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► **To cite this version:**

Carlotta Santini. Jacob's Fight with the Angel. Interpretative Patterns and Pious Embarrassments. *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, 2024, 2024 – 1, Mythical Narratives in Comparative European Literature / Le récit mythique dans la littérature européenne comparée (7), pp.113-127. 10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16970-3.p.0113 . hal-04564885

HAL Id: hal-04564885

<https://ens.hal.science/hal-04564885>

Submitted on 30 Apr 2024

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CLASSIQUES
GARNIER

SANTINI (Carlotta), « Jacob's Fight with the Angel. Interpretative Patterns and Pious Embarrassments », *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, n° 7, 2024 – 1, *Mythical Narratives in Comparative European Literature / Le récit mythique dans la littérature européenne comparée*

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16970-3.p.0113](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16970-3.p.0113)

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SANTINI (Carlotta), « Jacob's Fight with the Angel. Interpretative Patterns and Pious Embarrassments »

RÉSUMÉ – Cet article analyse un cas d'étude précis, le mythologème de la "lutte avec l'Ange" (Gen., 32), et ses diverses interprétations par les mythologues germanophones à la fin du dix-huitième et au début du dix-neuvième siècles. En particulier, sur certaines interprétations qui ont ramené les figures du mythe à des schémas épistémologiques et cognitifs et qui ont développé une forme d'interprétation psychologique de l'épisode biblique.

MOTS-CLÉS – mythe, psychologie, Bible, Jacob, Ange

SANTINI (Carlotta), « Le combat de Jacob avec l'ange. Modèles interprétatifs et embarras pieux »

ABSTRACT – This paper focuses on a precise case study, the mythologeme of the "struggle with the Angel" (Gen., 32), and its various interpretations by German-speaking mythology scholars at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. In particular, it explores some interpretations where myth can be traced back to epistemological and cognitive schemes and which developed a form of psychological interpretation of the biblical episode.

KEYWORDS – myth, psychology, Bible, Jacob, Angel

JACOB'S FIGHT WITH THE ANGEL

Interpretative Patterns and Pious Embarrassments

MYTHS AND THE BIBLE: A CONTROVERSIAL DEBATE

“The word ‘myth’ is Greek, mythology is a Greek concept, and the study of mythology is based on Greek examples.”¹ With these words of introduction to their best-selling handbook on the *Hebrew Myths*, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai remember us, as an essential premise, that in speaking of Hebrew myths we situate ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, within a specific interpretative tradition. One that since the end of the eighteenth century in Germany, has studied the accounts of gods and heroes in poetic and religious texts from the Greco-Roman and later Judeo-Christian traditions, tracing them back to universal epistemological schemes.

Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812) is responsible for the introduction of the term “myth” (*Mythos*) in substitution of the term “fable” (*Fabel*), in use in the classical tradition for the definition of poetical materials such as legends of gods and heroes. An old word for a new concept, which in fact struggled to establish itself:² “myth” does not mean “history”, it does not mean either “fantasy tale”, or not even “sacred history”. The exact translation is “true tale”, and on the degrees of this

1 Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths. The Book of Genesis*, New York: Doubleday, 1964, p. 11.

2 This term does not enjoy plebiscitary assent, not even among classical scholars. Still Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möller (1848-1931) refuses to adopt the term *Mythos* and he uses with full consciousness the German terms *Fabel*, *Sage*, *Geschichte*. The same does Micha Josef Bin Gorion (1865-1921), one of the most important scholars of Jewish culture and tradition. Mikhah Yosef Bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden*, Frankfurt a. M.: Rütten und Loening, 1913.

“truth” or “truthfulness” of the mythical accounts, the entire epistemological value of this controversial instrument of modern scholarship is played out.

Complicating matters in the case of the adoption of myth as a hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition are the conflicting instances – religious and historic-critical – that drive exegetes. The prejudice against the *Graecia Mendax*, which was still so strong among classical scholars, could not fail to make the adoption of this new hermeneutical category suspect in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, about whose different levels of “truth” or “truthfulness” it was not the custom to question.³

One has only to recall the famous question posed by Heinrich Corrodi (1752-1793) as a title for the XVIII Heft of his *Beiträge zur Beförderung des vernünftigen Denkens der Religion* (1794): *Ob in der Bibel Mythen zu finden sind*, (*If one can find myths in the Bible*).⁴ Here he knowingly opposes the newly-born mythological school, represented by Heyne and Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826). Ten years later Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755-1806) still denounces this critical attitude towards the mythological interpretation in the field of Biblical Studies:

The name mythology [...] would have been rejected as profane in the past if it had been applied to the biblical writers, and if a mythology would have been discovered in their books. And even now there are certainly still many who find this name offensive, and who receive no little irritation if the same value has to be recognized to Hebrew legends of the past, as to the legends of all other peoples.⁵

The relationship of every scholar with the Bible, with its myths and its sacred history, with all the doctrinal impasses, moral judgements, interpolations of different and stratified traditions, can rightly be called

3 For a first exploration of the dynamics of appropriation/rejection of the concept of ‘myth’ in German scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in relation to the study of biblical texts, see Carlotta Santini, “The Rise of Jewish Mythology: Biblical Exegesis and the Scientific Study of Myth.” In: *Mosaic Law among the Moderns*, edited by Paul Michael Kurtz, Paris: Brill, 2024, chapter 2.

4 Heinrich Corrodi, “Ob in der Bibel Mythen zu finden sind”. In: *Beiträge zur Beförderung des vernünftigen Denkens der Religion*, XVIII, 1794, pp. 1-74.

5 Georg Lorenz Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie des alten und neuen Testaments, mit Parallelen aus der Mythologie anderer Völker, vornehmlich der Griechen und Römer*, Leipzig: Wegand’schen Buchhandlung, 1802, I, p. 21 (my translation).

a “Struggle with the Angel”. Out of metaphor, in this article I will focus on a precise case study: the mythologeme of the “struggle with the Angel”, from the biblical account of *Gen.*, 32. This episode went through various interpretations by German-speaking scholars of mythology at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century. I will address some central figures of the late Enlightenment and early Romantic currents, who made the study of the Bible a focus of their philosophical and philological reflection. From Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Johann David Michaelis (1717-1787), Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827) and Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826) to the classical interpretation of Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755-1806), a special attention will be also paid to Friedrich August Carus (1770-1807), who can be considered the father of the *Völkerpsychologie*.⁶

Following the metamorphosis of the story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel, this article aims to shed light on the instances that preside over the interpretation of biblical episodes and on the theoretical embarrassment experienced by these scholars in calibrating their hermeneutical tools. These scholars seem hesitate to reduce this story to the limits of a definitive epistemological category: whether myth or history, fantasy or religious truth, every attempt to an epistemological exegesis could not yet be free of religious and confessional concerns.

THE STORY OF JACOB, THE ANTI-HERO

Gen., 32, 24-34 tells of Jacob’s fight with the angel on his returning to the Promised Land after having spent many years in exile by his uncle Laban. Let us briefly recall the story as it is narrated in the Bible. When

6 The success of this biblical episode, as is well known, expresses itself over the long haul and goes far beyond the restricted sphere of scholarship. It will in fact be the subject of representation for many artists, as in the exemplary encaustic painting in Saint Sulpice by Eugène Delacroix. But it is also to remember the later literary rewritings, such as the well-known one by Thomas Mann in *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (1933). This is the first of four volumes of Thomas Mann’s major work, *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1933-1943), which in fact owes much to the earlier scholarship, in particular Mikhah Yosef Bin Gorion’s essay *Joseph und seine Brüder. Ein altjüdischer Roman*, Berlin: Schocken, 1933.

Jacob arrived at the ford of Jabbok, he sent all his people and his herds across the river and remained alone on the shore (22-23). There darkness caught him and a man (a man, mind you, not yet a God or an angel) wrestled with him until dawn appeared (24). Unable to overpower him, the stranger grabbed him at the hip and this was put out of joint (25). From this injury, which left Jacob limping, derives the precept that closes the paragraph, where it is said that to this day the Israelites do not eat the sciatic nerve (32). As dawn approached, the stranger asked Jacob to let him go. Jacob refuses unless he first obtains a blessing from him (26). The stranger then asks Jacob for his name (27). At his answer, a new name is given: “Thy name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for thou hast wrestled with God and man, and hast overcome” (28). It was then Jacob’s turn to ask the stranger his name, but this latter refused to answer and gave to Jacob nonetheless his blessing (29). Once Jacob had let his adversary go, he renamed that place Peniel, for he had seen God there face to face and his life had been spared (30).

The stories of Jacob, whose pilgrimage to and from the holy land show many parallels with the stories of other patriarchs – Abraham first and of Moses after him – are part of that process of construction of a national identity, which dates back to the Babylonian⁷ and post-exilic times.⁸ It is in fact beginning with Jacob that the mention of ‘Israel’ enters the biblical narrative, to indicate both the patriarch and the elected people named after him. The story of Jacob’s fight with the angel on the eve of his encounter with his brother Esau shows in fact an interesting stratification of very ancient elements, legacies of paganism and the original tribal background of the Palestinian peoples, combined with references to a much later context. For instance, later exegetes have advanced the identification between Esau-the-Red, Edom, and Rome.

7 Hugo Winckler (1863-1913), radicalizing his theses of a Babylonian derivation of the biblical account, made of Jacob and his progeny a very telling case of acculturation. His interpretation of Jewish myths as disguises of Assyrian-Chaldaean and Babylonian astral conceptions and knowledge, identified the night fighter Jacob with a personification of the lunar god. Consequently, Jacob’s progeny, the 12 sons from which the 12 tribes of Israel arise, are interpreted according to the system of the Chaldaic decans.

8 On this process of construction of national identity through the different historical stages of the relations between the kingdoms of Israel and Yehudah, as well as towards the enemy powers in the region, is still worth to be consulted the great classic work of Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, Berlin: Reimer, 1883. More recently, Mario Liverani, *Oltre la Bibbia. Storia antica di Israele*, Bari: Laterza, 2012.

This identification was particularly meaningful in the period when Palestine was under Roman control, and the people of Israel bowed their heads – as Isaac's blessing for Esau would have previewed (*Gen.* 27, 40) – under the yoke of their Edomite brothers.⁹

These few lines of *Genesis* have already known a very rich tradition of readings, interpretations, glosses and annotations, even rewritings, from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, aimed at clarifying the ambiguity of numerous passages, the implications of which conflicted with later doctrinal frameworks. Graves and Patai, in recalling the midrashic tradition on this episode, speak very rightly of a “pious embarrassment” among exegetes.¹⁰ The first source of conflict is about the identity of the mysterious wrestler. What does it mean for the Judeo-Christian tradition that Jacob fought with an angel? For, from a rigidly monotheistic perspective indeed, angelic beings are not conceivable except as emanations of God himself. An Angel is always “God's angel”, the way in which God manifest himself by entering the order of the Creation and communicating with its Creatures. If we accept the conclusion that the angel was none other than God himself, a conclusion Jacob draw from his answer (“for thou hast wrestled with God and man”) and on which to this day both Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions agree, how can we justify God degrading himself by fighting with a man? And why should God fight against his chosen one? Moreover, how can it even be conceived that God is defeated by him?

It was therefore necessary to let Jacob fight against someone else. We thus have a long list of possible other names for the mysterious adversary: the names of angels are mentioned (Michael or Raphael), who would have been sent by God to test Jacob's strength, or who perhaps were not alien to the traditional animosity and envy of the angelic essences towards God's preferred son, the man.¹¹ Other versions of the story mention a brigand/shepherd or pretend Jacob had fought with

9 The identification between Rome and Edom is justified by the fact that the Edomite Antipas (20 BC – 39 AD) was the father of Herod the Great and the founder of the Herodian dynasty, which ruled the Kingdom of Judea under the protectorate of Rome.

10 Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, *op. cit.*, p. 228. For an account of some of the most important versions and interpretations of the struggle with the angel in the midrashic tradition, consult Mikhael Yosef Bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden*, III, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-30.

11 Some versions of this account attribute to the angel fighting with Jacob the famous words of the Psalm 8 “what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man, that you care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than angels”.

Esau himself (anticipating their public confrontation) or with this last's guardian angel, the demoniac Samael. Other interpretations try to find motives for God's attack against his beloved one, looking for reasons why Jacob might have incurred divine wrath. Alongside the predictable idealisation common to all patriarch descriptions (extraordinary heroes, great warriors, men of great beauty and gigantic physical constitution), Jacob is regarded indeed in the sacred narrative as a highly fallible figure.

That of the patriarch's faults is a traditional argument, one of the first to be reinterpreted by the new psychologically oriented exegetical criticism. The Patriarchs are men and their faults are human faults, Johann Gottfried Herder reminds us in his *Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie*.¹² Among the possible reasons for Jacob fears is the righteous retaliation by a repeatedly deceived brother. The earliest exegetes contemplated other cases. God could have sent his angel to test his courage, but also to punish him for his conscious or unconscious faults: Jacob betrayed his brother, his father and his uncle Laban, and he could have incurred the charge of idolatry for the theft of Laban's idol, the *Teraphim*.

On the figure of "the poor Jacob", who of all the patriarchs shows the weakest character, Herder recalls us what Laurence Sterne wrote in one of his famous Sermons, the XXII, *The History of Jacob considered*:

And Jacob said unto Pharaoh: the days of the years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been. (Gen. 47, 9)

There is not a man in history, whom I pity more than the man who made this reply, – not because his days were short, – but that they were long enough to have crowded into them, so much evil as we find. Of all the patriarchs, he was the most unhappy: for, bating the seven years he served Laban for Rachel, "which seemed to him but a few days for the love he had to her" – strike those out of the number, – all his other days were sorrow.¹³

The prejudice against Jacob resonates further in the description given by Friedrich August Carus, who argues that the ancient authors who speak of Jacob do not speak that well of him in order not to have to speak too much against him.¹⁴ He is the Lord's chosen one, and as such,

12 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie*, Dessau: Verlag Kasse, 1782, vol. I, p. 264.

13 Laurence Sterne. *The Works of Laurence Sterne. Sermons*, London, 1790, vol. V, p. 7.

14 Friedrich August Carus. *Die Psychologie der Hebräer*, Leipzig: Barth und Kummer, 1809, p. 82.

he is above reproach. This does not alter the fact that his character (*Charakter*) is cowardly, treacherous and insecure.¹⁵

DREAM THEORY

The same sort of embarrassment toward this narrative, which hardly fit the criteria of a sacred story, can be recognized underlying one of the most successful interpretations of the episode of Jacob's wrestling with the angel: that of Jacob's dream. The theory according to which the biblical account actually refers to a dream occurred to Jacob is supported among others by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827). The dream theory would moreover be justified by the biblical tradition itself, for which Jacob is the dreamer *par excellence*. He was dreaming indeed, when the ladder of angels appeared to him and he received the promise of the alliance with God (*Gen.* 28, 11-19). According to Eichhorn, the author of the Pentateuch (Moses) would have implicitly suggested to interpret the episode of the struggle with the angel as a dream, like in the case of the narration of Eve's birth, which not by chance took place during a long sleep that God imposed on Adam (*Gen.* 2, 21-22). For, speaking of a dream would not mean for Eichhorn disavowing the historical and sacred value of the biblical account. "According to the custom of his time" (*nach der Gewonheit seiner Zeit*), so Eichhorn, Moses could have rightly believed that God reveals Himself in dreams and what He reveals, "like in a parenthesis" (*in einer Parenthese*) from the real, turns out to be true.¹⁶

15 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

16 Friedrich Gottfried Eichhorn, *Urgeschichte*, with annotations by Johann Philipp Gabler, Nürnberg: Monath und Kussler, 1793, vol. II, p. 54. The pagan idea of the "true dream" that comes from God will become a successful *topos* of Romantic literature. One needs only to recall John Keats' "Adam's Dream", which became the symbol of creative imagination in Romantic poetry: "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – He awoke and found it true". John Keats, *The Keats Project*, "Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817", Letters from 1817, n. 35, <https://keatslettersproject.com/letters/letter-35-to-benjamin-bailey-22-november-1817/> [accessed 1st December 2023]. Adam dreamed of the woman; he awoke, and he realised that the dream was true: Eva had given birth.

Eichhorn's editor and commentator, Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826), author of the weighty annotation to his *Urgeschichte*, is even more drastic in denying that the biblical episode could have unfolded literally as it is narrated. The whole affair is so prejudicial to the divine majesty that it could not but be interpreted as a dream. If it were not a dream, in fact, one could not but conclude – and this conclusion is not acceptable for Gabler – that it is a fable (*Fabel*) brought in the biblical text by popular tradition. Gabler, who was one of the most convinced exponents of the mythological school, uses here explicitly the term *Fabel* in the most denigrating sense possible: fantasy tales, popular or literary amusements that earned the Greek world the reputation of *Graecia Mendax*. However, the hypothesis of the dream alone is not enough to explain the episode according to Gabler. It does not explain the final part of the episode, when Jacob got his disability wounded by the angel. This episode grounds the food precept enunciated at the end of the paragraph. Although apparently out of context, the precept could not be so easily expunged, as it is perfectly consistent with the character of other normative passages in the Pentateuch.

Was it therefore a dream, or was there something real? Can a dream – as in the best tradition of Freddy Krueger – injure a man? In order to get ready of this ambiguity, Gabler recurs in his commentary to a very interesting and extraordinarily modern thesis enunciated by Johann David Michaelis (1717-1787), the translator of the Testaments:

If we dream of something very intense, a pain may really arise in the part of the body which we dream of being injured: or if we move and push ourselves in a dream; we than dream this along with the rest and our imagination makes, so to speak, an interpretation of it that is in accordance with the dream; in the morning, however, we are hurt by the real blow that we gave ourselves during our sleep.¹⁷

Michaelis' psycho-physiological explanation is readable in two directions: a) From the dream to the injure: In a dream, one recreates an image of pain that is able to affect the body and persists upon waking. b) From the injure to the dream: The movements of a sleeper's body

¹⁷ Johann David Michaelis, *Deutsche Übersetzung des Alten Testaments, mit Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte*, Mainz: Dieterich, 1771-1791, vol. II, p. 154 quoted in Johann Philipp Gabler's notes to Johann Friedrich Eichhorn, *Urgeschichte*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54, n. 21 (my translation).

cause the sleeper to injure himself, and the pain of the blow or wound, in turn, modifies the course of the dream itself.

The first option seems too bold to Gabler: if taken in a strict sense, one could say that a vivid imagination (*lebhaftes Phantasie*) is able to cause modifications in the physical state of the body. This hypothesis, if verified, should make the object of study of a new discipline, which Gabler calls the *empirische Seelenlehre* (empirical theory of the soul), which in his time was still to be written, and which anticipates by at least a century the most exciting studies on psychosomatics. More cautiously, Gabler settles on the second option, and postulates the theory of a two-steps dream:

Jacob, by the sudden movements which the vivid dream produced in his body, struck his foot so hard that he felt the pain even in his sleep, and this occasioned a new part of the dream to begin, which followed on from the previous ones: in the morning he limped from this violent thrust; and so the dream grew still more illusory; what was a mere dream now turned into history.¹⁸

FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE MYTHOLOGICAL THEORY

Although very popular, the dream theory did not entirely satisfy scholars of the time. On the one hand, there is the desire to remain as faithful as possible to the biblical text and to reaffirm the reality of the supernatural event. Why should one resort to daring psycho-physiological interpretations, when the biblical text says that Jacob fought and he was wounded? On the other hand, those who were ready to give up the historical reality of the biblical account and were in search for more symbolic meanings behind the story, considered the dream solution nothing more than a puerile compromise. Why should we be satisfied of the weaker reality of the dream, if we are no longer able to defend the historical reality of the biblical account? These two attitudes were coexisting in most of the scholarly approaches of the time.

18 Johann Philipp Gabler's notes to Johann Friedrich Eichhorn, *Urgeschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 55, n. 21 (my translation).

“Is there a word of dream here? Is it not all narrated so straightforwardly historically?”¹⁹ According to Herder, Jacob could not have slept. Common sense – what we would better call psychology – tells us this. He was afraid of his brother; he feared his just vengeance. He went away from his camp to keep watch, not to be surprised by his enemy. How could he have slept in these circumstances? Recalling the already mentioned descriptions of the peculiarity of Jacob’s character, of the behaviour of this anti-hero as emerged in the biblical account, Herder is convinced that the truthfulness of the biblical account lies precisely in its sincerity, in the fact that even the less praiseworthy aspects of the patriarch’s character are not concealed. No one will tell a story this way, if it was not true.

Herder sees the attribution of the new name to Jacob as a necessary step towards purification from previous sins. Anthropological readings of the Bible insist on the importance of Jacob’s renaming, bringing it back to similar practices among different peoples. The casuistry can include the need to purify oneself of a crime, being raised to kingship, the conquest of a new land. All these cases, in one way or another, fit well with Jacob’s own case. Herder is not going that far to present here an ethnologic reading of the episode, but in many ways his interpretation can be said an anthropological one: “[Jacob’s] story is an instructive mirror of the human heart – so Herder – and God Himself wiped away the stain that the youthful Jacob carried around with his name”.²⁰

The impact of the introduction of such psychological interpretation of the Bible and the Gospels was indeed so important, that the debate far exceeded the specialised fields. Still at the beginning of the twentieth century Anatole France felt compelled to leave a trace of this quarrels in his *Histoire Contemporaine*, which was meant to represent a fresco of nineteenth century culture and society:

Led astray by the recent example of a monk who thirsted for the applause of the age, M. Guitrel presumes to explain the scenes of the Gospel by means of that pretended local colour and that pseudo-psychology of which the Germans make a great show; and he does not perceive that, by thus walking in the way of infidels, he is skirting the abyss into which they have fallen. I should weary the benevolent attention of His Eminence Monseigneur the

¹⁹ Herder, *Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie*, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264 (my translation).

Cardinal-Archbishop were I to place before his reverend glance the passages where M. Guitrel with pitiable childishness follows the narratives of travellers, as to 'the boat-service on the Lake of Tiberias', and those where, with intolerable indecency, he describes what he calls 'the soul-states' and 'the psychic crises' of our Lord Jesus Christ.²¹

Relying on psychological arguments, and in particular on the impressionability of Jacob wearied by the long journey and fearing just revenge from his brother, Wilhelm Friedrich Hezel (1754-1824) proposes an interpretation of our story that is half-historical and half-psychological. According to Hezel, Jacob could indeed have met a man and fought with him. Not that much the strength of the stranger, but rather his own excitable imagination, always ready to recognize supernatural influences in his life, generated in him the bold idea that he was fighting with a superior being. To this lucid – how to call it! – hallucination is also to be attributed Jacob's belief he had won the confrontation. For indeed, being the only one who had been wounded, it would have been more logical to think at least of a draw. Hezel goes so far as to imagine that the pretended angel sent by God to test Jacob's strength was actually a servant who had secretly followed his lord and, seeing him worried, had attacked him to restore his courage.²²

The psychological interpretation paves the way for the mythological one. If the problem is in fact the veracity of the biblical episode in the sense of its fidelity to the form in which it was transmitted to us, speaking of dreams (however realistic), of nocturnal frights and overexcited imaginations, of earthly fights mistaken for otherworldly encounters, does not make indeed any difference. These are all in the end mere strategies to rarefy the historical consistency of the supernatural event without going so far as to deny it properly. The common key to all these interpretations is that if something happened at the ford of the Jabbok, it happened only in Jacob's mind, in a dream or in his imagination. From here to considering the alternative, i.e. that the struggle with the angel is not only a figment of Jacob's imagination, but rather a figment of the imagination of the author of the Pentateuch, the step seems

21 Anatole France. *The Elm-Tree on the Mall*, translated by M.P. Willcocks, London: John Lane Company, 1910, p. 22.

22 Wilhelm Friedrich Hezel. *Geist der Philosophie und Sprache der alten Welt*, Lübeck und Leipzig: Friedrich Bohn, 1794, p. 203 ff.

short. However, it is precisely this step that the scholars of the time do not want to take. For them, it would in fact be a step backwards, to demote the biblical text to the stage of mere poetry, a stage that even the pagan tales of gods and heroes, with which they had endeavoured to compare them, had broken through.

If not literally true, if not drastically invented, what degree of truth remains to the biblical account of Jacob's struggle with the Angel? Herder would argue for a symbolic interpretation. The Jewish tradition, who handed down this story, claims Jacob fought. There must also have been a fight. But what kind of fight? This would be a spiritual and symbolic one, an inner struggle of the soul. So Jacob's soul struggles with God, but one could also say, that in the darkest hour of his life Jacob struggled with itself, against its own limits and its own fears. It is no surprise, that this interpretation has been particularly well received in the Christian exegetic tradition. It prefigures indeed Jesus' agony on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22, 43-44), the agony of life that sees and fears the advent of the death. Here too we have the appearance of an angel – in this case in the role of consoler. Jesus' struggle during his pray was so intense that his face sweated blood (another interesting psycho-physiological effect). And it was in this darkest hour in which he fought against his fate, that Jesus came to ask God if it was possible to take this cup away from him.

If the struggle is an inner struggle, the figure of the angel becomes merely accessory. "The concept of the angels was thus in Jacob's soul", Herder tells us.²³ Jacob believed in angels as divine messengers: he had dreamt of them, had strongly believed that God had put armies of angels at his side to protect him against his enemies. A fortiori, when he withdrew to pray God and he fought with him in pray, his spirit needed a visible symbol. Symbol is understood here in a rather concrete way, just as the consecrated host is a symbol of Christ:

And behold, such a hero appears, the godlike figure of a heavenly warrior, and wrestles with Jacob. It appears, it disappears with the shadows of the twilight; in short, read the beautiful night vision itself, that also according to the tone and colour of the narration hovers in the foreboding shadows of night.²⁴

²³ Herder, *Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 266 (my translation).

A similar interpretation seems to be given by Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755-1806):

According to a very widespread belief (*Wahn*),²⁵ gods, angels and spirits appear only at night, and disappear when the day approaches. It is also conform to the opinion of the ancient world that gods and spirits fight with humans.²⁶

However, Bauer is making a step forward. Adopting a method of internal and external comparison – within the Bible and with other cultures, the Greek in particular²⁷ – he observes multiple accounts of the heroes' struggles with supernatural entities. Always in the case of these narratives, the fight itself may be a pretext, but it has the value of consecrating the hero's rights to primacy, kingship, and divine election.

Despite the conviction that we are dealing with a story that is typical in many respects, and thus has all the characteristics of a-historicity, Bauer, however, try to propose an interpretation, which can preserve as much as possible the historical grounding of this event, like Herder and Eichhorn did before him:

Jacob was strengthened in his belief in God's protection because, according to the philosophy of religion (*Religionsphilosophie*) of his time, he thought he had really fought with Elohim, and from this he got the name Israel. According to this *raisonnement*, the struggle with God entered into history.²⁸

Jacob really did wrestle with someone, or believed he wrestled with someone, what matters most is his *Raisonnement* – in accordance with the *Religionsphilosophie* of his time – which convinced him that he wrestled with God. In this way, the story of the struggle with the angel would become sacred history.

At the end of his commentary, however, Bauer cannot refrain from formulating a hypothesis, which is far more daring:

25 Scholars belonging to the first generations who engaged in the mythological debate are not completely free from the prejudice that they are still facing superstitious and fantastic beliefs. Bauer's use of the term *Wahn*, with the meaning of illusion, imagination, or even hallucination, is revealing of the persistence of this attitude.

26 Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie, op. cit.*, p. 253 (my translation).

27 It should be noted that among the elements of cultural comparison taken into consideration by Bauer is also the Pseudo-Ossian tradition.

28 Bauer, *Hebräische Mythologie, op. cit.*, p. 255 (my translation).

But could the whole rather be nothing but a philosopheme (*Philosophem*), in which only this idea (*Gedanke*) would be veiled: that Jacob prayed fervently to God, he wrestled with God in prayer, and was victorious; God heard him and granted his protection. An old poet or philosopher dressed this up, according to the belief of his time (*gemäss dem Glauben seiner Zeit*), as if the deity had appeared and wrestled with Jacob.²⁹

A dream, a hallucination, a fable: a weird albeit true story, which cannot, but has to be believed. The only answer left for is that we are facing here a myth. Nevertheless, all interpreters constantly circle around the problem: some part of the story must await a very concrete degree of truth, if not the struggle, if not the divine identity of the enemy, then certainly Jacob's historical existence must be saved. This residue of historical truth, so disturbing and complicated to sustain in the interpretation of the episode, is exactly what scholars of this period cannot give up when it comes to the biblical account. The problem would not arise with the stories of the gods and heroes of the Greeks, of course.

It is in dealing with the stories of the Bible that Bauer – who in any case is the first to openly speak of Jewish mythology – formulates the categories of historical, historical-philosophical and purely philosophical myth: a symbolic interpretation of an event that purports to be historical on one side, a religious doctrine or concept handed down in mythical form on the other. The real question for Bauer, the question he dares not to ask in the first place, but he states almost at the conclusion of his argument, like a mental experiment, is what truth is handed down through the deforming mirror of the myth of the struggle with the angel. Should we recognise here the memory of an historical event, or historical characters, which have been misinterpreted? Are we moreover facing a symbolic interpretation, a purely philosophical idea, a doctrine or religious concept that has been handed down in mythical-narrative form?

29 *Ibid.*, p. 256 (my translation).

CONCLUSION

These examples show how the tradition of German scholars of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century shared the same “pious embarrassments” of previous exegetes about the story of Jacob. Various strategies have been put in place to preserve to this tale, if not its historicity, at least its sacredness, restoring a logic to it and granting it meaning. In fact, the greatest danger seems to be that of disqualifying this narrative, making it fall into the repertoire of fables, and thus decreeing its exclusion *de iure*, if not *de facto*, from sacred history. Dream theory and psychological interpretations, not entirely new strategies to biblical exegetes, are used by these scholars to reflect on the conditions of the mentality of the time that conceived this story: whether it is the mentality of the writer Moses (so Eichhorn), that of the patriarch Jacob (so Carus), or maybe the mentality of the people who told these stories and made them an integral part of their own culture and national identity (so Herder and Bauer). In order to be fully understood, this story must be read in the light of the habits of that time (so Eichhorn), in the light of a widespread belief, or of the opinion of the ancients, or, as Bauer will say – adopting a remarkably new concept – in the light of the “Philosophy of Religion” of that time. Only in this way, one can suspend the judgement on the historicity as well as on the truthfulness or the morality of this story. Only insofar as it is the product of a precise mentality, of a worldview, which can be explained based on the epistemological modalities of an ancient culture, Jacob’s struggle with the angel cease to become an object of “pious embarrassment” for the scholars. In this way, the story accesses the status of a cultural invention of the human spirit, which can rightly aspire to a universal and supra-historical value, as it still does today.

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