

# HYMN INTERPRETATION

## "Wrestling Jacob"

JAMES HART BRUMM

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."<sup>1</sup>

This wondrous, brief, enigmatic, rich passage from Jacob's story in Genesis is the subject of an equally wondrous, enigmatic, rich (though certainly not brief) hymn by Charles Wesley. "Come, O thou traveler unknown," which Wesley titled "Wrestling Jacob," first appeared in his *Hymns and Sacred Poems* of 1742, five years before "Love divine, all loves excelling," and three years after the first version of "Hark! The herald angels sing." Of its fourteen stanzas, four are included in most hymnals when it appears at all. Carlton Young did a great service to the church by including all the stanzas in a text-only version (immediately after the four-stanza version prepared for congregational singing) in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Everyone reading this journal is familiar with Charles Wesley. Erik Routley reminds us that, from what Wesley calls his Methodist "conversion" on May 24, 1738, until his death fifty years later, he wrote 8,989 religious poems, of which something over 6,000 qualify as hymns. That would mean Wesley wrote an average of 3.4 hymns per week, "assuming him to have died in the act of writing." All of our hymnals contain several of Charles Wesley's hymns, some of which we sing probably more than once every year.

Yet I include this particular hymn in my series of hymns we do not sing enough. There are two reasons for this, I suspect. One reason is that the text is so specifically associated with this particular scripture, which only appears in *The Revised Common Lectionary* once in the three-year cycle, and then in the middle of summer. The other reason is the difficulty in assigning the text to an appropriate tune. RHOSYMEDRE is a pop-

ular match and is easily sung, but it fails to express the struggle and anguish that Genesis describes and Wesley paints so brilliantly. While it isn't as much of an affront to the text as setting "O sacred head, now wounded" to MORNING SONG, it is akin to setting that passion hymn to AURELIA. The use of the tune CANDLER, based on the Scottish tune "Ye banks and braes" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (#386), is quite interesting, but not much more satisfying. Carlton Young admits that Routley's tune WOODBURY and the folk tune VERNON (in *Christian Harmony*, the revised edition of 1873) are better matches, but neither is eminently singable. I have only heard Routley's tune sung congregationally in the chapel at Westminster Choir College, hardly a typical parish gathering.

Even if we cannot do it musical justice, the text is worth reading and re-reading. Even Wesley's title, "Wrestling Jacob," operates on several levels. Are we wrestling with Jacob? Are we to see ourselves as Jacob, doing the wrestling? Or is this just a description of who Jacob was, and who we are? The ambiguities continue in the hymn itself, as they do in the scripture. In Genesis, there is no place where we are specifically told that Jacob wrestled with an angel; the text says "a man," and then suggests that Jacob wrestled with God, and except for the injury to his hip, leaves open the possibility that he dreamed it all (there is some similarity to the story of his dream about a ladder earlier in the Jacob narrative). Wesley takes the ambiguity a step further; already, in the third line of stanza three, he has moved from Jacob's struggle at Peniel to Wesley's (and our, the Christian reader might say) own struggle with Christ, "the Man who died for me." And, even then, we find ourselves wrestling with our own sinfulness, our human nature struggling against Christ, and our intellect striving "till I thy name, thy nature know."

As is generally true with Wesley, who wrote as someone who was imbued with scripture, this text makes numerous allusions to passages other than the story. The second stanza hints at Isaiah 49:16 (NRSV): "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands," part of the song of the Suffering Servant, part of a prophecy of Israel's return from exile. Stanza three touches on Romans 5:8 (NRSV): "The proof of God's amazing love is this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Stanza four, with its mention of the "unutterable name" of God, reaches back to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The fifth stanza reaches back to II Corinthians 12:10 (NRSV): "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." The subsequent stanzas make allusions to John 12:24 (foretelling Christ's crucifixion), James 5:16, I Corinthians

13:12, Matthew 28:20, Malachi 4:2, Colossians 1:5, and Psalm 42; a more vigilant Biblical scholar would probably find even more.

The hymn is an eighteenth-century evangelical Bible study in the nature of personal redemption: the church is called out of all history; all history points toward the salvific work of Christ on the cross; and, while Christ's work is on behalf of all creation ("pure universal Love thou art," stanza nine, line 4), the primary concern is with personal salvation. All of the scriptures alluded to reflect a special relationship between God and a chosen individual or group. Jacob's wrestling match becomes, for Charles Wesley, the model for Israel's exodus from Egypt and her Babylonian exile and restoration, and for Christ's death and resurrection. In each of these events, the people of God were lost, yet never out of God's love, and God's love restored them. Wesley clearly sees that as the pattern of his own relationship with God, as well.

Yet there is also a larger struggle reflected here, perhaps Wesley's struggle with the Enlightenment. Four of the first seven stanzas end with the line "till I thy name, thy nature know," while the final six stanzas conclude "thy nature, and thy name is Love." The human desire to be able to know and quantify our world and everything in it comes into contact with Love, known yet never fully knowable. We have the solution to the mystery leading to an even greater Mystery, and yet Wesley seems to find this mystery comforting. It is enough to know that God is love, without knowing entirely what that means, and to live forever in the joy of Love's presence. As a pietist and a scholar myself, I can respect that resolution. There is also the pattern of guilt, grace, and gratitude here, consistent with an evangelical, pietist understanding of the believer's relationship with God.

It would be wonderful to have a tune for congrega-

Come, O thou Traveller unknown,  
whom still I hold but cannot see;  
my company before is gone,  
and I am left alone with thee;  
with thee all night I mean to stay  
and wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell thee who I am,  
my misery, or sin declare;  
thyself hast called me by my name,  
look on thy hands, and read it there;  
but who, I ask thee, who art thou?  
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

In vain thou strugglest to get free;  
I never will unloose my hold;  
art thou the Man that died for me?  
the secret of thy love unfold;  
wrestling, I will not let thee go  
till I thy name, thy nature know.

Wilt thou not yet to me reveal  
thy new, unutterable name?  
Tell me, I still beseech thee, tell,  
to know it now resolved I am;  
wrestling I will not let thee go  
till I thy name, thy nature know.

'Tis all in vain to hold thy tongue  
or touch the hollow of my thigh;  
though every sinew be unstrung,  
out of my arms thou shalt not fly;  
wrestling I will not let thee go  
till I thy name, thy nature know.

What though my shrinking flesh complain,  
and murmur to contend so long?  
I rise superior to my pain;  
when I am weak, then I am strong.  
And when my all of strength shall fail  
I shall with the God-Man prevail.

My strength is gone, my nature dies,  
I sink beneath thy mighty hand,  
faint to revive, and fall to rise;  
I fall, and yet by faith I stand;  
I stand, and will not let thee go  
till I thy name, thy nature know.

Yield to me now, for I am weak;  
but confident in self-despair:  
speak to my heart, in blessings speak,  
be conquered by my instant prayer.  
Speak or thou never hence shalt move,  
and tell me if thy name is Love.

'Tis Love! 'Tis Love! Thou diedst for me,  
I hear thy whisper in my heart;  
the morning breaks, the shadows flee,  
pure universal love thou art.  
To me, to all, thy mercies move,  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

My prayer hath power with God; the Grace  
unspeakable I now receive;  
through faith I see thee face to face,  
I see thee face to face, and live:  
in vain I have not wept and strove;  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

tional singing that could help unlock the intellectual and emotional depths of this poetry. Yet, even then, it would be difficult to sing even most of the text in a typical congregational situation. This is a hymn that can be preached, which I did last summer, using several stanzas with a brief introduction. I look forward to doing that again, or perhaps even making it a framework for a hymn festival. It is a work of art that we must allow to inspire more Christians. ☞

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 32:24-30 from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

*James Hart Brumm is pastor of Blooming Grace Reformed Church in Defreestville, New York. A collection of his hymns, Out of the Ordinary, has recently been published by Wayne Leupold Editions.*

I know thee, Saviour, who thou art,  
Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;  
nor wilt thou with the night depart,  
but stay, and love me to the end;  
thy mercies never shall remove;  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

The Sun of Righteousness in me  
hath rose with healing in his wings,  
withered my nature's strength; from thee  
my soul its life and succour brings;  
my help is all laid up above,  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

Contented now; upon my thigh  
I halt, till life's short journey end;  
all helplessness, all weakness, I  
on thee alone for strength depend,  
nor have I power, from thee to move;  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

Lame as I am, I take the prey,  
hell, earth and sin with ease o'ercome;  
I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
and as a bounding hart fly home  
thro' all eternity to prove  
thy nature, and thy name is Love.

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*A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*,  
pp. 29-30.

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