wayyō'mer ya'āqōb ka'āšer rā'ām*, "angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them . . ."; and also, of course, an equally clear foreshadowing of 33:10: *rā'ītī pānekā kir'ōt pēnē 'ēlōhīm*, "I see your face as one sees the face of God." Also significant is the occurrence of *bērākā* in 33:11, recalling not only the blessing theme of 32:27, 30 but also the play on *bērākā*, "blessing," and *bēkōrā*, "birthright," that is the hallmark of the brothers' struggle in Gen. 25 and 27.¹⁵

But the most striking example of verbal linkage is surely *wayḥabbēqēhū*, "he embraced him," of 33:4, an unmistakable echo of *wayyē'ābēq* of 32:25, joined through it to the web of word plays and phonetic effects noted above. This is a model of the interplay of form and meaning, because *wayḥabbēqēhū* is the very heart of the climactic verse of the over-all narrative of the reunion. As Jacob approaches, bowing submissively, *wayyāros 'ēsāw liqrā'tō*, "Esau ran towards him . . ." To attack him? This is a more than reasonable possibility if one has followed the sequence of devices the author has used to build tension in chapter 32; cf. *wēgam hū' hōlēk liqrā'tēkā we'arba'mē'ōt 'iš 'immō* "he also is coming to meet you with four hundred men," in 32:7, and, in general, the discussion below. *Wayḥabbēqēhū*—the tension breaks. The story becomes the account of a gracious, if

15 The verbal links extend to earlier portions of the return narrative. So, for example, *šallah*: 30:25, 31:27, 42. Note also the start of the journey: *wayya'ābōr 'et hannāhār*, and, especially, the strange parallels between Laban's dream in 31:24, 29 and the wrestling story of 32:25ff.—is *kī yēš lā'ēl yādī* in 31:29 here a hint? *Rā'ā 'ēlōhīm wayyōkah 'emeš* seems to be a clear foreshadowing of 32:25ff. Note also 31:50: *'ēn 'iš 'immānū rē'eh 'ēlōhīm 'ēd . . .*, cf. note 17.

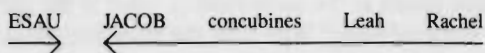
guarded, reconciliation. So the linking of *wayḥabbēqēhū* and *wayyē'ābēq* is no casual ornament but a device deeply meaningful to the logic of the story: the surest sign of literary intention. In sum, there can be no doubt that Gen. 32:25–33 is extremely well nested in its narrative context through the manipulation of language.¹⁶

It is also part of the elaborate thematic geometry of the larger story. The author presents a set of almost military maneuvers in chapters 32–33. In 32:7–24 they clearly express Jacob's fear. Hearing of Esau's approach with a large band of followers, Jacob divides his property, to ensure the survival of at least a moiety. The night before the confrontation detailed tactics begin. He dispatches deputations of servants and animals to appease Esau, ferries his family and the rest of his property over the Jabbok, but himself remains alone on the near side.¹⁷ At this point the physical disposition of the actors may be represented as follows:



Jacob is in the most protected position in the trajectory of meeting, farthest from the point of danger. His terror is almost palpable.¹⁸

The next morning the limping Jacob makes further dispositions. He divides his family into three groups of wives and children and arranges them in relation to the threat in the inverse order of his affection for them: concubines, Leah, Rachel: but “he passed in front of them” (33:3). There is no hint of hesitation; note the contrastive word order (*wēhū' ābar lipnēhem*, “but he passed ahead of them”): the act of dividing and passing in front of them was a single action:



It is impossible not to hear in this key *lipnēhem* a contrast with the repeated *'aḥārēnū's* of 32:19–21. This use of space is surely a narrative device, to achieve a certain effect and is intentional¹⁹—note the actual use of *rewaḥ*, “distance,” in 32:18. What is that effect? I think that these maneuvers before and after the nocturnal battle are meant to imply that Jacob has found his courage; and that the source of this new confidence is somehow to be found in the outcome of that struggle, in its blessing and change of name.

16 On the links to the context, see especially Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 10, 20–23.

17 The uncertainties in verses 21–24 are real and certainly look much more like a confluence of sources than anything in 32:25–33 itself. However, I think that Barthes in this case makes too much of the conflict between *wayya'ābōr* of v. 23 and *wayya'ābēr* of v. 24, “The Struggle with the Angel. Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:22–32” in *Image—Music—Text*, tr. by Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 129ff.). Almost certainly, Jacob himself is left by himself on the opposite bank, separated from his family by the stream.

18 Note the ironic contrast between *lēbaddō* and . . . *'iš 'immō*, as well as the possible pun of the sense “safely, securely” noted elsewhere; and the probable link cited above to 31:50. Note also the ironic *'iš 'immō* of 32:7! All these devices serve in different ways to highlight the initial phrase of verse 25, the grammatical parallelism of the verse, sealing the effect.

19 It is through no desire to obfuscate or to be coy that I point out that all talk of authorial intention or aim in this essay must be taken as an analogy or even a metaphor. The status of authorial intention is a knotty issue in modern literary criticism and, in fact, has come to mean little more than one's reading of the structure and meaning of the text. The “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt) must be avoided, at least until it can be better understood.

Yet Gen. 32:25–33 contains no overt words of comfort or confidence. Moreover, even the dullest interpreter must appreciate the ironies in the situation. It is just when he is alone, “safe,” (a meaning well attested for *bādād*, which it may be legitimate to extend also to *lēbaddô*) that Jacob is suddenly attacked. The outcome is a wrenched hip: surely a poor preparation for a possible battle! And yet he must also somehow be a new person with a new status. Otherwise, what is the meaning of the name change? The wrestling story seems both to fit its context and yet oddly to be out of place.²⁰ If the unambiguous message of language was, as we saw, integration, the message of content is ironic paradox.

The sense of paradox is heightened by examination of Jacob’s prayer in 32:10–13, the verbal expression of his anxiety as the spatial maneuvers are physical. Jacob fears that Esau will smite him “mother and child.” He prays for rescue, reminding God, none too subtly, of his promise to make his descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea, a process that requires mothers and children. The reader expects some divine response to the patriarch. Night comes, the time of dreams and visions. He waits, like Jacob, for a revelation and appropriate inspiriting message; something like “Fear not Jacob, *ānī māgēn lāk*, “I am your shield!” (Gen. 15:1).

The “answer” is a tackle by an unintroduced man: a strange revelation indeed! Yet Jacob himself describes it as such in 32:31: “I have seen God face to face.” And a dislocated hip is a peculiar comfort; yet the blessing and name change that accompany it are totally appropriate thematically. Moreover, *wattinnāṣēl napšī*, “but my life has been spared,” of 32:31 is surely a statement of some relevance to Jacob’s predicament in light of *haṣṣilēnī* of 32:12. The parallelism of the nocturnal combat and the meeting with Esau becomes explicit in 33:10, as noted. The double reference of *šālēm* in 33:18: “safe” from Esau, “whole”, healed of his injury, also points to the same duality. What is the author up to? Why this dance of comprehension and confusion? Why does the story both draw near to its context, then retreat from it? The answer is obscure. All that is clear is that this confusion is willed, since it is marked by facts of language; and that it is matched, even exceeded, by the internal paradoxes of the wrestling story. It is there that the major problems of comprehension lie.

The impression of almost all readers is that the story is told in a deliberately, perhaps unnecessarily cryptic manner. There is an annoying ambiguity in regard to the identity of the actors in verses 25 and 26: “when he saw that he could not win he touched the hollow of his thigh . . .” Only the following words (“so the hollow of Jacob’s thigh became dislocated”) clarifies the matter, retroactively. This situation is then repeated in verses 27 and 28: “he said . . . he said . . . he said . . .” Only the “Jacob” of the end of verse 28 allows the reader to identify the speakers, again, in retrospect. Also troubling is the inconsequence of blessing and naming in section two.²¹

20 Its over-all relationship to the larger Jacob cycle has often been noted by commentators, especially that to Gen. 27 and to the meeting with Laban. A larger chiasm of blessing (struggle with Esau)—flight—flight (from Laban)—blessing and meeting with Esau seems to emerge from chapters 27–33. On such larger patterns in general see. J. P. Fokkema, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, (Amsterdam, 1975) and Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture. Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York, 1979).

21 It is troubling but perhaps not as much of a narrative non-sequitur as it seems if, as some have noted, a convention is being played on; specifically, a pun of *bērak* as “blessing” and parting (or meeting) greeting; cf.

These ambiguities would perhaps be insignificant, mere infelicities of narrative, if they did not accompany and exacerbate the logical inconsistencies and non-sequiturs of the plot. The story seems to have no plain, simple meaning as a story. Who was Jacob's opponent? What were his motives? Who won the struggle, Jacob or his assailant? Was the latter a man or 'ēlohīm, a divinity?²² These questions may be restated as two sets of basic oppositions: victory–defeat and human–divine. They may be compared to twin vines that in their intertwining have formed a twisted thicket to entrap the reader. They obscure the logic of the narrative. Let us attempt to trace their convolutions through the fabric of the story, section by section.

Section one, verses 25–26, certainly implies Jacob's defeat, because his opponent dislocated his thigh when, or because, he saw that he (the opponent) could not himself win: *wayyar' kī lō' yākōl lō wayyagga' . . .*²³ But section two, verses 27–30, just as certainly announces Jacob's victory: otherwise the name Israel is senseless. *Wattūkāl* of verse 29 can hardly mean "you almost won" or "you did your best!" It contradicts the *wayyar' kī lō yākōl lō* of verse 26. In sections one and two the themes of victory and defeat present their opposition in its most blatant form.

The other major opposition, human–divine, is not fully activated until section three, verses 31–33. In verse 31 Jacob baldly declares he has seen divinity, 'ēlohīm. Yet section one states that he was fighting 'iš, a human. Would a divinity have to dislocate Jacob's hip to win? Section two complicates the matter; for the explanation of the name Israel proclaims a victory over both men and gods, 'im 'ēlohīm wē'im 'ānāšim. The sequence 'iš, 'ēlohīm–'ānāšim, 'ēlohīm in sections one, two and three, respectively, can hardly be accidental. It signals some narrative strategy. What is the author's aim?

There can be little doubt that he is playing with a known biblical convention: the inability of human actors to detect the divinity of supernatural visitors until they perform some sudden wonder. This convention, almost a "type scene",²⁴ animates the narrative of Gen. 18–19, Judg. 6 and, especially, Judg. 13, where it forms the basis almost of a burlesque. In Gen. 32 there is no wonder;²⁵ that is itself a surprise. And yet there is a great

II Sam. 19:40; 13:25; Gen. 47:7, 10, etc. Note the punning use in Gen. 27: verse 10's *waybārākēhū* means "he greeted him": Isaac has established "Esau's" identity and gives him the welcoming blessing. In 27:27, having firmly convinced himself by "Esau's" smell, *waybārākēhū*, he actually blessed him. *Lēbārēk* of 27:30 perhaps continues the play: "to dismiss, give the parting blessing" and "bless" itself. If one accepts a connection between *šillah* and *bērak* as in Joshua 22:6, 7 (cf. *JPS* translation of Gen. 32:30: "and he took leave of him there") then the relationship between naming and blessing may be understood in something like the following way: Jacob demands a blessing. The request for his name seems to be imply an attempt to establish his identity for a proper blessing: "Blessed be X to God!" or the like; cf. Gen 14:19. It would be pleasant if one could show that blessing after a fight was a sign of submission or reconciliation. Of course, the association between naming and actual blessing is known from convenantal passages like Gen. 17 and 35 (P), as well as Gen. 5:2.

22 "Divinity" will have to serve as an englishing of 'ēlohīm.

23 Ehrlich (*Mikra Kipshuto*, *ad locum* and *ad* Gen. 24:2, 9) suggests that placing the hand under the thigh was a sign of inferiority or submission to a superior, but offers no evidence.

24 Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), ch. 3.

25 H. Eising, *Formgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Jakobserzählung der Genesis* (Münster, 1939), takes the laming itself as a sign of theophany, a wonder equivalent to the *maplī la'āšōt* of Judg. 13 (p. 125): "ein Zeichen seiner (the angel's) Stellung und ein Zeugnis für seine Worte." This interpretation strikes me as reflecting a mixture of levels of interpretation, combining the narrative and the associative (see below) in an unwarranted manner.

wonder: the naming of Israel.²⁶

In section one, as noted, there is no reason to suppose Jacob's attacker was anything other than human, a brigand, perhaps. Section two is written ambiguously, to allow both interpretations. The phrase *'im 'ēlōhīm wē'im 'ānāšīm* is equivocal. Only *'ēlōhīm* of section three will reveal its purport in terms of the whole story. As it stands it may also be taken as a kind of hendiadys, quite appropriate in the mouth of a human opponent: "you have struggled with everyone, gods and men, and prevailed"; cf. Judg. 9:9, 13.²⁷ In this case the theophoric element in *yīsrā'ēl* can easily be taken as the familiar use of divinity as a superlative.²⁸

On the other hand, section two also contains clues to the "man's" divinity. The appeal to the rising of the dawn star not, as in section one, as a mere fact but as a motive for release is probably such a clue. The connection of divinities with stars is familiar from places like Judg. 5:20, Job 38:7 (*kōkēbē bōqer // bēnē 'ēlōhīm*); cf. also *hēlēl ben šaḥar* of Isaiah 14—is *šaḥar* of Gen. 32 perhaps a hint of a more specific identity?²⁹ A definite clue is the refusal to give the name in verse 30; cf. Judg. 13:18. It is probably at this point that Jacob realizes the divine status of his opponent, prompting the *rā'itū 'ēlōhīm* of verse 31. But until that statement the narrative remains dark on this issue.

The dawning of understanding in section three also sheds retrospective light on section one. Even as he grasps the identity of Jacob's attacker, the reader, like Jacob, glimpses a new interpretation of the wrenched hip. Jacob adds to his proclamation of revelation *wattinnāšēl napšī*, "but my life has been spared." This pious relief at having avoided the usual penalty for encountering divinity places Jacob's defeat in a different perspective: it was a kind of rescue, even salvation. Laming is a small price to pay for revelation, and for such a new name! A formal clue to this shift in perceptions is perhaps the alliteration of *wattinnāšēl* and *šōlea'* of verse 32, an unusual word which may have been chosen for this effect. This shift from a negative to a positive construction of the disabling limp is surely required by the *gīd hannāšeh*. Abstinence is a negative act. Only as a memorial of revelation, rescue and naming does the injury to the thigh make sense as a national, cultic symbol. The relationship of positive and negative in the final etiology perfectly mirrors the reanalysis of Jacob's injury as a sign of rescue.

If this interpretation is valid, a particular thematic strategy emerges from the narrative.

26 It is also possible that the author is playing with some of the motifs of theophany. Jacob's other revelations are explicitly dreams (P's *wayya'al mē'ālāw 'ēlōhīm* of 35:13 (cf. 17:22) is ambiguous in this regard). Gen. 32:25–33 is a fight, not a standard revelation; and no dream battle, because when the sun shines, Jacob limps away: the injury, and blessing, were a waking experience. *bēhāqīš*. *Rā'itū 'ēlōhīm pānīm 'el pānīm* of verse 31 is then ironic; for the struggle took place in the gloom of dawn before one can distinguish even between colors, *bēn tēkēlet lēlābān* (Mishnah, *Berakot* 1:2). The divine presence shields itself in darkness, a standard theophany motif.

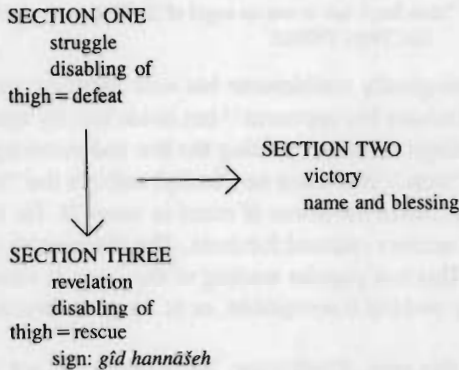
27 On the idiom, cf. also *'ēlōhīm wē'ādām* of Prov. 3:4; and possibly 1 Sam. 2:26; *gam 'im yhwē wēgam 'im 'ānāšīm*, although here, after the curse on the house of Eli, it is also to be taken literally. Note also Ugaritic: *'ilm wnšm // hmlt 'arš* and Mari (Yaḥdunlim) *šāpit ilī u awilūtīm*; cf. Robert Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," *HTR* 65 (1972), 146.

28 Note especially the use of *'ēlōhīm* in this sense in Gen. 30:8, a verse reminiscent of Gen. 32:29: *naptālē 'ēlōhīm niptalī 'im 'āḥōtī gam yākolī*.

29 It is not unlikely, as some have suggested, that the connection between angelic urgency and the breaking of dawn in Gen. 19:15 is related to this motif.

Sections one and two presented an opposition of defeat and victory. Even as 'ēlohīm of section three activates the opposition divine–human, it resolves the former one, as defeat is partially assimilated, so to speak, to victory, emerging as that saving limp: a perception confirmed by the association of the latter with a national etiology. The repetition of *kap hayyārēk* that links verse 33 to section one can now be understood as an aspect of this authorial maneuver.

Yet, that same 'ēlohīm also acts to dissolve the story, making the opposition victory–defeat too extreme to be resolvable. The relief expressed by *wattināṣēl napšī* is incompatible with the victorious connotation of the name Israel; just as *rā' itf* of verse 31 hardly comports with *sārītā* of 29: how can a grueling wrestling bout be described merely as “seeing?” Moreover, 'ēlohīm establishes an intolerable paradox, almost as a sliding scale: the more divine Jacob's assailant, the less likely his victory; but the less divine, the less significant the name Israel. The implications of these equations will be discussed below. Here it need only be noted that the more one attempts to unite the parts of this recalcitrant story the more stony-faced it becomes. In structural terms, the more one tries to perceive the adherence of section three to one, as described above, the more section two is perceived as incongruous with either of them:



The play of conjunction and disjunction we described above now reveals itself as an adjunct of the narrative difficulty of this story. The author has liberally supplied clues to its essential unity: the sequence 'iš–'im 'ēlohīm wē'im 'ānāšim–'ēlohīm noted before is surely such a formal clue. In addition, the theme of struggle is integral to all three sections; and the final etiology is linked to the name Israel because it is, after all, something done by the *bēnē yiśrā' ēl*.³⁰ Yet it is simply impossible to make narrative sense of the episode. It resists interpretation. And most disturbing is the fact that, as was also the case in regard to its external relationship to the larger narrative context, this intractability seems to be willed and deliberate. What can be its meaning?

30 Also linking the three sections are the references to the stages in the process of morning light: the rising of the dawn star (sections one and two), the shining of the sun; cf. Judg. 19:25–26. In addition, the extensive punning on the name Jacob in section one is surely intended to prepare the way for the name change in section two. On the source critical situation, see note 36.

II

Such willed obscurity is so strange a proposition that one naturally tries to find alternative solutions. Two strategies present themselves, one literary, the other, historical.

The former involves seeing in Gen. 32:25–33 an example of that elliptical manner of narration that distinguishes much of the best biblical style. Stories are often told in a manner that manipulates meaningful silence to stir readers' emotions and stimulate their imagination. This is what makes biblical personalities like Abraham and Jacob so "fraught with background,"³¹ so actively real to the reader. Cannot one view Gen. 32 also as an example of such stimulative ellipsis; so that the tensions described above result not in baffling confusion but in that type of "equivocal"³² interpretation that enriches the text? Perhaps it is the author's intention that his readers bridge the narrative problems of the story by positing something like the following connective statements between its warring sections:

(*wēhā'ēlōhīm nissā 'et ya'āqōb* "God tested Jacob . . ."; cf. Gen. 22:1)

SECTION ONE

(*wēlō' rāpā mimmennū*: "but he (Jacob) did not release him . . ."; cf. Exod. 4:26)

SECTION TWO

(*wayyar' ya'āqōb kī mal'ak yhw hū*: "then Jacob saw it was an angel of YHWH . . ."; cf. Judg. 6:22)

SECTION THREE

The "attack" is a divine test, a theologically troublesome but well attested type of event. Jacob, although injured, does not release his opponent³³ but holds him by main strength.³⁴ He thereby proves his psychological mettle, passing the test and receiving his new name as a reward. He has, in fact, "won." But when he (finally) realizes the "man" is *'ēlōhīm* he is overcome with proper piety; hence his words of relief in verse 31. He has proved his worthiness. Physical strength mirrors spiritual fortitude. The blessing he won by trickery in Gen. 27 is now his by right. This is a popular reading of the story. It views it as a psychological test and normalizes it by making it acceptable, or at least comprehensible, in the framework of biblical concepts.

Such a strategy is attractive but, in this case, illegitimate. The objection is not that there is no real change in Jacob's character—his cagey refusal to accompany Esau to Seir is quite the work of the old Jacob (just as the old name remains in use alongside the new one). Rather, it is that the general narrative situation in no way justifies the kind of ellipsis described by Auerbach, Alter and others. For example, in Gen. 22 we are asked to make *psychological* sense of the story. In Gen. 32:25–33 we are expected to make simple

31 Auerbach's famous phrase (*Hintergründlichkeit*) in *Mimesis*.

32 See Edward L. Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph" in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis & James S. Ackerman eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Texts*. Vol. 2 (Nashville, 1982), 114–29.

33 S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, connects *sarā* with Arabic *šuriya*, "persist, persevere," a sense quite appropriate to Gen. 32, but the meaning is perhaps a semantic extension in Arabic.

34 So, for example, Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 215: "Although lame below the belt Jacob keeps clasping the man in his arms." In general, Fokkelman's reading of the episode is sensitive, but a mixing of interpretive levels. He notices the deeper significance of the "touch" to Jacob's thigh (see below) but draws back from it as "reaching beyond the boundaries of verification." (p. 215).

narrative sense out of it, to make it *coherent as a plot*. Here we face not subtle emotional reconstruction of motives and reactions but gaping paradoxes. This episode is written enigmatically, not merely elliptically.

The historical strategy renounces interpretation of the story. It views its inner tensions as an historical accident, the result of clumsy splicing by insouciant editors. This, of course, is the solution of source and form criticism. The story makes no sense in its present form because it consists of the poorly connected bones of extinct prehistoric beasts; it will never make a whole animal. For example, is it not obvious that sections one and three, which posit Jacob's defeat, simply belong to a different tradition from section two, which assumes his victory? Perhaps the former alone was originally associated with the etiology of the *gîd hannāseh* (if, indeed, that element ever had any original connection with the story), the latter with the name Israel. Or is it not possible that in an early form of the episode it was Jacob, up to his old tricks, who cunningly employed ju-jitsu to wrench his opponent's hip, as Gunkel suggested? Of course, at that stage of development the story would have been only a chrysalis, a folk tale, similar to those fairy tales in which a hero wins a reward from a supernatural being.³⁵ No doubt Jacob's assailant was originally a troll or spirit guardian of the Jabbok ford; and Jacob himself some local hero with a limp.

Such suppositions, which fill most scholarly speculation on this episode, are reasonable in themselves. As already noted, the story certainly passed through many stages of development. Some of them were no doubt like those just described. However, such an approach will never solve the literary problems, being irrelevant to them; and even to apply them here is a misuse of scholarly methodology. There are no positive signs of historically distinct strands in Gen. 32:25–33. To be sure, *wayyagga' bēkap yērēkō* of 25 sounds suspiciously like *wattēqa' kap yerek ya'āqōb* of 26. Perhaps in one form of the story Jacob was disabled by his opponent at the end of the struggle, in another the injury occurred incidentally in its course. Yet these skeins do not proceed binarily through the story so that grasping their ends one may unravel them with a single yank. It is impossible to isolate distinct plot lines marked by consistent linguistic usage, the strongest criterion of the documentary hypothesis. The episode is, as Noth says, not, perhaps, without a trace of wistful regret "*literarisch nicht zu zergliedern*." it should not or, in any case, cannot be divided.³⁶ As a literary unity, its problems of disunity must find a literary explanation or none at all.

35 On the relationship between Gen. 32 and Proppian analysis of folktales, see especially Barthes, *The Struggle with the Angel*, 138–40.

36 Noth, *Ueberlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuchs*² (Stuttgart, 1948), 31: "... die Erzählung (ist) zwar sachlich aus verschiedenen Motiven zusammengesetzt, aber literarisch nicht zu zergliedern." He assigns it all to J. To be sure, as already stated, its tradition history is no doubt complex, but its current literary unity is likely. In any case, attempts like Gunkel's to apportion it to J and E are forced. The alternative forms Penuel–Peniel do not, I think, support a source critical division of the passage. The apparent conflict between *wayya'ābōr* of v. 23 and *wayya'ābēr* of 24, noted above, is before the proper beginning of the episode and no sign of its internal disunity. The only real linguistic evidence is, as noted, *wayyagga'–wattēqa'*. The other 'criteria' for division are purely literary and rest on the assumption that sources are present; so, for example, the common view that v. 33 is a later gloss; cf. Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 10. For defenses of the literary (as opposed to traditio-historical) unity of the passage, see Hentschel, *Jakobs Kampf*, 18; Eising, *Formgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, 126, n. 36 and p. 134; H. J. Hermission, "Jakobs Kampf am Jabbok (Gen. 32, 23–33)", *ZTK* 71 (1975), 241, n. 8; Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 3, n. 12; Elliger, *Jakobskampf*, 1–7. See also Robert Martin-Achard, "An Exegete Confronting Genesis 32:23–33," in R. Barthes et al., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis*, tr. by Alfred M. Johnson, Jr.

III

It is possible to view the enigma of the story of Jacob's wrestling bout abstractly, as a web of relationships between different kinds of structural features: the perceptual processes of isolation and integration; basic thematic oppositions; complexes of internal and external contexts. But they all fuse into a single concrete fact: the story is a non-story, a mask.

Yet, on another level, in another dimension of meaning, certain other facts leap from its words, impressing themselves on the reader's perceptions with no narrative mediation. I believe that light from this new dimension suffuses also the narrative levels, illuminating the paradoxes with a new significance.

The first such fact is Jacob's thigh. Could any Israelite have heard those words, in whatever context, without immediately grasping their national import? Israel is the people that came forth from that potent thigh, *yōšē' ē yerek ya'āqōb* (Gen. 46:26, Exod. 1:1; cf. Judg. 8:30).³⁷ Touching that thigh is automatically an act of national significance. Moreover, in Gen. 24:2, 9 and 47:29 "placing the hand under the thigh" accompanies an oath, in both cases one of reassurance. In the latter passage it is used in conjunction with openly covenantal terms: *hesed we' ēmet*. These terms are also employed in Jacob's prayer: *mikkol haḥāsādīm ūmikkol hā' ēmet* (32:11). Since the context requires some act of divine reassurance, a confirmation of the patriarchal promise, it is reasonable to suppose our hypothetical Israelite would have heard in the touching of Jacob's thigh an echo of covenant and promise; at least retroactively, once verse 31 declares the event to have been a revelation. It sounds so appropriate—and yet bewildering; for the same touch that inspires Jacob also jamaes him!³⁸

Nevertheless, Jacob's thigh is a powerful fact. It points directly to the new dimension of meaning and, by the very lack of narrative congruence, confirms its independence. This

(Pittsburg, 1974), 42–43. These authors then attempt, in most cases, a detailed and highly speculative traditio-historical analysis, a procedure I think equally misplaced here. All levels of analysis may not be possible for all biblical narratives; but even if a source critical and traditio-historical reconstruction were possible in Gen. 32, an exegete would still have an obligation to attempt a literary analysis, on the redactional level. And, in this case I think that literary interpretation is the door to the story's meaning on earlier compositional levels also.

37 *Yārēk* is associated with sex, like *raglayim* in general: Num. 5:22 and the passages cited in the text. As the place where the sword is strapped it also represents military strength: Exod. 32:27, Nah. 2:2, etc. Note that legs can also be representative of strength: Ps. 147:10 (*šōqē hā'iš // gēbūrat hassūs*). The *motnayim* and *yērēkayim* are the extremities of nakedness: Exod. 28:42. Ibn Ezra notes the possibility that the touching of the thigh refers to the membrum itself. "Putting the hand under the thigh" seems to have been so understood by tradition. It is interesting to note that sexual and physical strength are both subsumed by the term *'ōn*, which Hosea actually uses in connection with the wrestling incident (12:4). The first born is *rē' šīt 'ōnīm*; cf. Gen 49:3 *kōhī wērē' šīt 'ōnī*. *Ben 'ōnī* of Gen. 35:18 may be punning on this fact. Is there some link between Gen. 32:25–33 and the birth of Benjamin? He is, after all, the last of the tribal ancestors. The touch to the thigh may mark the end of the issue of progenitors from the patriarchal seed.

38 The *midrash* (Genesis Rabbah to *wayyišlah*, lxxvii, 3) takes the "touch" to the thigh symbolically or typologically, as an attack on Jacob's descendants, specifically referring to the Hadrianic persecutions. This comment at least shows an awareness of the national significance of the act.

new level is, of course, one of allusion or, better, linguistic association. It is "thigh" itself which is meaningful in this context, regardless of what happens to it. The fact that the latter is also a significant act on the associative level serves to confirm the effect.

In this story the associative plane of meaning stands apart from the narrative. This may now be posited as the central literary problem: the story is written on two discrete levels: (1) a narrative level, the baffling, contradictory progression of the plot. In conformity with Saussurean linguistic terminology, it may be termed "syntagmatic." Its hero is Jacob the man, hero of the saga.

(2) a level of national meaning, whose hero is Jacob the ancestor. It may be termed "associative," corresponding to the other plane of meaning in de Saussure's terminology.³⁹ The relationship between these levels is the core of the story's dynamic, the ultimate source of one's feeling of paradox but also, if viewed in terms of literary strategy, the clue to comprehending the intention of that paradox.

Such a duality of levels is entirely expected. Most patriarchal narratives have a national dimension of significance. This fact was recognized by the Rabbinic principle *ma'āšē 'ābôt simmān labbānīm*, "the actions recounted of the patriarchs are indicative of what would later happen to their descendants." The relationship is typological, almost magical. The building of altars, the acquisition of parcels of land, the journeys through the length and breadth of Canaan, all these foreshadow, even *effect* Israel's later occupation.⁴⁰

There is surely no other place in Genesis where the reader is more attuned to a resonance of past and future than Gen. 32. The situation is extreme: the eponymous ancestor of the nation is about to receive the national name: no casual matter. Edom may receive its name trivially from a pot of soup (Gen. 25:30); it is a trivial people. Israel is God's first born (Exod. 4:22), the first nation of the earth (*gōy 'ehād bā'āreṣ*: II Sam. 7:23), "supreme among the nations" (*'elyōn 'al kol haggōyīm*: Dt. 26:19; 28:1). Its naming is almost a cosmic event. The first appearance of the *people* Israel is in Gen. 32:33, the etiology of the *gīd hannāšeh*.⁴¹ This is no ordinary context.

Moreover, this eponymous ancestor is about to reenter the Promised Land after a long period of foreign labor. He is accompanied by the eponymous ancestors of eleven of the twelve tribes.⁴² He is preparing to cross a river; the Jabbok, to be sure, but in his prayer

39 Now commonly called "paradigmatic" rather than "associative." Saussure's original term is here retained as more apposite to literary analysis. The introduction of linguistic terminology is not merely illustrative, and certainly not arbitrary. It reveals the fact that this type of literary analysis follows linguistic models: the twin planes of meaning found in this text in fact correspond to levels of signification in all speech; see my "Through Windows and Mirrors into the Bible: History, Literature and Language in the Study of Text" in *A Sense of Text. The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature*, Supp. to *JQR*, (Winona Lake, 1983), especially pp. 32-33, n. 36.

40 See especially Nahmanides's famous comments on Gen. 12:6. He invokes the principle also at the beginning of 32, in particular; cf. Nehama Leibowitz, *'Iyyūnīm bēSeper Bērē' šīt* (Jerusalem, 1973), 259ff., and, in connection with Gen. 32, 257.

41 The only other appearance of Israel the nation in Genesis is 36:31. The shift from Israel the man to Israel the people is in Exod. 1: in 1:1 Israel means Jacob, verse 7 is transitional, 1:9 means Israel the nation, a fact marked by the unusual phrase *'am bēnē yiśrā' ēl*.

42 It is not unlikely Benjamin was already conceived, perhaps even close to birth. To be sure, that event does not occur until 35:17ff.; but in 48:7 Jacob states that Rachel's death was on his return from Paddan, which suggests no great lapse of time. However, the source-critical status of that verse is uncertain: Paddan itself points to P, but see Skinner's comments in the *ICC*.

Jacob refers to *hayyardēn hazzeh*, “this Jordan” (32:11). After the reunion he will journey to Shechem, also Abraham’s first stop and the site of Israel’s first covenantal action after the entrance into Canaan. He, too, will build an altar. He calls on “El, God of Israel.” Shechem itself will be attacked by his sons. True, he condemns the action, but in 48:22 he seems to trumpet its conquest as his own. The events at Bethel in Gen. 35 sound strangely similar to those performed by Joshua and all Israel at Shechem (Josh. 24). No Israelite ear could fail to vibrate with the intimations of dual levels of meaning in the events of Gen. 32 and its immediate context. The very heaping up of etiologies—three in this short passage!—serves to mark its special significance.⁴³

The author has stimulated the perception of duality with formal clues. The most significant is the use of *Leitwörter*. *Mal’āk* is used of angels in 32:2, of human messengers in 32:7. *Maḥāneh* applies first, in 32:3, to a divine encampment; then, in the following narrative, to Jacob’s earthly camp. The impression of duality is confirmed at the end of the reunion story by Jacob’s explicit comparison of that meeting with a divine revelation (32:11). The opposition of human–divine is, of course, also one of the thematic dualities of the wrestling episode. It can now be seen to accompany, even stimulate, the over-all duality of levels:

human = syntagmatic, narrative level	divine = associative, national level
Jacob the individual	Jacob the ancestor

Another formal clue is the use of an equivocal term like *nāga’* in 32:26 and 33. It means “harm, injure”⁴⁴ but also merely “touch.” Had a stronger, unambiguous term like *hikkā* or *pāga’* been used a national implication would scarcely have been possible. A clearly symbolic phrase like “place the hand under the thigh” would have been too explicit to allow an associative dimension of meaning.

If the reader is especially receptive to a typological perspective on this passage, he must also be aware of its essential difference from other patriarchal narratives in this respect. The use of typology is never simple. The patriarchs are not symbols but individuals. Many of their actions actually offend later Israelite attitudes; so, above all, their basically friendly relationship to the Canaanites: Abraham *rescues* the king of Sodom and later pleads for the Sodomites! There is no identity of past and future. However, all the actions recounted of the patriarchs make *sense* on one level or another.

The tremendous typological significance of the story, the urgent expectations it arouses

43 The national level of significance was apprehended by some interpreters, usually, however, only in a partial manner. One of the strongest is John L. McKenzie, “Jacob at Peniel: Gn. 32, 24–32,” *CBQ* 25 (1963), 71–76, especially pp. 73f. But his view that in the earlier Israelite form of the story Jacob fought a “Canaanite god or demon” who was a “protecting genius of the land against the arrival of Israel in its eponymous ancestor” represents a mixture of interpretative levels so common in dealing with this difficult story. Eising, *Formgeschichtlich Untersuchung*, also recognizes the national level of meaning: “wir befinden uns also auch mit dem Jabbokskampf und mit dem neuen Namen ‘Israel’ in heilgeschichtlichem Milieu” (p. 129) but, as already noted, attempts to force the story into a simply theophany pattern; cf. also Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 12–13.

44 “To harm” by semantic extension is many places: Josh. 9:19; 1 Sam. 6:9; Job 1:11, etc., etc. Of course, it is difficult to show in most of these cases that some rhetorical meaning is not involved like: “do not *even* touch, let alone harm!” Nevertheless, when God is the subject, the negative nuance is clear; cf. Isa. 53:4: *nāgūa’ mukkeh ’ēlohīm*, etc. Note that *nāga’ bē-* can also be used of sexual relations: Prov. 6:29; cf. with *’el*, Gen. 20:6.

in the reader's mind, makes its narrative incoherence insupportable. How could the author have chosen to be so obscure in such important matters? Why must the levels of meaning oppose rather than complement each other? Why cannot an angel simply appear to Jacob, touch his thigh, thereby blessing it in the manner in which angelic touch commissions prophetic mouths,⁴⁵ and utter some appropriate words of reassurance? In attempting to answer such questions one approaches the core of this story, its central mystery.

That mystery must have some relation to the physical and thematic heart of the episode: the naming of Israel. What did that name really mean to an Israelite? Its etymology is irrelevant; what did that Israelite *hear* in Israel? Primary evidence ought to be the "explanation" offered in verse 29: *kî sārītā*, etc. Unfortunately, *sārā* in the sense of "struggle" is virtually a *hapax*. Its only other verbal use is Hosea 12:4–5, a reference to the same event. Almost certainly it was a rare word,⁴⁶ and such explanations of names are often secondary.

I think it likely that what was *heard* in Israel was "dominion, rule;" i.e., *sārar*. Hosea's *wayyāšar* allows such a construction; and the only independent use of *sārā* (except for the name *Šērāyâh*) is *mišrā* of Isaiah 9:5–6, where the sense "rulership, dominion" seems assured. In fact: *sārā* may be here a *Nebenform* of *sārar*. Geminates and verbs IIIh often display a close relationship, cf. *qll-qlh*, "treat lightly;" *rbb-rbh*, "multiply;" *hyy-hyh*, "live;" *rdd-rdh*, "rule," etc. It is not necessary to posit that the true etymology of Israel is "God rules" or the like to maintain that it could have been perceived as such by Israelites.⁴⁷ If so, Gen.32:29 would have been taken as a proclamation, or promise, of Jacob's supremacy;⁴⁸ exactly the connotation required by the typological context, as noted above.

To this extent at least the allusive, associative meaning converges with, and greatly strengthens, the narrative one; for such a connotation of dominion conforms to the theme of victory implied by *wattūkāl*. It also fulfills the expectations established by Jacob's prayer, and confirms the national implication of the touch to his thigh. But it also correspondingly

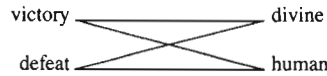
45 Isa. 6:7; Jer. 1:9; cf. also Dan. 10:16 and perhaps I Sam. 10:26. Other supernatural "touches:" I Kings 19:5, 7; Judg. 6:21; Dan. 10:10.

46 LXX, Vulgate and Pesh. derive it from *šrr* (Aramaic), "be strong;" Aquila and Sym. from *šrr*, "rule;" cf. the Targum. (*rb 't*). A meaning "struggle" is therefore hardly secure.

47 On "God rules" for *yisrā' el*, see *Noth, Personennamen*, 207f. and, in general, G. A. Danell, *Studies in the Name Israel in the Old Testament* (Uppsala, 1946); W. F. Albright, "The Names 'Israel' and 'Judah'," *JBL* 46 (1927), 151–185; and, more recently, R. Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," and B. Dinur, "Stories about the Name Israel" (Hebrew) in *Oz leDavid* (Jerusalem, 1964), 114–41. The emendation of *wayyāšar* to *wayyišer* in Hos. 12:5 (cf. S. R. Driver, *Genesis*) is quite unnecessary. The stem vowel of *šrr* is *u*: cf. *yāšōrū* of Isa. 32:1; Prov. 8:16. Although there are no biblical examples of non-stative geminates with *resh*, the *a* stem vowel of *wayyāšar* is probably owing to the treatment of *resh* as a guttural as in the verbs IIw/y; cf. *wayyāšar* (*swr*), *wayyāšar* (*šyr*) (but *wayyāgor* [*gwr*]!). See Ges. 72t.

48 In addition, it is difficult not to hear in *ya' āqōb–yišrā' el* a play on *'āqōb*, "twisted," and *yāšār*, "straight;" cf. Micah 2:7; 3:9 (cf. Blum, *Die Komplexität*, 141) and Isa. 40:4. Presumably *šin* was closer in sound to *šin* than *samekh*, so a pun is quite possible. Perhaps in the North the two have merged as in Phoenician and Ugaritic, cf. Albright, *The Names 'Israel' and 'Judah'*, 166. If so, Jacob's laming becomes even more ironic; bent in body he is not "straight." The rare cognomen *yēšūrān* certainly plays on this relationship. Other puns also become possible: *šrr*, "be strong" (Aramaic, but cf. *šērîrē biṭnō* of Job 40:19) and so, many others; but it seems profitless to pursue the road of word plays without further clues in the text.

increases one's sense of incongruence with the theme of defeat represented, on the narrative plane, by the injury to that thigh. If Israel implies not merely struggle but victorious rulership, the uncertainty of its relationship to the opposition of divinity and humanity also becomes sharpened. As mentioned before, there is a sliding relationship between the twin sets of themes:



Jacob's defeating God is blasphemous; his defeating a man is meaningless. One naturally tries to posit some intermediary, but still supernatural being: an angel. But why is the term *mal'āk* then avoided, especially since it already forms one of the *Leitwörter*, and angels play prominent roles elsewhere in the Jacob saga?⁴⁹ On the other hand, *'ēlohīm* can certainly refer by itself to angels; cf. 32:2–4!⁵⁰

The only reasonable answer is that it is not the author's intention that we resolve this issue; i.e., the ambiguity is precisely his aim. He is making use of the play of oppositions, as molded by the conventional uncertainty in regard to the identity of supernatural beings, to heighten the associative significance of the name Israel. Perhaps Jacob did defeat only a man; the event is then itself typological and symbolic. Perhaps he defeated God himself; an act only comprehensible as an expression of the ultimate divine favor: God allowed himself to be bested. Or perhaps it was, after all, an angel Jacob overcame, a victory tantamount to raising him, and his descendants, to members of the divine assembly, albeit, like prophets, human ones. The point is this: the meaning is in the restless activity of the mind as it tests each option. By being unclear on such a vital point the text allows intimations of all possible answers. This is what makes it "spacious," as von Rad said.

The concept of pregnant ambiguity is a cornerstone of modern literary analysis. This biblical story presents an extreme example of its use. But here both the ambiguity and the extremeness are, from the biblical point of view, essential. The name Israel is such a mystery that paradox is the only fit form of expression in describing its origin.

IV

Only that which is utterly intangible, matters. The contact, the spark of exchange. That which can never be fastened upon, for ever gone, for ever coming, never to be detained: the spark of contact.

49 In addition to the places cited above, also Gen. 48:16.

50 A *midrash* suggests that Israel was, in fact, the name of the defeated angel; see *Torah Shlemah*, p. 1290. Jacob won it in battle. If so, Israel would be like the angelic *'ēl* names in I Enoch 6 and elsewhere; as well as the names of the archangels Michael, Raphael, Gabriel. This opens new possibilities of meaning in the relationship of *šārā* and *šārar*. *Šār*, "prince, ruler," is a term applied to the archangels. To be sure, it seems to be a mainly late usage (Dan. 10:13ff.) but also occurs in earlier literature: Josh. 5:14 (*šar šēbā' yhw̄h*) and especially Ps. 82:7: *āk' aḥad haššārīm tippōlū*, a certain reference to the myth of the fallen angels; cf. Isaiah's infamous *hēlēl ben šaḥar* of 14:12. The allusive, associative sense here may be that Jacob overcame one of the leading angels, thereby winning his name and his status. Jacob, if not apotheosized, is at least more than most men, like Moses, whose face shone with divine radiance when touched by holiness.

Like the evening star, when it is neither night nor day. Like the evening star, between the sun and the moon, and swayed by neither of them. The flashing intermediary, the evening star that is seen only at the dividing of the day and night, but then is more wonderful than either.⁵¹

D. H. Lawrence

That meaning is a dialectic the mind forms out of relations, emerging in this case from oppositions of themes, contexts, levels of significance is a particularly modernist viewpoint. I do not think it is being forced on this biblical passage as something foreign to the way of thinking of ancient man. On the contrary, a relational approach is precisely what is needed to make sense out of the other paladin of the narrative enigma of the story, the touch to Jacob's thigh, sign both of defeat and of promise.

This duality of signification exactly mirrors the ancient apprehension of holiness, chief attribute of divinity. It is the source of all blessing, the energy of life; but it is, like all intense energy, potentially dangerous to man. The higher the degree of divinity possessed by Jacob's opponent the greater his power to maim and kill. The ambiguity of *nāga'* in this passage mirrors the dynamic of holiness; for it is no accident that that term plays a central role in the ancient strategy of dealing with the holy.⁵² Unprotected contact is fatal.

Israel's religious history is, in a sense, an attempt to harness holiness by making it comprehensible in terms of a human relationship, covenant: *hā' ēl haqqādōš niqdāš bišdāqā*, "The holy God sanctifies himself through righteousness" (Isa. 5:16). But it never lost its fear of what unrestrained holiness could do to the unwary or the unlucky. In this respect holiness is a survival of the unpredictability of the pagan gods, rooted in raw natural force. Israel's awareness of the otherness of the holy is expressed in a number of famous stories: Uzzah, Nadab and Abihu, even Moses and Aaron, allowed to die prematurely for not having "sanctified" God. An authentic expression of Israel's deep bafflement at the duality of holiness is the cry of the men of Beth Shemesh, smitten in their thousands for *looking* at the ark: "Who can stand before this holy God?" (I Sam. 6:20).⁵³

It cannot be coincidental, a casual correspondence, that the touching of Jacob's thigh just as he becomes Israel also expresses the duality of holiness in a nearly perfect manner. Such matters go far beyond conscious literary intention. This is the kind of meaning a text cannot help expressing. In Israel's case the duality of holiness forms the basis of a tension that permeates the whole of biblical religion. It finds expression also in the covenantal blessings and curses. The danger of being God's chosen is also at the root of the prophetic message: "Only you have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I shall punish you for all your sins!" (Amos 3:2).

The formal ambiguities and uncertainties of Gen. 32:25–33 stand in necessary parallelism to Israel's view of itself in relationship to its God and its land. Duality of emotion is expressed in an imagery in which indistinctness merges with opposition, emerging as a remarkable set of ambiguities. The half light of dawn, the half holy status of the Transjordanian site of the struggle mirror the half human, half divine nature of Jacob.

51 *Mornings in Mexico* (Middlesex, England, 1967), 52.

52 See, most recently, J. Milgrom, "Sancta Contagion and Altar/City Asylum," *Supp. to VT* 32 (Leiden, 1981), 278ff.

53 The text is disturbed, but even if one follows the LXX and limits the slain to the family of Jeconiah the point is unaffected.

If, by virtue of his victory he is “little less than god” (*mē’at mē’ēlōhîm*: Ps. 8:6), his laming makes him only half a man. He is not only Israel, but also *sârûa’*,⁵⁴ infirm, ineligible for divine service.

Because the meaning of this story unfolds binarily, in sets of oppositions clothed as narrative paradoxes, such a structuralist approach seems only natural.⁵⁵ The dialectic of dichotomies is here much clearer than in most biblical narratives. For this reason the story is also a true myth, not merely a fossilized use of pre-Israelite mythology. It is myth because it contains tensions which can never be resolved.

Indeed, this perspective into the nature of the story also allows one to glimpse an internal duality of structure, completing the parallelism of form and meaning. The clue is the relationship between the touch to the thigh, emblem of the duality of holiness, and the name Israel, bearer of the problematic of divinity vs. humanity. Since holiness is the essence of divinity, section two, verses 27–30, may be perceived as parallel to section one, verses 25–26. Jacob’s name is a sign of dominion; but, to an Israelite, *being named* is a sign of subordination. As has often been noted, in the Bible it is an act always performed by a superior to an inferior: not only God to creation, but Adam to the beasts and Pharaoh to Joseph, etc. Although named, Jacob is not able to obtain the name of his opponent—also a sign of human fallibility. The equation that emerges between the first two parts of the story is the following:

$$\text{blessing of thigh : disabling} :: \text{winning of name} : \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{being named} \\ \text{refusal of name} \end{array} \right.$$

The doubling of the last member of the equation is doubtless to make the parallelism clearer.

As noted before, section three seems to try to resolve the opposition presented by one and two by presenting a mediating concept: disabling → rescue, salvation. And the final etiology, the sign of the event, gathers up all the oppositions into this new positive framework. The *gîd hannāseh*, like that other sign of covenant, circumcision, is a symbolic representation of the dialectic of positive and negative, blessing and curse. Like other cultic

54 Lev. 21:18. The exact nature of the injury is unknown, but seems to result in a limp. Jacob therefore has a *mûm*, a defect that, if he were a priest, would disqualify him from divine service as incompatible with holiness; as animals who are *sârûa’* are unfit for sacrifice (Lev. 22:23). For Arabic parallels to Jacob’s hip injury, see Driver and Skinner, *ad locem*. Levi Strauss says: “In mythology it is a universal character of men born from the earth that at the moment they emerge from the depth, they either cannot walk or do it clumsily.” This chthonian feature he connects with the theme of non-autochthony, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion*³ (New York etc., 1972), 295. The link to Israel’s non-autochthony is suggestive, cf. also R. Couffignal, “Jacob lutte au Jabbok,” *Revue Thomiste* 75 (1975), 590–91.

55 As Barthes says (*The Struggle with the Angel*, 126) the story “lends itself to an extremely classic and almost canonical structural analysis.” See the discussion in *Semeia* 3 (1975), 99–127 by Hugh C. White, “French Structuralism and Old Testament Narrative Analysis: Roland Barthes”; and the reply by Robertson in the same issue. It must be made clear that my own analysis is not such a classical structuralist exercise, although the clarity of the oppositions makes it hospitable to such an approach.

actions it stands on the dangerous frontier of holiness.⁵⁶

V

The modern aspect of this interpretation is that it views meaning not as a static quantity to be recovered, like a lost treasure from the sea, but as a dynamic quality, a set of relationships to be explored and charted: the sea itself. It is, so to speak, an environmental, ecological approach. Its only reward is intangible, an awareness of the balance within texts.

But it also claims to be a scientific hypothesis in literary garb. As such it must submit itself to confirmation by testing. A genus of interpretation based on a single example is suspicious. Unfortunately the Bible contains few similarly enigmatic passages that are the expression of mythical awareness (as opposed to merely difficult and suggestive passages resulting from the splicing of sources). The reason is clear: Israel aimed at “overcoming” myth with history. In narrative, this means replacing opposition of syntagmatic and associative levels with congruence. So, for example, the Exodus story is replete with supernatural wonders, but is quite comprehensible as a simple narrative. Its associative aspect remains potent, as the extensive use of Exodus imagery by the prophets attests, but it does not express itself in blatant internal paradoxes in the text.

However, the Book of Exodus does contain a story even more enigmatic than Gen. 32:25–33 and often associated with it in scholarly discussion: Exodus 4:24–26. If it is also a true myth it ought to be amenable to the same *type* of interpretation as Gen. 32:25–33, although details may differ.

24 ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש המיתו
 25 ותקה צפרה צר ותכרת את ערלת בנה ותגע לרגליו ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי
 26 וירף ממנו אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת

(24) On the way, at the night lodging, YHWH met him and tried to kill him.⁵⁷ (25) Sipporah took a flint knife and cut off her son's foreskin. She touched it to his legs⁵⁸ and said, “You are my bridegroom of blood.” (26) He released him. Then she said, “A bridegroom of blood in regard to circumcision.”⁵⁹

Even if all the lexical problems were solved this text would remain cryptic. It appears

56 Blum, *Die Komplexität*, is perceptive on this point. Gen. 32 stands, he says, “an der Grenze des in Israel theologisch Sagbaren”; and he sees the link to the name Israel (24) and recognizes that an authorial strategy is at play (p. 18). However, he then falls back on a traditio-historical analysis of the problems. For a literary study of the Samson pericope, similar in spirit to this essay, see Edward L. Greenstein, “The Riddle of Samson,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), 237–60.

57 In context it can only be Moses who is attacked. The suffix of *hāmîṭô* can hardly be anticipatory in this case (*pace* Ehrlich). This does not prejudice the issue of who may have been assailed in earlier forms of the story.

58 *Raglayim* is either a euphemism for the genitalia or metonymically associated with them.

59 The semantic intertwining of *hātān* and Arabic *ḥatana*, “circumcise,” is difficult to follow. Ehrlich's suggestion that the strange *lammūlôt* is a linguistic gloss designed to explain the unusual sense of *hātān*, is attractive.

to have been deliberately truncated so as to be as obscure as possible. It makes no sense as narrative. Why did God attack Moses? Whose legs were touched, and why? The mysterious, almost incantatory quality of the story is increased by the repetition of the enigmatic phrase *hātan dāmim* and the alliterations of the same or similar sounds: *wayipgēšēhū*–*waybaqqēš*, *šippōrā*–*šōr*, etc. To be sure, there are similarities to Gen. 32:25–33: the assault at night, the touching of a leg. But these similarities also highlight the differences: here the narrative problem is not inner paradox but real obscurity.

The essential tension is supplied by the context: how can YHWH attack the messenger he took such pains to reassure in chapters 3 and 4? In 4:14 he became angry with Moses for repeatedly refusing his commission. No word is said of any formal acceptance. But the other prophets are also silent on this point; and surely Moses's preparations for a return to Egypt indicate his tacit acquiescence. The divine assault is therefore shockingly unmotivated.

The narrative dilemma is perhaps even stronger than in Gen. 32; but here, too, there are linguistic clues pointing to an attempted integration of the passage into its context. In 4:22–23 God speaks of Israel as *bēnī* and *bēnī bēkōrī*. "my son, my first born son." If Pharaoh does not release God's son, he will *kill* Pharaoh's *son*. When God attacks Moses and tries to *kill* him, Sipporah circumcises her *son*; and God releases Moses. The use of *bēn* as a *Leitwort* is especially effective because references to Israel as God's son are rare in the Pentateuch. In 4:26, immediately after the episode, Aaron *meets* Moses, using the same *yipgēšēhū* that begins the story in 4:24. By these terms the story is stitched into its context. That this is no matter of mechanical editing by contiguous catchwords is indicated by the presence of more remote verbal connections: *hātān* of 4:23–24 with *hōtēnō* of 4:18 and, especially, *hambaqšim 'et napšekā* of 4:19 and *waybaqqēš hāmītō* of 4:24. The paradox of verbal integration and narrative isolation therefore parallels that in Gen. 32:24–32.

Here, too, there are unmistakable pointers to another, associative plane of meaning. After verses 23–24, an explicit reference to the coming slaughter of the first born, could any Israelite have failed to hear in the repeated *dāmim* of verses 25 and 26 a foreshadowing of the Passover blood?⁶⁰ There may be supporting clues: Exod. 12:43ff. strongly declares that only the circumcised may partake of the Passover sacrifice. If circumcision was originally associated in tradition with the Passover (cf. Joshua 5) the association of 4:24–26 to that ritual would have been ineluctable. But it is blood that is the key to the associative level, the key to the dialectic of oppositions.

The mystery of the Passover is its bloodiness, the blood of the lamb which must be smeared on the doorpost. YHWH must clearly see it or the first born of that house, Israelite or no, will die. The apotropaic quality of the blood is magical quite in the pagan sense. In this respect the final plague differs from the others: no automatic distinction is made between Israel and Egypt. The eating of the lamb's flesh is incidental; although, since it must be finished by dawn, a flavor of magic lingers about it also.

Here is a real paradox: the Passover is woven into the normative pattern of

⁶⁰ So already the Rashbam; cf. M. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York, 1969), 110ff.; Lawrence Kaplan, "'And the Lord Sought to Kill Him' (Exod. 4:24): Yet Once Again," *Hebrew Annual Review* (1981), 65–73; M. Fishbane, *Texts and Texture*, 70–71, 76. The point is a common one, underscoring the ineluctability of the associative level of meaning in Exod. 4:24–26.

Heilsgeschichte but also stands apart. It is reasonable to posit that the weird danger of the *lêl šimmûrîm*, the “night of watchfulness” (Exod. 12:42) expresses an apprehension of holiness similar to that expressed in Gen. 32.⁶¹ Physical contact with the divine, terrible and killing, can be averted only by a physical act.

The Passover event itself contains the dialectic of holiness we saw in Gen. 32. The purpose of Exod. 4:24–26 is to so sharpen that basic opposition of danger and salvation as to channel the reader’s perception of the entire narrative which follows. In other words, Exod. 4:24–26 is part of a thematic introduction to the Exodus story, as many commentators have noticed. But its particular relationship to the preceding verses 21–23, the other half of that introduction, is less often observed.⁶² It forms another basic opposition, confirming the relational interpretation. These verses contain startling news. In 3:19–20 God stated that Pharaoh would prove stubborn. Now he says that *he* is the source of that recalcitrance! This is a famous theological dilemma because it violates the doctrine of free will, but is surely a problem imposed by later religious systems.

However, the conflict between the promised salvation and this divine delay would surely have been apprehended by biblical man. I think that it would have been accepted as a narrative necessity. That a plot must advance through several stages is a convention of great power. The more plagues the better; the greater the obstacles, the more impressive the salvation. Pharaoh must be made an antagonist strong enough to give meaning to God’s and Israel’s victory. Another convention is the humbling of pagan pride by divine punishment. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, though troublesome, is acceptable in biblical terms.

But the assault on Moses—that *is* incomprehensible. It is an event so strange that it contrasts in the strongest way with the preceding verses. There a seemingly arbitrary act is employed to establish a fixed framework for the Exodus story. We know that there will be a final, catastrophic plague, in due time. The pattern is planned and fixed. The inexplicable attack on Moses, linked by association to the final plague, provides that element of divine unpredictability that gives the event its sacred terror. The opposition predictability–unpredictability is established at the beginning and saves the plague narrative, with its regular, carefully artful construction, from insipidity and dullness. Here the dialectic of oppositions is used to narrative effect, as a conscious literary device. The treatment of the enigmatic fragment of verses 24–26 is anything but peremptory and accidental, but can be understood only in a relational manner.

61 The *mašhîm* of Exod. 12:23 and similar cases: II Kings 19:35 and II Sam. 24:16 is a divine agent; like other angels, not to be separated from divinity itself.

62 The situation in 4:18–26 as a whole is uncommonly interesting. Source-critically it is a pastiche; but it has been edited in a manner that brings out certain patterns. It is marked as a discrete section by the repetition in 4:26 of *har hâ’ êlôhîm*, which connects directly with 4:14. The obvious *Leitwörter* are *hâlak-šûb* in 4:18, 19, 21, *šûb* alone in 4:20. In addition, the contrast of *hayyîm* in 4:18 and *mêtû* in 19 is probably intentional, perhaps designed to introduce a dualism of human-divine levels. 4:21–23 certainly represents the divine level because God gives Moses (and the reader) a snippet of divine knowledge: the true nature of the coming contest with Pharaoh. The whole passage needs a thorough, integrated analysis. An outward clue to meaning is the startling lack of narrative consequence; the Rabbis used it to illustrate their principle of *’ên muqdam ûmê’ uḥâr battôrâ*; cf. Rashi on 4:20.

VI

Shklovsky, one of the most influential members of the literary critical movement known as Russian Formalism, defined the major device of literature as defamiliarization, "making strange." His views are described by Victor Erlich as follows:

'People living at the seashore,' wrote Shklovsky, 'grow so accustomed to the murmur of the waves that they never hear it. By the same token, we scarcely ever hear the words which we utter . . . Our perception of the world has withered away, what has remained is mere recognition.'

It is this inexorable pull of routine, of habit that the artist is called upon to counteract. By tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together the disparate notions, the poet gives a *coup de grace* to the verbal cliché and to the stock responses attendant upon it and forces us into heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture. The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our perception, giving "density" to the world around us. "Density" (*faktura*) is the principle characteristic of this peculiar world of deliberately constructed objects, the totality of which we call art.⁶³

Gen. 32:25–33 can be understood as a paradigmatic example of this "device of making strange." The author was faced with a particular problem. Ordinarily, nothing could be less ordinary than divine revelations. But in the Pentateuch they have become, in their usual form, almost routine events; Jacob has already experienced at least two of them (Gen. 28; 31:3, 13ff.). How, then, could he make "strange" an event that called for a truly special effect: the naming of Israel? The enigma of the wrestling story is the result. Older traditions have been structured and interwoven in the pattern of the narrative so as to trigger conflicting, intersecting reactions in the reader. Shklovsky's "density" is this tangle of perceptions engendered by the text. Through the magic of art, fusion becomes fission. Von Rad's "spaciousness" is the expansive play of the mind as it attempts to follow the lines of light which, like rays from a dark star, those perceptions hurl into imaginative space.