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

STEPHEN A. GELLER
Dropsie College

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:

יְחַיֶּה יְמֵקָה לֹבַר יָאָבִק אַרְשׁ יֶבֶן תַּעֲלוֹת חַשָּׁר
יִרְאֶה כִּי לֹא יִלְּכַת בֵּית יָמִקָה בֵּין יִרְאֶה אִיָּבִק בֵּין עֲלֹת
יָאָבִק נֶשֶׁרֵי בַּעַל מֵעֲלָה יָאָבִק לָא אָסָפָה לָא אָמָר עָרְבָּה
יִשְׁאֲרֶה אָלוּ הַאֵשׁ יִשְׁאֲרֶה יִשְׁאֲרֶה
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְטָעֲמָה עֶבֶר אָדָם כָּפָא אֲשֶׁר רָעָה אוּלָּב אֲשֶׁר רָעָה
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְאָלֶּמ יָאָבִק
יָאָבִק אָלֶּמ וְיֵשֵׁכֵּה נַגָּר נַגָּר

(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 wa'taqob noted below: wayyagg' bekup, wattēqa' kap, etc. See below also on gōlēa' and wattinnāshēt, and note also the proleptic anticipation of qed hannāsheh in haggidkā našēmēkā.

37
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 Jacob, but 'Israel,' for you have struggled with God and man and prevailed." (30) Jacob asked, "Tell me your name!" He said, "Do not ask my name!" 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 him as he passed (from) Peniel—and he was limping on his thigh. (33) Therefore the descendants of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve, 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 temp normal 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. 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'dqâb: "not 'he tricks/holds the heel' will be your name..." Contrast the word order of Gen. 17:5, 35:10 (P).
6 On šârāth, see below.
7 On lâmâ with negative force, see Jos. 16:1b; 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 hannâše. Nâšēh is undoubtedly Arabic nasyun, but the etymology and anatomical relationship to the Hebrew term are uncertain. In Job 40:17 gidâ pâhâdâw may refer to the male organ; a point perhaps relevant to Gen. 32 (see below). It is also possible that ya'dqâb and gid form a pun: note 'qph tr (2 Aquit vi:23); cf. Arabic 'qab—is the link the Achilles tendon? Suggestive but speculative is Gevitz's surmise that gid hannâše is a punning reference to the tribes of Gad and (Half)Manasseh, the boundary between whom was the Jabok, "Of Patriarchs and Pious: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford," HUCA 46 (1975), 33–45.
10 The passage certainly gives 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 Jabobk (Gen. 32, 23–33)—eine genuin israelitische Tradition?" Dienst der Vermittlung (Leipzig, 1977), 13–37. See also especially K. Elliger, "Zum Jakobskampf am Jabobk," ZTK 48 (1951), 1–31, and, recently, B. Diekmann, "Das Interesse der Ueberlieferung an Gen. 32, 23–33," Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament 13 (1978), 34–52, 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 than that of the earlier Pentateuchal sources, I and, perhaps, E. The relationship of P to the story is uncertain. In 35:6ff. presents his own account of the name change, a single 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, 'od 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 PM 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, wayyébdēq lēš ‘immā, is grammatically parallel to the phrase wayyiywăṭēr yā’qōb lēbaddō, 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 gid ḥamnāšēh 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 wayyāḇērēk ‘ōtō 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 true, as seems likely, he has little light to shed on Genesis. For example, can his ma’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) lā’ār ‘el more or less corresponds to šārāʿ ‘ān of Gen. 30:30, assuming that ‘el is the preposition. Wayyāḇērēk ‘el in 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 ma’āk as a later gloss: “God proved himself Lord and prevailed.” Andersen and Freedman read wayyāḇērēk ‘ēl li ma’āk wawvōkal, 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 (bē’ēl yāḇērēkēnu...). 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 (J) 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).
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 (yérékō) to 33. Yet the etiology of Penuel is firmly rooted in the narrative context while that of the gid 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 gid hannāšeh . . . kap hayyārēk . . . kap yerek . . . bēgīd 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: wayyēʾāḇēq ḫāʾ ‘immō . . . wayyaggā’ bēkap yérēkō / wattēqa’ kap yerek yaʿāqōb / bēhēʾāḇēqō ’immō. 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 onomatopoetically: 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–ḥēʾāḇēq. 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: ki ḫim berakāti . . . mah šēmekā . . . haggidā nā šemekā . . . wayyārēk ḫōtō sām. 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 lā and hō in sallēhēti ki ʿāḏa ḥatšahar etc. and the internal chiasm of šēmekā . . . yaʿāqōb . . . yaʿāqōb . . . šēmekā in verses 28 and 29, respectively. On alliteration here see especially Blum, Die Komplexitäts.
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.

SECTION ONE (32:25–26): NARRATIVE

- wrestling: wayyê ábêq 'is 'immô . . .
  - thigh: wayyaggá békêp yêrekô
  - thigh: wàttêqa' kap ñerek ya'aqôb
  - wrestling: bêhê'âbêq 'immô

SECTION TWO (32:27–30): DIALOGUE

- blessing: kî 'im bêrakkôn
  - name (of Jacob): mah sêmekô
  - Israel
  - name (of opponent): hagglât nà sêmekô
  - blessing: waybârek 'ôtô sôm

SECTION THREE (32:31–33): ETIOLOGY

- etiology: wayyiqrâ' . . . sem hannâqôn pêni'êl
  - narrative: wayyêrrâ'h lô hašâmeš . . .
  - etiology: 'at kân lô' yô'kêlân bênê yisra'êl
  - 'et gôl hannäšek

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 safe" 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 tâlém is a place name (LXX, Vulgate); see Skinner's comments in the ICC, ad locum. To be sure, tâlém as "safe" is otherwise unattested, but cf. the common bêšâlôm (Sam. reads tâlôm here). Perhaps tâlém refers back to bêšâlôm of 28:21.
The most important are:

1. *mal-dok*, “angel” 32:2, 3; “messenger” 32:4, 7; note also *mel-dak*, “property” 33:14.
2. *mahaneh*, “camp” 32:3, 9, 11, 22; and, as a pun, *min-hah*, “gift” 32:14, 21; 33:8, 10.
   Also *hannah*, “granted” in 33:5 and *heh*, “favor” in 33:8 (with *mahaneh*) and in 33:10
   (with *min-hah*).
4. *panim*, “face, presence” or as a preposition, “before” etc. 32:4, 19, 21, 23; 33:10, 14.
   Most impressive about the use of these terms is their frequent concatenation: so, for
   example, in 32:4: wayyipshah... *mal-dok lepanav*, “he sent messengers ahead”; 32:19
   *min-hah ki* *sela* *ki*, “it is a gift sent”; 32:21: *takappar-panav bamin* *hahoteket lepanay
   we* *ahare keen er* *eh panaw ‘ulay yiish* ‘panay. *watta-abor hammin-hah ‘al panaw wehuh
   lan... bammahaneh*, “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 *abar* 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; *wehuh* ‘abar lipnehem, “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: *salah* in 32:27; *panim* in 33:11; *abar* in 33:32. More significant than
number is interconnection. For example, it is impossible to separate the heaping up of
forms of *panim* in 32:21 from the etiology of Penuel in 32:31; just as it is necessary to see
in r’ai ‘elohim *panim* ‘el *panim*, “I have see God face to face,” of 32:31 an intentional
echo of 32:2–3: wayyipsh*uh* b*o* mal*’ ak* ‘elohim. *wayyohmer ya* ‘aqiq *ka* ‘asher ra’am,
“angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them...” and also, of course, an
equally clear foreshadowing of 33:10: r’ai ‘elohim kir’ot peneh ‘elohim, “I see your face as
one sees the face of God.” Also significant is the occurrence of *berek* in 33:11, recalling
not only the blessing theme of 32:27, 30 but also the play on *beraka*, “blessing,” and
*bekar* ‘, “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 *wayyabsegah*, “he
embraced him,” of 33:4, an unmistakable echo of *wayye abre* 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 *wayyabsegah* is the very heart of the climactic verse of the
over-all narrative of the reunion. As Jacob approaches, bowing submissively, *wayyaro*
‘esaw ligra’ot, “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. *vegam ha’il helek ligra’ot ve’reva’i me’ed ti’el immo* “he also is coming
to meet you with four hundred men,” in 32:7, and, in general, the discussion below.

*Wayyabsegah*—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, *salah*: 30:25, 31:27, 42. Note also the start of the journey: *wayye abre* ‘et hannahar, and, especially, the strange parallels between Laban’s
dream in 31:24, 29 and the wrestling story of 32:25ff.—is ki yets l’el yadi in 31:29 here a hint? R’a ‘elohim
wayyakah ‘emel seems to be a clear foreshadowing of 32:25ff. Note also 31:50: ‘en *ti* ‘immannah re’eh ‘elohim
‘ed...’, cf. note 17.
guarded, reconciliation. So the linking of wayḥabbēqēhā and wayyēʾābēq 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:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ESAU} & \text{deputations} & \text{family} & \text{Jacob} \\
\rightarrow & \text{Jabbok} & \leftarrow \\
\end{array}
\]

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: “he passed in front of them” (33:3). There is no hint of hesitation; note the contrastive word order (wēḥāʾ ʿābar lipnēhem, “but he passed ahead of them”): the act of dividing and passing in front of them was a single action.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ESAU} & \text{JACOB} & \text{concubines} & \text{Leah} & \text{Rachel} \\
\rightarrow & \leftarrow \\
\end{array}
\]

It is impossible not to hear in this key lipnēhem a contrast with the repeated ʿahārēnū’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 wwayrāḏō or v. 23 and wwayrāḏōr 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 lēḥaddī and . . . ʿīmō, 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 ʿīl ʿimmō 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 lēbaddō) 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.\footnote{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 inspiring 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, wattināṣēl napsī, “but my life has been spared,” of 32:31 is surely a statement of some relevance to Jacob’s predicament in light of ḥaṣṣišēnī 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 ṣālēm 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.\footnote{21}
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 'elohim, a divinity? 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 'kì lô' yâkôl lô wayyaggâ'... But section two, verses 27-30, just as certainly
announces Jacob's victory: otherwise the name Israel is senseless. Wattâkûl of verse 29 can
hardly mean "you almost won" or "you did your best!" It contradicts the wayyar 'kì lô
yâkôl lô 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, 'elohim. Yet section
one states that he was fighting 'îš, 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 'elohim wè'im 'ânâšim. The sequence 'îš,
'elohim—'ânâšim, 'elohim 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", 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; that is itself a surprise. And yet there is a great
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 ‘elōhīm wē’im ‘ānāšīm is equivocal. Only ‘elōhīm 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 yišrā’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 bōger īl bēnē ‘elōhīm); cf. also hêṭēl ben šāhar of
Isaiah 14—is šāhar 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’îti ‘elōhīm 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
wattinnâšēl napāšī, “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
wattinnâšēl and sōlea’ 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 gid hannâšēh. 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 (Ps’s wayy’al me’ālāw ‘elōhīm 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, bēhāqṣ. Rā’îti ‘elōhīm 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
tekēlet lēlābân (Mishnah, Berakot 1:2). The divine presence shields itself in darkness, a standard theophany motif.
27 On the idiom, cf. also ‘elōhīm wē’ādām of Prov. 3:4; and possibly 1 Sam. 2:26; gam ‘im ywḥ wēgam ‘im
‘āndāšīm, although here, after the curse on the house of Eli, it is also to be taken literally. Note also Ugaritic: ‘îm
wāsīm lī hmt ‘ārs and Mari (Yaḥunum) šōpis īl ‘u auišūtim; cf. Robert Coote, “The Meaning of the Name
Israel,” HTR 65 (1972), 146.
28 Note especially the use of ‘elōhīm in this sense in Gen. 30:8, a verse reminiscent of Gen. 32:29: napālē
‘elōhīm niptaṭī ‘im ‘ādōt gam yākolti.
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 'elōhīm 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 'elōhīm also acts to dissolve the story, making the opposition victory--defeat too extreme to be resolvable. The relief expressed by wattiqāsēl naqāši is incompatible with the victorious connotation of the name Israel; just as raʾîṭi of verse 31 hardly comports with šārıḥa of 29: how can a grueling wrestling bout be described merely as "seeing?" Moreover, 'elōhīm 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 story-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:

SECTION ONE
struggle
disabling of
thigh = defeat

SECTION TWO
victory
name and blessing

SECTION THREE
revelation
disabling of
thigh = rescue
sign: gid hannāṣēh

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 '13- 'im 'elōhīm weʾim 'ānāṣēm- 'elōhīm 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 yiṣṭāʾel. 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. Isdg. 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 56.
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:

(weha ‘elohim nissä ‘et ya‘agôb “God tested Jacob . . . .”; cf. Gen. 22:1)

SECTION ONE

(vêlo’ rápâ mimmenên; “but he (Jacob) did not release him . . . .”; cf. Exod. 4:26)

SECTION TWO

(lawasur ‘ya‘agôb kl’mal’ ak ‘ywâh hî’; “then Jacob saw it was an angel of Yahweh . . . .”; 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 ‘elohim 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 (Hintergründigkeitt) in Mimesis.
33 S. R. Driver, The Book of Genesis, connects sard with Anaq sâriyâh, “persevere, persevered,” 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 claspmg 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 gid hannášēh (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. 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' bēkapat yērek̂̆̄f of 25 sounds suspiciously like wayyāqqēqā' kāp yērek 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. As a literary unity, its problems of disunity must find a literary explanation or none at all.

36 Noth, *Ueberlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuchs* (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 Peniel–Peniel do not, I think, support a source critical division of the passage. The apparent conflict between wayyā'ābēr of v. 23 and wayyā'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'–wayyāqqē. 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 tradition-historical) unity of the passage, see Hentschel, *Jakobs Kampf*, 18; Eising, *Formgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, 126, n. 36 and p. 134; H. J. Hermisson, "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, yōgē'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 haḥāsādām 'amikkol ha'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 lames 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

37 Yārēk is associated with sex, like raglawim 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 (šōqā hā'lāš // gēḇārat hassāš). The motṣayim 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 re'sīt 'ōnim; cf. Gen 49:3 kōhī wērē'sīt 'ōnim. Ben 'ōnim 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. 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'ašé 'ábôt simmān labbānim, "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.

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'dreṣ II Sam. 7:23), "supreme among the nations" (el-yôn 'al kîl ḥaggyồyîm: 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 gid hâmâšēh. 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. 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 appropriate 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.


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 bēšād yîrāʾ 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 hayyardin 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 covenental 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 ever 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. Mat’āk is used of angels in 32:2, of human messengers in 32:7. Mahāneh 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
Jacob the individual
divine = associative, national level
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 Jabokskampf 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: nāgā’ mukkhe ‘ēlōhīm , 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, 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: ki šârîtā, etc. Unfortunately, šārā 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; and such explanations of names are often secondary.

I think it likely that what was heard in Israel was “dominion, rule;” i.e., šârâ. Hosea’s wayyâsâr allows such a construction; and the only independent use of šârâ (except for the name Sérâyâh) is mišrâ of Isaiah 9:5–6, where the sense “rulership, dominion” seems assured. In fact: šārâ may be here a Nebenform of šârâr. Geminates and verbs IIIh often display a close relationship, cf. qll-qllh, “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. If so, Gen.32:29 would have been taken as a proclamation, or promise, of Jacob’s supremacy; 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 wâtâkâl. 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” 1 Kings 19:5; 7; Judg. 6:21; Dan. 10:10.
46 LXX, Vulgate and Pesh. derive it from šâr (Aramaic), “be strong;” Aquila and Sym. from šrr, “rule;” cf. the Targum (rub”). A meaning “struggle” is therefore hardly secure.
47 On “God rules” for yîsrî šîl, see Noh, Personennummen, 207; 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 Os leDavid (Jerusalem, 1964), 114–118. The emendation of wayyâsâr to wayyâsir in Hos. 12:5 (cf. S. R. Driver, Genesis) is quite unnecessary. The stem vowel of šrr is u: cf. yâšôrî of Isa. 32:1; Prov. 8:16. Although there are no biblical examples of non-stative geminates with resh, the a stem vowel of wayyâsâr is probably owing to the treatment of resh as a guttural as in the verbs ḫw/y. cf. wayyâsâr (swr), wayyâsâr (sr) (but ḫwâsâr [swr]!). See Ges. 72t.
48 In addition, á is difficult not to hear in ya’âqôb–yîsrî šîl a play on ḫqôb, “twisted,” and yâšâr, “straight;” cf. Micah 2:7; 3:9 (cf. Blum, Die Komplexität, 141) and Isa. 40:4. Presumably šin is 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 naming becomes even more ironic; bent in body he is not “straight.” The rare cognomen yēšûrin certainly plays on this relationship. Other puns also become possible: šrr, “be strong” (Aramaic), but cf. šârîrî bînô 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:

| victory | divine | defeat | human |

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? On the other hand, 'ēlōhīm can certainly refer by itself to angels; cf. 32:2–4.

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 lasted. 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 Shemah, p. 1290. Jacob won it in battle. If so, Israel would be like the angelic 'ēl names in 1 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 šādār and šā'ār. Şar, "prince, ruler," is a term applied to the archangels. To be sure, it seems to be a mainly late usage (Dan. 10:13f.) but also occurs in earlier literature: Josh. 5:14 (šar gēḇā' yhwḥ) and especially Ps. 82:7: 4k'ahad hasšārām tiyyālā, a certain reference to the myth of the fallen angels; cf. Isaiah's infamous hēlēl ben ʾāḥār 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.  

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’el haqqādāš niqādāš biṣdāqā, “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?” (1 Sam. 6:20).

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.
53 The text is disturbed, but even if one follows the LXX and limits the slain to the family of Jeconiahu the point is unaffected.
If, by virtue of his victory he is "little less than god" (mē at mē ēlōhîm: Ps. 8:6), his lameness makes him only half a man. He is not only Israel, but also šārā'ā,\(^{54}\) 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:

\[ \text{blessing of thigh : disabling :: winning of name} \]

\[ \begin{cases} \text{being named} \\ \text{refusal of name} \end{cases} \]

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 \(\implies\) rescue, salvation. And the final etiology, the sign of the event, gathers up all the oppositions into this new positive framework. The gid hannâšéh, 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 mām, a defect that, if he were a priest, would disqualify him from divine service as incompatible with holiness; as animals who are šārā'ā are unfit for sacrifice (Lev. 22:23). For Arabic parallels to Jacob's hip injury, see Driver and Skinner, \textit{ad locem}. Levi Strauss says: "In mythology it is a universal character of man 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, \textit{Reader in Comparative Religion} (New York etc., 1972), 295. The link to Israel's non-autochthony is suggestive, cf. also R. Couffignal, "Jacob lutte au Jabbok," \textit{Revue Théomiste} 75 (1975), 590–91.

\(^{55}\) As Barthes says (\textit{The Struggle with the Angel}, 126) the story "lends itself to an extremely classic and almost canonical structural analysis." See the discussion in \textit{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.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{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 genre 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.

\begin{verbatim}
24 יוֹר הַר פְּלָד בֶּן יַעֲקֹב שֵׁה מִשְׁלָהוֹ
25 חֲקַק יְהֹוָה אֵל אֵל יְהֹוָה
26 לְהוֹדֵל אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ הַבֶּן

(24) On the way, at the night lodging, YHWH met him and tried to kill him.\textsuperscript{57} (25) Sipporah took a flint knife and cut off her son's foreskin. She touched it to his legs\textsuperscript{58} and said, "You are my bridegroom of blood." (26) He released him. Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood in regard to circumcision."\textsuperscript{59}

Even if all the lexical problems were solved this text would remain cryptic. It appears
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{56} Blum, \textit{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," \textit{Prooftexts} 1 (1981), 237–60.

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

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Raglayim} is either a euphemism for the genitalia or etymologically associated with them.

\textsuperscript{59} The semantic intertwining of \textit{hātān} and Arabic \textit{ḥatama}, "circumcise," is difficult to follow. Ehrlich's suggestion that the strange \textit{lammūlī} is a linguistic gloss designed to explain the unnatural sense of \textit{ḥātān}, 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 ḥātan dāmîm and the alliterations of the same or similar sounds: wayipqēshēhā—waybaqqēs, sippōrá—sîr, 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 insertion of the passage into its context. In 4:22–23 God speaks of Israel as bēnî and bēnî bēkōrî. “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 yipqēshēhā 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: ḥātan of 4:23–24 with hōtēnō of 4:18 and, especially, hambaqqîm ’et napsēkā of 4:19 and waybaqqēs hâmîtō 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 dāmîm 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

---

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 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 maṭhî 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 hâšê’îmohî, which connects directly with 4:14. The obvious Leitwörter are hâlak-tub in 4:18, 19, 21, tub alone in 4:20. In addition, the contrast of hayyîm in 4:18 and mérî 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 ‘én maqâdâm ʾâmē ʾsḥâr battâdî; cf. Rashi on 4:20.
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.