Malcolm Davies

Jacob at Beth-El and the Yabboq*

1. The Yabboq: Genesis 32.23-33

Having concluded a covenant with Laban at the cairn, Jacob, in the company of his family and possessions, moves south until he reaches the ford of the river Yabboq. There, on the eve of his encounter with his brother Esau, he wrestles with a mysterious adversary until dawn: «And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day» (Gen. 32.24). At the coming of the light of dawn the stranger says: «Let me go, for the day breaketh», but Jacob replies: «I will not let thee go, except thou bless me» (32.26-28). The blessing obtained, the stranger vanishes, and Jacob is left to call «the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved» (ib., 30).

Almost one hundred years ago, J.G. Frazer addressed «the strange adventure which befell Jacob at the passage of the river», and concluded that though «the story is obscure, and it is probable that some of its original features have been slurred over by the compilers of Genesis because they savoured of heathendom», nevertheless an original version could probably be conjectured in which «Jacob’s mysterious adversary was the spirit … of the river», and «the subtle Jacob, lying in wait, … pounce[d] out and grapple[d] with him until he had obtained the coveted blessing», perhaps having first to overcome numerous resorts to metamorphosis. The main support for this conjectural reconstruction was provided by potential parallels from Greek mythology: using his famous comparative

* The most detailed and recent treatment of Genesis’ presentation of Jacob (with full bibliography) is the monograph by Wahl, Jakobserzählungen.

1 The secondary literature on this episode is immense. For a bibliography up to c. 1980 see Westermann, Commentary, 512. More recent references in Wahl, Jakobserzählungen, 278 ff.

method. Frazer adduced Menelaus’ ambush of Proteus, Old Man of the Sea, and Peleus’ of Thetis the sea sprite. More recently, M.L. West has approved Frazer’s hypothesis, adding Heracles’ tussle with Nereus, another Old Man of the Sea.

For a long time I resisted Frazer’s hypothesis. This was firstly because the story-pattern in question extends beyond heroes ambushing water-spirits, appropriate though the latter are for their role. The demonic beings in question, who are obliged to reveal some important truth to the hero, also include, as Frazer was partly aware, such non-aquatic individuals as Phineus, or Silenus, or Chiron. Secondly and rather more importantly, when one sets them in the context of folk-tale, these beings are soon observed to be really at home only in the very earliest episodes of a hero’s quest: they participate in what has been termed a Vorabenteuer or «preliminary adventure», falling in with the hero at an early stage of his journey and supplying helpful information, or sometimes a magical agent, that speeds him to his goal. By contrast, Jacob’s encounter

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3 For a sceptical critique of which see ACKERMANN, Frazer, esp. 270 ff.
4 WEST, Helicon, 483. The hypothesis that Jacob’s adversary was originally ‘the spirit of the river’ (‘Flussdämon’) is also given sympathetic consideration by WAHL, Jakobserzählungen, 283 and 285.
5 Note also Pisander fr. 6 (where Heracles’ opponent is Oceanus) and see in general DAVIES, Stesichorus, 278. Frazer further cited Heracles’ combat with the river god Achelous, but as West (quoted in last note) sees, that is formally different, since Heracles does not need to extract help. The combat does, however, involve a river, as opposed to the other types of water-spirits compared, and that distinction is important. For it is possible, with e.g. WESTERMANN, Commentary, §16, 521, to accept the identification of Jacob’s adversary as an original river-spirit, without admitting the rest of Frazer’s hypothesis, which Westermann, indeed, reverses: he deems Jacob the victim and his adversary the aggressor trying to stop him crossing (an interpretation not available for any other examples of wrestling with a water-spirit).
6 See FORBES IRVINE, Metamorphosis, 76 ff. Norse literature provides a parallel with its prophetic mermen: see DAVIES, Aristotle, 688.
7 FRAZER, Folklore, 413 says: «water-spirits are not the only class of supernatural beings for whom men have laid wait in order to wring from them a blessing or an oracle», and proceeds to cite the case of Silenus and of Faunus and Picus, on whom see my remarks in DAVIES, Aristotle, Appendix 2.
8 On Phineus as originally a helper figure see MEULI, Odyssey, 98 ff. = Ges. Schriften, 2, 661 ff. and cfr. my remarks in DAVIES, Stesichorus, 283. On Chiron see the same article, 282 and n. 31.
9 The term originated with MEULI, Odyssey, 102 (= Ges. Schriften, 2, 664). See further my comments in DAVIES, Stesichorus, 278.
10 The notion of a magical agent derives from PROPP, Morphology, 43 f. (original Russian publication 1928, first edition of English translation 1958: for further
comes very near the end of his travels, and the blessing obtained
seems too different from the information or agent idiomatically
required. Nevertheless, even within the limits of Greek mythology, the
helper figure, or donor as he is sometimes called, is often very
effectively disguised. I have shown elsewhere that he lurks within
such initially surprising characters as Telephus or Philoctetes.
And Frazer’s approach does allow for the analogous possibility that
some of the tale’s original features have been slurred over by the
compilers of Genesis. His stress upon the adversary’s eagerness
to be gone at dawn is appropriate, given the frequent connection

details see Davies, Stesichorus, 278, n. 8), which independently reaches much the
same conclusion as Meuli (see previous note) regarding the idiomatic nature of the
hero’s encounter with a helper figure near the start of his quest. Propp, Morphology, 39 f. sees that the hero’s encounter with the helper can often take the
form of a ‘testing’ (compare Christ’s temptation by Satan, for whose relevance see
Davies, Judgements, 37 f.). This is interesting, given that Jacob’s encounter with
his adversary has sometimes been interpreted as a test: see Westermann,
Commentary, 521, itself hostile to this interpretation.
11 Compare Wahl’s carefully worded conclusion (Wahl, Jakobserzählungen,
283): ‘da der unbekannte Ringkämpfer offenbar göttliche Vollmacht hat, liegt es
nahe, dass der Dichter an eine Stellvertreter Gottes gedacht hat’.
12 Especially by Propp, Morphology (n. 10 above). See Davies, Stesichorus,
278, n. 8.
13 See Davies, Telephus, 9 f.
14 See Davies, Philoctetes, 349 f.
15 Frazer, Folklore, 412 (= Gaster, Myth, 206); cfr. n. 51 below. Wahl,
Jakobserzählungen, 285 reaches a very similar conclusion as to the attitude of the
author of this episode: ‘die mythischen Züge der Überlieferung reduziert er
soweit, dass nur noch verwischte Spuren erkennbar sind. Nur das, was unbedingt
an numinosem, mythischem Gehalt für die Szenerie nötig ist, lässt er gelten. Alles
andere wird ausgelassen’.
16 Frazer, Folklore, 411 (= Gaster, Myth, 206) compares the ghost of
Hamlet’s father (1.1.156: ‘it faded with the crowing of the cock’; cfr. ibid., 146 ff.,
i.218 ff., v. 58 and 89: for analogous superstitious see the ‘Longer Note’ on
1.1.155 in H. Jenkins’ Arden edition); Mephistopheles’ warning to Goethe’s Faust
in Part 1, final scene of the poem (v. 4600: ‘Der Morgen dämmert auf’); and
Jupiter’s words to Alcmena in Plautus Amphitryon 532 f.: cur me tenes? / tempus
est, exire ex urbe priusquam lucescat sol volo. Strangely, given his stress on the
setting of Jacob’s encounter (Frazer, Folklore, 411 = Gaster, Myth, 206: ‘It was
night, probably a moonlight ... night; for it is unlikely that with such a long train
he would have attempted to ford the river in the dark’), Frazer omits to observe
that Peleus’ ambush of Thetis occurred on a night when there was a full moon. By
the time he came to compile Appendix X, The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis to
his Loeb Apollodorus (2.383 ff.), published in 1921, he was aware that a probably
independent modern Cretan folk-tale (383, cfr. 388) involves the coming of the
between helper figures and the Otherworld or Underworld. This latter feature meshes neatly with their frequent ambivalence.

And it must be allowed that the remainder of Jacob’s career in *Genesis* reads like one vast concatenation of folk-tale features. We begin with that primeval motif the pair of contrasting brothers, Ésau the hunter and Jacob the herdsman, which issues in the tricking of the former (the stupid brother) by the smarter sibling. Jacob then goes on the archetypal quest for a bride. On arriving in the relevant land, our hero meets his bride-to-be at the spring, where she has come to fetch water. He then contracts to serve
dawn: the young man who here falls in love with a sea-nymph takes the advice of an old woman (an ancillary helper figure) and «seize[s] his darling by the hair when the hour of cock-crow was near». For nocturnal confrontation of the equivalent sea-sprite («the seal casts off its skin every ninth night») see further the tale from the Faro islands which Frazer cites on p. 386 and that from «the Pelew Islands in the Pacific» on p. 387 («one night he saw a fish come out of the sea, lay aside his tail» etc.). Additional instances of water-sprites who «must be back in the water before dawn» are given by Gaster, *Myth*, 211 and 377, n. 33, who also quotes further parallels for the more general notion that «demons … being “princes of darkness” lose their power at daybreak and must then depart».

A good example of a helper who is also a «Jenseitsfigur» would be Rumpelstiltskin: see my observations on this character in Davies, *Rumpelstiltskin*, 1ff.

See, for instance, Davies, *Rumpelstiltskin*, 6 f.

For a useful introduction to the issue of folk-tale features within the Old Testament see Hermisson, *Testament*, which cautiously concludes that there are no actual folk-tale or genuine folk-tale motifs, though there is «eine Anzahl volkstümlicher Erzähl motive» (p. 440). See further Westermann, *Commentary*, 50 ff. and Wahl, *Jakobserzählungen*, 83, 90 ff. on myth and folk-tale in the Old Testament.

See Davies, *Judgements*, 33.

Note, however, Hermisson’s warning (Hermisson, *Testament*, 423): «doch ist mit solcher Nomenklatur nicht viel gewonnen; sie mag auf novellistische Züge der Erzählungen hinweisen, vielleicht auf eine beim Erzählen zuweilen mitwirkende Absicht zu unterhalten».

Cf. Ranke, *Braut*. Folktales often envisage the simultaneous seeking of wives by brothers (cfr. Ranke, *Brüder*), so it is striking that Ésau obtains another wife (28.6 ff.) during his brother’s quest.

Laban for that characteristic folk-tale number of *seven years*\(^\text{24}\). He is momentarily thrown off balance by having the standard motif\(^\text{25}\) of «the false (or substituted) bride» used against him, but soon recovers and takes revenge with the ruse concerning the speckled goats\(^\text{26}\), a species of the trickier out-tricked\(^\text{27}\), with the younger herdsman outwitting the older\(^\text{28}\). Even Jacob’s flight and pursuit by Laban has the appearance of a watered-down version of «Der Magische Flucht»\(^\text{29}\).

However, what has decisively influenced me in my acceptance of Frazer’s interpretation, is the one episode which I have deliberately omitted from the above list. Let us now turn to examine it.

2. *Beth-El: Genesis 28.10-22*\(^\text{30}\)

Near the start of his quest for a bride – and thus, as we saw above, at exactly the right moment for an idiomatic encounter with a folk-tale helper – Jacob «went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep» (28.11). There follows the famous vision that is «Jacob’s ladder»\(^\text{31}\).

Now yet another form an encounter with a helper figure can take is that of a dream-vision. I have shown elsewhere\(^\text{32}\) that the different meetings with the Muses reported by the poet Hesiod and of the poet Archilochus are further versions of meetings with ambivalent helper figures, where the poet occupies the role of hero and his poetic career is the equivalent of a heroic quest, near the start of

\(^{24}\) For such ‘serving’ in quests see, for instance, RÖHRICH, *Dienst*. For seven as a ‘folk-tale number’ see DAVIES, *Temptress*, 608, n. 17.


\(^{26}\) On this episode see the remarks of REEVE, *Conceptions*, 85 ff.

\(^{27}\) Rumplestiltskin’s story again supplies a good instance of this pattern: see DAVIES, *Rumpelstiltskin*, 10.

\(^{28}\) See HERMISSON, *Testament*, 423.

\(^{29}\) See, for instance, PUCHER, *Flucht*. As he points out, the pursuer in such cases is usually the father, and the pursued ‘ein Liebespaar’. Cfr. AARNE, THOMPSON, *Types*, No. 13: «The girl as helper in the hero’s flight».

\(^{30}\) For a recent examination of this passage see WAHL, *Jakobserzählungen*, 267 ff.

\(^{31}\) On this and in particular its indebtedness to Egyptian and Babylonian prototypes see WAHL, *Jakobserzählungen*, 275 f. and nn. 149 ff.

\(^{32}\) See DAVIES, *Judgements*, 42 ff.
which the significant encounter with a numinous being occurs.
Solomon’s dream in *Kings* subserves a similar function.33 Dreams
most naturally occur, of course, at night, and those of Hesiod and
Archilochus have been guessed34 to occur at mid-night: «noch
mehr als der Mittag gilt die Mitternacht als eine unheimliche,
befremdende Zeit», as one scholar has put it35. Perhaps the same
was originally true of both the numinous experiences undergone by
Jacob36. Menelaus’ encounter with Proteus occurs at mid-day,37 the
other liminal and transitional period of the twenty-four hour cycle
(and, perhaps more to the point, an obvious time for siesta in the
burning Mediterranean heat).

The mention of stones in the Genesis narrative is also significant,
and not merely because of the sequel in which Jacob «took the
stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it for a pillar, and
poured oil upon the top of it» (28.18). Archilochus’ vision of the
Muses took place near the town of Lissides, the etymology of
whose name has been taken to conjure up a stoney landscape.38
Christ’s encounter with Satan in the New Testament can also be
shown to belong to the cycle of stories here considered and it pre-
supposes a stoney wilderness as background.39 Uninhabited
wilderness is the locale *par excellence* of numinous encounters of
the kind Jacob undergoes.

Even Macbeth’s meeting with the three weird sisters transpires, on
investigation, to be another such numinous encounter with ambiva-
 lent helpers,41 and it takes place to the appropriate background of a
«blasted heath» (1.iii.77), that is a blighted landscape. But what I
really bring in Macbeth’s case for, is the sequel to the meeting. When
these ambivalent helpers disappear, Banquo exclaims (1.iii.79 f.):

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33 See Davies, *Judgements*, 40 ff.
36 Dream-visions are, by definition, experienced by the hero when he is alone; and more often than not the helper-figure encounters a *solitary* hero (cfr. Davies, *Aristaeus*). This may explain Jacob’s being ‘left alone’ at Gen. 32.24, prior to the fight.
38 See Müller, *Archilochos*, 104, and my article (n. 34).
39 See my article (n. 34).
40 See my article (n. 34).
41 See Davies, *Judgements*, 33.
42 See my article (n. 34).
«The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them. – Whither are they vanish’d?». To which Macbeth immediately replies: «Into the air; and what seem’d corporal, / Melted as breath into the wind. Would they had stay’d!». This is an eloquent reminder that wonder and amazement are the idiom response to such encounters, to the disappearance of the numinous beings, but also to the contents of their prophecies. One may talk in terms of kata-plexis, especially since the equivalent participle kataplagevnta is used of Archilochus’ reaction at the termination of his vision of the Muses. Perfectly at home, then, is Jacob’s response upon awakening (28.16-17): «“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not”». And he was afraid, and said “How dreadful is this place!”». Westermann’s commentary ad loc. observes «Jacob’s reaction of shock to his dream» and his «fear of the holiness of the place», and uses the term «tremendum (awe-inspiring)» of the overall effect.

As we have seen, the whole episode ends with Jacob setting up and anointing a sacred stone. It has been pointed out that «a common type of "god sent" dream, in Greece and elsewhere, is the dream which prescribes a dedication or other religious act», and although the present dream does not explicitly command this, the act is there nonetheless.

**Conclusion**

On any interpretation there is a parallelism between the two episodes here considered, both of which terminate with Jacob naming a place and claiming to have seen God there. My specific argument here is that the episodes of Jacob at Beth-El and at the Yabboq are doublets, both representing an original scheme wherein the hero experienced a ‘preliminary adventure’ with a numinous demon or helper figure. The Beth-El episode is more logically placed, standing as it does, where it should, near the beginning of Jacob’s quest

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43 See the observations by **MÜLLER, Archilochoslegende**, 107 ff. and my article (n. 34).
44 See **MÜLLER, Archilochoslegende**, 107 ff., and my article (n. 34).
45 **WESTERMANN, Commentary**, 457 and 460.
46 On this and ancient Greek analogues see **BURKERT, Mythology**, 42 and 162.
for a bride. It takes the familiar form of a dream-vision in which the helper gives prophetic\textsuperscript{48} information (13 ff.: «the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth» etc.). Less suitably placed, the encounter at the ford nevertheless still preserves vestiges\textsuperscript{49} of the ambush of the knowledgeable demon by a hero who needs his help. In neither episode is the basic kernel of the story pattern, the actual aid supplied, particularly clear. At Yabboq, indeed, a general and ill-defined blessing is all the hero bears away with him (together with a limp)\textsuperscript{50}. But this is largely to be explained, with Frazer, in terms of the «slurring over» of the original folk-tale motivation, «by the compilers of Genesis»\textsuperscript{51}.

P.J. Milne, Владимир Попп и исследование структуры в иудейской библейской повести, Bible and Literature Series 13, Sheffield 1988, 126 ff. provides a summary and critique of attempts by Roland Barthes and others to apply Proppian theories to the story of Jacob at the Yabboq in a way different from the present article.

\textsuperscript{48} For prophecies from the helper as sometimes taking the place of concrete aid see Propp, Morphology, 120 and 129. Carl Jung's interesting essay The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales (for details of original publication see Davies, Aristaeus, 63, n. 34) observes that the old man who often features as helper can appear in dreams or visions (Collected Works, 9.i.215 f., 218) and that «the figure of the superior and helpful old man tempts one to connect him somehow or other with God» (225 f.).

\textsuperscript{49} Wahl, Jakobserzählungen, 283.

\textsuperscript{50} Scholars have variously identified in this laming of Jacob the establishment of some sort of balance between the benefit conferred by the blessing and the physical disability (permanent or not). It may, then, be appropriate to recall the ambivalence of the folk-tale helper figure (see n. 18 above); an example of this ambivalence has been detected in the Muses' treatment of various bards, blinding them but simultaneously conferring the power of song: for Muses as ambivalent helpers see further Davies, Temptress, 610, n. 38.

\textsuperscript{51} Precisely what Frazer means by this expression can be gauged by other passages in his book, especially the following (2.394): «a comparison of early Hebrew traditions with their Babylonian counterparts enables us to appreciate how carefully the authors or editors of Genesis have pruned away the grotesque and extravagant elements of legend and myth … In their handiwork we can trace the same fine literary instinct which has similarly purified the Homeric poems from many gross and absurd superstitions, which, though they bear plain marks of an antiquity far greater than that of Homer, are known to us only through writings of much later ages». Cfr. Gaster, Myth, xxxiii on ‘suppression’: «there are also cases in which details of the older stories have been deliberately suppressed in order to accommodate the whole to a new outlook». See further, e.g., Kaiser, Einleitung, Engl tr., 48 (cfr. 90) on such ‘aversion to mythology’, or Wolff, Anthropologie, Engl. tr., 102 ff. on the ‘demythologising of death’. Cfr. Griffin, Homer, xv on the links between Homer and the Old Testament, and his Index s.v. Bible.
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