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# Recent Literary Structuralist Approaches to Biblical Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

JOHN ROGERSON

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STRUCTURALIST INTERPRETATION of the Bible is a new and growing feature of the current scene in biblical studies. The seventh congress of the International Organisation for the Study of the Old Testament, which met in Uppsala in 1971, had some discussion of the topic,<sup>2</sup> and 1971 also saw the publication of two symposia in French, in which Roman Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars discussed their differing approaches to the Bible with French literary structuralists.<sup>3</sup> Two years earlier, P. Beauchamp had published an important structuralist work on the first chapter of Genesis, *Création et séparation*,<sup>4</sup> while in Germany Ehrhardt Güttgemans had been advocating 'generative poetics' as a basis for New Testament interpretation.<sup>5</sup> One could also cite numerous articles, including those of Edmund Leach, in which Lévi-Strauss's structuralist interpretation of myths was applied to parts of the Old Testament (Leach's first article appearing in 1961).<sup>6</sup> Most significantly, the April 1974 number of *Interpretation* was wholly devoted to structuralist interpretation, although it must be said that the contributors seemed to make little attempt at achieving maximum intelligibility!<sup>7</sup>

The present article, which is based on a public lecture, does aim to be as intelligible as possible about structuralist interpretations of the Bible. It assumes that readers know little or nothing about structuralism, and for this reason, will probably appear to be very elementary to those who are familiar with structuralism in linguistics, or in, say, English and French literary studies. It is not my aim in the article to commend structuralist approaches to biblical interpretation, since, as will emerge, I have reservations about them. Rather, the article stems from my belief that the attractiveness of structuralism in some quarters comes from a dissatisfaction with some of the methods of biblical scholarship which have served us for many years. I partly share these dissatisfactions, and it is my opinion that structuralist approaches may help us to understand some of our old methods more clearly, and will

raise important wider questions about them. At the same time, I fear that there could be an irrational landslide towards structuralist interpretations, and that could only be bad for biblical studies in my opinion, for reasons that will be stated.

Before I give some typical examples of structuralist interpretation, it might be useful to state wherein they differ principally from the more familiar methods of biblical studies. For a long time now, biblical interpretation has been particularly concerned with *intentions* and *origins*. What was the original liturgical use of a given psalm in the worship of ancient Israel? What was a prophet's intention in his particular situation when he uttered a given oracle? What original settings can we find in the life of ancient Israel or the early Church for a particular tradition or parable? There can be no doubt that the attempts to answer such questions have immensely enriched our understanding of the Bible, and there can be no question of abandoning such methods of enquiry. At the same time, even the most ardent advocate of such methods will agree that they are often hypothetical and involve circular reasoning. In some cases, there is little else with which to reconstruct the background to a text other than the text itself; or the procedure is impossible to verify, as in the attempt to discover from the text of Genesis 1 a 'deed account' which was subsequently supplemented by a 'word account' and other aspects of the framework of the passage as we now have it.<sup>8</sup> Structuralists accuse scholars who proceed in this way of interpreting the text by the source.<sup>9</sup> They denounce form- and traditio-historical methods as too hypothetical, and, in turn, they concentrate on interpreting the extant text in its own right, and in the light of its own forms and structures. Further, they make no attempt to discover the original intention of a prophet, compiler or editor, and would tend to regard this as irrelevant, as well as too uncertain and uncontrollable. Structuralist interpretation seems to claim, then, that it is objective in the sense that it interprets what we have actually got, as opposed to conjectural 'earlier' or 'original' forms, and it gets away from intentionalism.<sup>10</sup>

In turning now to illustrate some structuralist approaches to biblical interpretation, it must be recognised that in fact there are several types of structuralism, with varying theoretical bases. At the simplest level, there is the type of structuralism that looks for literary patterns in biblical narratives. A recent attempt along these lines, in S. McEvenue's *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*,<sup>11</sup> tries to show the presence in the Priestly source of the Pentateuch of numerous literary devices, including Palistrophe, the device in which the thought or argument flows and ebbs according to a pattern that can be described as a b c d e e d c b a. Against what was said in the preceding paragraph, this approach does try to understand the intention of the author or editor better, but the enterprise is based more on the attempt to discover patterns *within* the text, than on the reconstruction of 'earlier'

forms of narrative which are then compared with the final text. McEvenue's approach obviously runs the danger that the investigator will 'discover' patterns merely by being anxious to do so, and in such a treatment, one cannot always be sure that the material has been handled fairly.

This type of approach, however, is of less importance than those methods that are based in their different ways on the revolution in linguistics that was brought about by the publication in 1916 of F. de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*.<sup>13</sup> Whatever de Saussure meant to say (for the *Course* was compiled from papers after the author's death, and research into his writings, some still unpublished, continues),<sup>13</sup> the *Course* had the effect of focussing attention on language as a *system* which underlies the speech acts of individuals. In turn, the concentration upon language as a *system* led linguists to define meaning in terms of relationships within the system. To give a simple example, in the two phrases 'the bride trod on her train' and 'the bride got on her train', the different meanings of the word 'train' are communicated to the reader or hearer by the relationship of the word 'train' to the other words in the phrases. It ought to be possible to describe how the meaning of 'train' is thus affected by the other words, and so part of the structuralist endeavour is directed towards describing the relations between elementary sounds, words, and groups of words, which help to contribute to meaning in a speech act.<sup>14</sup> Now, literary texts can be likened to speech acts. They consist of language, and underlying them is language as a system that can be investigated and described. If it is possible to understand a simple speech act in terms of an underlying system of language, it ought to be possible to do the same for a literary text. Moreover, if meaning can be defined in terms of the relationships between the items in a simple piece of speech, it might be possible to apply the same sort of investigation to a literary text, and to see its 'meaning' in terms of the items which it contains. This last point is a 'way in' so to speak, to the structural treatment of literary texts.

In biblical studies, an excellent example of this sort of procedure is Beauchamp's discussion of Genesis 1.<sup>15</sup> Beauchamp unhesitatingly affirms that the 'meaning' of Genesis 1 is to be sought in the structural relations in the passage itself, and he sets out what these relations are. In Genesis 1 there are ten 'words' of creation, that is, ten instances of the phrase 'God said . . .'.<sup>16</sup> If the narrative is divided into two parts, each part containing five words of creation, it is found that the first half (verses 1-19) contains 207 words and the second half (verses 20-Ch. 2: 1) 206 words. Beauchamp maintains that day four, with the creation of the luminaries, is the climax of the first half, and that the purpose that the luminaries are said to have, namely, to rule over the day and night (Gen. 1: 18) corresponds to the command to man in the second half that he should rule over other creatures. But the

luminaries also mark the passage of time for man, and direct him to the seventh or sabbath day, when he worships the Creator of the universe. The whole section begins with the words 'heaven and earth' (Gen. 1: 1) and ends with the words 'heaven and earth and all their host' (Gen. 2: 1).<sup>17</sup> The passage thus has a structure which can be described, and which provides us, in the relations which obtain in the structure, with meaning.

The reader may well ask at this point whether the writer or editor of Genesis 1 *intended* the structure to be there. Did he deliberately cast his account of creation so? As I understand it, the structuralist would regard the question as missing the point of what he was trying to do. Analysis that depends on the investigation of language as a *system* underlying speech acts or texts is not concerned with intentions. Whatever might be the structural relations used to describe the items in the different phrases 'the bride got on her train', 'the bride trod on her train' we do not *intend* them. In the same way, the literary structuralist can point to relations within a text, without having to consider whether they are intended.

My next, and perhaps most important example of structural interpretation is taken from the exegesis by Roland Barthes<sup>18</sup> of Genesis 32: 22ff., with the help of the diagram on p. 13. By way of introduction, it should be said that Barthes is partly influenced by the work of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, and by the French critic A. J. Greimas, as well as being a formidable contributor himself to French structuralism and literary criticism.<sup>19</sup> If we remember that the work of F. de Saussure led scholars to investigate language as a *system*, we can say that Propp and Greimas have looked for system in the analysis of texts. Propp's book, *Morphology of the Folktale*,<sup>20</sup> first published in Russian in 1928 but not generally known in the west until it was translated into more accessible languages after the second World War, sought to demonstrate that underlying the Russian folktale was a system of functions, in which the relations between the hero, villain, prisoner, etc. could be expressed in terms of simple formulae. Greimas<sup>21</sup> has extended this sort of analysis, showing an interest in the *sequence* of a narrative, and in the relations of the actors, the latter giving rise to his *actantial* analysis (and see the bottom of the diagram). In his treatment of Genesis 32: 22ff., Barthes undertakes several types of analysis, but what is illustrated in the diagram is principally his sequential analysis—the analysis based on the plan of the verbs and sequences.

The incident of Jacob's wrestling has long presented an invitation to interpreters to look behind the text for its 'original form' so that the growth of the story can be reconstructed, and theories about the original form, most of them plausible, abound. The story has been variously explained as originating in a cult aetiology preserved at the sanctuary of Penuel, an explanation of why Israelites do not eat the

sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, a folktale of a supernatural being who must return to heaven (or hell) before dawn, a folktale about a wrestling match with a river demon, a name-aetiology explaining the name 'Israel', a story originally about a fight between Jacob and Esau, and a pun on the Hebrew words for 'Jabbok' and 'wrestle'. It is difficult to see how *all* of these theories about the original form of the story can be right, and though plausible, they all represent nothing more than intelligent guesses. The structuralist will probably be impatient with them, and say that they are typical of the highly speculative nature of so-called form- or tradition-criticism.

The structural analysis of this text by Roland Barthes begins by trying to exploit what is, to usual biblical commentators, an embarrassment. Even from the RV translation of verses 22-24a, an ambiguity can be discerned. Does 'passed over' in v. 22 mean that Jacob *and* his retinue passed over, or does it mean (see 'sent over' v. 23) that he caused *them* to pass over, while he himself remained on the side that they had first reached? Commentators usually solve the problem by assigning the verses to different literary sources, or by bracketing certain words as glosses, thus removing the ambiguity.<sup>22</sup> But Barthes is concerned to analyse the text as we have it, and he does so according to the view that a text can have many structures, and that they may all be considered; there is to be no subordination of structures to a dominant 'centre' or main approach. Thus under (1) *The Crossing*, Barthes sets out both possibilities. If Jacob wrestled *before* crossing the river, the story is an 'ordeal' story, where the hero has to prove himself in his quest. If he *did* pass over, there is a contrast between resting (v. 24a) and moving (i.e. the fight) which symbolises a stage of spiritual renewal before the next stage of the journey.

Under (2) *The Struggle*, Barthes notes the obscurity of the identity of Jacob's opponent, and the paradox that the apparent loser is the victor, and vice versa. These two points give the story a peculiar quality, which theologians may try to express the immanence and transcendence of the divine. (3) *The Naming* is very interesting. Verses 29f. seem to be the counterpart of verses 27f. Jacob cannot know God's name, and his question is answered only in so far as a sanctuary, a place where God can be known, gets a name. Thus the partial lack of symmetry between the structures indicates something unique about the divine.

In the actantial analysis, Barthes uses a method particularly associated with the work of Greimas, which produces the very unusual result that the Originator of the quest and the Opponent of the hero are both God, thus signifying a 'scandalous' view of God. It is also unusual that the Subject and the Person to whom the quest is directed should be the same. We should note in passing, however, that these 'unusual features' may be nothing more than an indication that for this particular text, actantial analysis simply will not work!

Whatever its defects this piece of interpretation reveals some, though not all, of the attractions mentioned earlier, that structural analysis can have. First, it is objective in the sense of being based entirely on the text itself, and not on some unverifiable source or earlier form of the story lying behind the text. It does not interpret the text by the 'source'. Second, and really only amplifying the first point, it interprets what the first and subsequent Hebrew readers of the text read; or put theologically, it interprets the canonical text. Third, it makes no attempt to discover the original intention of the author or editor of the story. Fourth, it draws attention to details that commentators otherwise usually ignore, or explain away (e.g. vv. 22-24).

Barthes himself is extremely modest in the claims that he makes for what he has done. He does not claim that his interpretation is 'scientific' or even that it can be said to be based on the application of 'rules' to the text. This admission is bound to coincide with the suspicion that the reader may have, that Barthes' interpretation is due as much to his particular literary 'flair' as to anything else, and that previous acquaintance with the story, and with the Old Testament claims about the uniqueness of Israel have affected his presentation. In favour of what Barthes has done, I must say that without having specially ransacked the commentaries on this point, I do not remember seeing anywhere the point about the contrast between the naming of Jacob and the non-naming of God made so forcefully as with the help of Barthes' approach; and similarly, I do not remember seeing the point about the victory of the vanquished made so clearly. But for all this, and the modesty of Barthes' claims, we must not lose sight of the fact that what is being assumed in this and the structuralist interpretation of Beauchamp, is that 'meaning' can be elicited from the relations between items in the text, and it is to an assessment of this claim that we must now turn.

In what follows immediately, I must express my indebtedness to Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*,<sup>33</sup> a book which has helped me to understand more clearly, doubts that I have published about claims made for their interpretations by Lévi-Strauss and Leach,<sup>34</sup> and doubts that I have privately entertained about the work of Barthes, Greimas and Beauchamp; Culler's argument centres on what is known as 'linguistic competence', and here again, there must be some explanation for the benefit of those unfamiliar with modern linguistics. When a native speaker of English is faced with the two now famous phrases 'colourless green ideas sleep furiously' and 'the shooting of the hunters'<sup>35</sup> he knows at once that the first phrase is nonsense and that the second is ambiguous, meaning either that the hunters were shot or that they shot somebody. If we ask *how* the native speaker of English knows these things, the strict answer is that we do not know, although there are several theories about this. However, such theories belong strictly to the realms of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, and the

linguist pure and simple does not try to answer the question, but assumes that the native speaker possesses a linguistic competence (however he came by it) that enables him to determine that a phrase is meaningless or ambiguous, or meaningful. The linguist *assumes* linguistic competence, and sets out to describe it, to make generalisations about what it does in practice, and even in some cases to formulate rules about it. At almost every point in linguistic description, the presence of the native speaker is vital. In phonetics, we rely on the native speaker to tell us that what makes the difference in meaning between 'pin' and 'bin' lies in the difference between p and b; for it would be theoretically possible for p and b to make no difference to the meaning, and for the difference between the two words to depend on some subtle distinction in the pronunciation of the 'n'. Again, in the two phrases 'the bride got on her train', 'the bride trod on her train', the native speaker knows at once that the two trains are different, and this fact then enables the descriptive linguist to look for features in the 'system' by which he could describe the effect on 'train' of the other items which surround it. It could be objected at this point that in dealing with a dead language, such as Classical Greek or Biblical Hebrew, we have no native speakers available. This is true, but just as it is possible for us to begin to acquire linguistic competence in a foreign language, so that we readily know when 'temps' in French means 'time' and when it means 'weather', so we can, with the help of lexicons, concordances and other modes of study and reading, acquire some sort of linguistic competence in a dead language, though with regard to these, there will always be areas where the evidence that exists is insufficient to fix the meaning of a word in a given context beyond dispute."

Linguistic competence, then, that intuitive response of the native speaker to an utterance, or that more laboriously acquired competence in a foreign or dead language, is the necessary pre-requisite for the structural description of language. The main problem about the structural description of a literary text, is that there exists no such thing as a *literary* competence, which is to a literary text as linguistic competence is to a brief utterance. We cannot read a poem to a native speaker of English, expect an immediate response from him as to its meaning, and then set about describing in general terms the competence that his response exhibits. We all know well that when we were faced with a Shakespeare play for the first time at school, we were probably at a loss to know what it was all about; and this was not only because it was in a form of English that was strange to us. We just did not know how to read it. There was certainly no literary competence that we possessed that enabled us to judge its meaning in an instant.

All structuralist interpretations of *texts*, then, which use the analogy of Saussurian linguistics, are really using a false analogy. If a linguist tries to assert that 'colourless green ideas sleep furiously' *does* have a



meaning, and if he exhibits this meaning on the basis of relations between the items that make up the phrase, there remains the native speaker of English who will simply laugh him out of court. But there is no such control in the case of structural interpretations of texts; even if there were native speakers of Biblical Hebrew available for consultation, they would probably be able to make no judgment as to whether Beauchamp had discovered *a* or *the* correct meaning of Genesis 1. It therefore seems to me that while such structuralist interpretations may be interesting and suggestive, if they make claims to objectivity on the basis of the analogy with the structural description of short phrases of speech, then this claim to objectivity must be rejected. It is for this reason that I said at the beginning that if there were to be a landslide towards structuralist interpretation in biblical studies, this would be a bad thing. It would open the door to a method where *lack* of a control would possibly produce far more excesses than the circularity of which form- and redaction-criticism is accused.

But if there is no such thing as an 'intuitive' literary competence corresponding to our linguistic competence, this is not to say that there can be no such thing as literary competence at all. Culler is insistent that when literary texts are written, there underlie them what he calls certain 'enabling conventions'. It is possible to learn how to read Shakespeare, and literatures in foreign languages, which is why university departments of English and French literature exist and have students. Culler believes that it may also be possible to try to generalise about the literary competence that experts have gained, just as the descriptive linguist generalises about linguistic competence, and he believes that such generalisation would help us to understand and better acquire literary competence. What he believes to be impossible is the acquisition of a method for discovering a final or absolute meaning of a text. Several quotations will illustrate how he views the relation of literary competence to the meaning of a text:

The meaning of a poem within the institution of literature is not, one might say, the immediate and spontaneous reaction of individual readers but the meaning that they are willing to accept as both plausible and justifiable when they are explained (p. 124).

What requires explanation is not the text itself so much as the possibility of reading and interpreting the text . . . (p. 127).

Reading is not an innocent activity. It is charged with artifice, and to refuse to study one's modes of reading is to neglect a principal source of information about literary activity (p. 129).

How could all this affect the study of the Bible? I discuss this under two headings: a theory of reading and a theory of signs.

*A theory of reading*

IN his discussion of Lévi-Strauss, Culler notes that Lévi-Strauss is trying to discover what certain myths might mean in relation to 'the global system of myths'. Culler comments: 'In this respect his project is as justifiable as that of a modern critic who does not attempt to reconstruct the meaning a poem might have had for a sixteenth-century audience but explores the meanings it can have now, within a greatly enriched institution of literature.' Culler goes on to say, however, that whereas there are educational and literary institutions which maintain and enlarge the understanding and reading of literature, the same cannot be said about myths. To quote him again, 'we know how to read literature but do not know how to read myths . . . to discover how poetry works we must think about how we read poems; for that we have evidence, but we know little about how to read myths' (pp. 50-51).

Could we substitute the Bible where Culler has used the word 'myths'?<sup>27</sup> Would it be fair to say 'we do not know how to read the Bible'? With regard to some parts of the Bible, this would be quite untrue. In the case of the so-called Wisdom Literature, and especially a book like Proverbs, we can read it in the light of comparable literature from the ancient Near East, and understand it as an instance of a wider class of writing. Again, in the case of books like Daniel, we can learn something about the 'enabling conventions' of what we call 'apocalyptic'. It would be fair, though, to say that although we know much about the individual items which might make up a prophetic book, we do not know how to read a prophetic book as a whole; and the same could be said for parts of the Pentateuch. At the moment, I am speaking about the matter from the scholar's point of view. So far as the student is concerned, the position may be much less clear. The standard 'Introductions to the Literature of the Old Testament' often tell students something about the individual literary forms which can be found in the Old Testament—lament, messenger formula, law speech and so on, but I know of no 'Introduction' which among other things suggests to the student how he might *read* the Old Testament. Perhaps this accounts for the common experience of examiners in the Old Testament, that the content of the Old Testament is often less well known than the critical theories about it.

It might well be argued that it would be useless to try to discover 'enabling conventions' behind the prophetic books, or parts of the Pentateuch, or a book like 1 Samuel, because in their final form these works are haphazard compositions from the hands of 'scissors-and-paste' editors; and one would have to respect that view if it were strongly and convincingly maintained. My guess is, however, that in some areas of the Old Testament, we have simply not thought about enabling conventions, nor asked whether it would be useful to attempt

to construct a theory of reading. We have gone on using the Bible as material for reconstructing entities that lie beyond it, such as the history of Israel or the origins of Christianity, and although we have not rested there, we have given far more guidance in how to use the Bible as a means to an end, and not sufficient on how to read it as an end in itself.

Structuralist approaches to biblical interpretation, by their concentration on the text as we have it, and by their use of quasi-literary techniques, will have been of value if they do nothing more than make us face up to the question of whether there can be literary competence in respect of reading the Bible, and surely nothing but good can come if we can think about how we read it, and in so doing, make it easier for others to read it. In 1971, the German scholar Wolfgang Richter in his *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft*<sup>29</sup> outlined for discussion a programme for a theory of interpreting the Old Testament as literature, and his method was based by analogy on the analysis of the various levels of language in structural linguistics. His, it must be said, is a complex theory embedded in an even more complex book; but it may be a sign of things to come. One should also note here the work of L. A. Schökel.<sup>30</sup>

### *A theory of signs*

WHAT I have just said about a theory of reading assumes a study of the Bible that should be open to all readers, regardless of their faith or lack of it. But it is not, of course, possible, to separate entirely a theory of reading from a theory of signs. The Bible is the possession of a believing community which claims that the words or literature of the Bible point beyond themselves to a transcendent reality. Throughout most of its history, theology operated with a theory of how the text related to these realities. We can cite St. Augustine's work *De Magistro* written shortly after his conversion, or Hans Frei's description of Calvin's view of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as 'the effective rendering of God and his real world to the reader by way of the (biblical) text's appropriate depiction of the intercourse of that God and that world, engaging the reader's mind, heart, and activity'.<sup>30</sup> Since the end of the eighteenth century, I think that it is fair to say that in Protestantism biblical scholars have had no real theory of the relation between the text and the transcendent realities to which it is believed to refer.<sup>31</sup>

The structuralist interpretation of the Bible has raised this question anew. Within Saussurian linguistics, there has been great interest in 'semiotics'—the theory of how things signify, and one view is that of the closed nature of the world of signs—the view that meaning is a question of relations within a system, and that it is not necessary to ask how the

signs within the system are related to the 'real' world.<sup>21</sup> In the symposium *Exégèse et herméneutique*, Paul Ricoeur recognised that the structuralist view of the closed world of signs was a challenge to Christian claims about the Bible.<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur would seek a solution in the following way: he starts from the proposition 'I am, therefore I speak', argues that underlying speaking is being, and with the help of Heidegger and other 'phenomenologists' seeks to relate the text to 'being'.

Whatever we may think of this use of a philosophical tradition that is possibly strange to many, it has to be admitted that the discussion about the status of religious language has been an important one in philosophical circles in Britain in recent years. What is disappointing is that biblical scholars, who are concerned with a text that is full of religious language, seem to have played so little part in all this; and on the other hand, the theories of writers like Ian Ramsey,<sup>23</sup> so far as I am concerned, have provided virtually no help to a biblical scholar who would have welcomed some light on how to regard the religious language of the Bible. But perhaps structuralism, and what flows from it, is beginning to change all this. Michel van Esbroeck, a Catholic scholar, has recently advocated, for structuralist reasons, something like a return to the four-fold exegesis of the pre-Reformation church.<sup>24</sup>

I must confess that I understand some of the points made in the final part of this article only imperfectly, and that in some cases, I do not see clearly what the way ahead might be. But I trust that some readers will have been informed about the nature of structuralist interpretation of the Bible, and that others will have sensed that whatever may come from these approaches, they may be an indication of new stirrings in the field of biblical studies which, with the help of careful and patient thought, may shed new light upon an old text.

#### *Genesis 32: 22-32*

(22) And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two handmaids, and his eleven children, and passed over the ford of Jabbok. (23) And he took them over the stream, and sent over that he had. (24) And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. (25) And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. (26) And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. (27) And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. (28) And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed. (29) And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. (30) And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for, said he, I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. (31) And the sun rose upon him as he passed over Peniel,

and he halted upon his thigh. (32) Therefore the children of Israel eat not the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day; because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

### 1. *The Crossing*

	did not himself pass over	wrestling,	passed over (v. 31)
'passed over' (v. 22)		naming	
	passed over himself		continued (v. 31)

### 2. *The Struggle*

- (a) Obscurity of v. 25 (unspecified 'he' and 'him'). The passage does not say that Jacob wrestled with God, though this can be inferred from v. 28.
- (b) Paradox that in the struggle, the possessor of the secret art does not win, and that the weaker, and defeated (?) Jacob is the victor. Jacob is 'marked' thus perhaps signifying the special position of Israel over against the other nations (perhaps symbolised by Esau, whom Jacob is preparing to meet).

### 3. *The Naming*

God questions J.	J. replies directly	J. gets new name
v. 27	v. 27	v. 28
J. questions God	God replies indirectly	?
v. 29	v. 29	
		Penuel gets new name
		v. 30

#### ACTANTIAL ANALYSIS

Subject of the quest	— Jacob	Object of the quest	— crossing the river
Originator of quest	— God	Person to whom quest is directed	— Jacob
Opponent	— God	Helper	— Jacob

Source: R. Barthes in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique* (Ed. F. Bovon) 1971.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a public lecture delivered at St. Mary's College, St. Andrews, in November 1975. It also profited from James Barr's 'Reading the Bible as Literature' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 56, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 22, Leiden, 1972, pp. 113-142.

<sup>3</sup> F. Bovon (ed.) *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique*, Neuchâtel, 1971; X. Léon-Dufour (ed.) *Exégèse et herméneutique*, Paris, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> P. Beauchamp, *Création et séparation*, Paris, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> E. Güttgemans, *Studia Linguistica Neo-testamentica*, Munich, 1971, pp. 184ff.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. E. Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*, London, 1969. In the present article, I do not discuss the interpretations of Leach and Lévi-Strauss.

- <sup>7</sup> See my *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*, Berlin, 1974, pp. 101-127.
- <sup>8</sup> *Interpretation*, Vol. 28, 1974.
- <sup>9</sup> See especially Werner H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967.<sup>2</sup>
- <sup>10</sup> See Beauchamp's criticisms of Schmidt, *op. cit.*, Introduction, and pp. 103-112.
- <sup>11</sup> On 'intentionalism', see James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, London, 1973, pp. 61, 63-64.
- <sup>12</sup> S. E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, Rome, 1971.
- <sup>13</sup> F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Lausanne and Paris, 1916.
- <sup>14</sup> See E. F. K. Koerner, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Braunschweig, 1973, pp. 213ff.
- <sup>15</sup> Cp. G. Leech, *Semantics*, Harmondsworth, 1974, Ch. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-123.
- <sup>17</sup> Verses 2, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29. Early Jewish interpretation asserted that the world was created by ten utterances (Mishnah, *Aboth* 5: 1, B. Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 32a), although opinions differed about their identification in the biblical text.
- <sup>18</sup> It can be reasonably asked why Beauchamp stops at 2: 1 and not 2: 4a, the normal terminus of the Priestly account. Perhaps Beauchamp would reply that the question missed the point of his enterprise.
- <sup>19</sup> *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique*, pp. 27-39.
- <sup>20</sup> For introductory works by Barthes in English see *Writing Degree Zero*, London, 1967; *Elements of Semiology*, London, 1967.
- <sup>21</sup> V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, Texas, 1968.<sup>2</sup>
- <sup>22</sup> A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*, Paris, 1966, pp. 172ff.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, the discussion of J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, Edinburgh, 1910, p. 408. Skinner concludes: 'either the narrative is defective at this point, or it is written without a clear conception of the actual circumstances'.
- <sup>24</sup> J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, London, 1975.
- <sup>25</sup> See note 6.
- <sup>26</sup> These two examples are taken from N. Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, The Hague, 1957.
- <sup>27</sup> See J. Lyons, *Structural Semantics*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 95-96.
- <sup>28</sup> I am not, of course, asserting that the Bible is 'myth' or 'mythical'; only that what Culler says about reading myths may also be applicable to the Bible.
- <sup>29</sup> W. Richter, *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft*, Göttingen, 1971.
- <sup>30</sup> E.g. 'Hermeneutics in the Light of Language and Literature', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 25, 1963, pp. 371-386.
- <sup>31</sup> H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, New Haven, 1974, pp. 24-25. See also T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Michigan, 1971, pp. 49-68.
- <sup>32</sup> See James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, pp. 91ff. for a discussion of what he calls 'referential meaning'.
- <sup>33</sup> *Exégèse et herméneutique*, p. 306.
- <sup>34</sup> I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, London, 1967.
- <sup>35</sup> M. von Esbroeck, *Herméneutique, structuralisme et exégèse*, Paris, 1968.