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# Wrestling Jacob

by Edward Houghton

*In sending us this paper Mr. Houghton, a minister of the Methodist Church in Walsall, mentions Professor Irwin Reist's article "John Wesley and George Whitefield: A Study in the Integrity of Two Theologies of Grace", which appeared in the Quarterly for January-March 1975, and indicates that his own findings are to much the same effect as Professor Reist's. He has for years studied the theology of Charles Wesley's hymns, and come to the conclusion that their account of the Christian experience is thoroughly "Calvinist"—or rather, evangelical at a point before the Calvinist-Arminian divide.*

**A**FTER Calvary, no scene in all Scripture so held Charles Wesley's evangelical imagination as did Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok ford. He often preached about it—Telford<sup>1</sup> lists eight Journal references, beginning May 24, 1741: "I preached on Jacob's wrestling for the blessing. Many, then, I believe, took hold on His strength, and will not let Him go, till He bless them, and tell them His name." It must have been powerful preaching, born of the very strength that was its subject. But in verse Wesley goes even further, for here he identifies himself, imaginatively but also seriously and believingly, with Jacob. He *is* that man, in immediate real experience.

His earliest such lines,<sup>2</sup> in terms virtually identical with the sermon, are:

Lord, I will not let thee go,  
Till THE BLESSING thou bestow,  
Hear my Advocate Divine;  
Lo! to his my suit I join:  
Join'd to his, it cannot fail:  
Bless me, for I will prevail!

—this from the end hymn of the important Part II of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739. In this second part, beginning "Where shall my wondering soul begin?", are hymns which sound a new personal and evangelical note—we may take it, first expressions in verse of the new experience the Wesley brothers had entered into the previous year. So that the Jacob theme goes back, in effect autobiographically, to Charles' earliest evangelical days.

Who is *Wrestling Jacob*?—the man Jacob to begin with and also, he being Patriarch, his descendant people, still bearing his name and character. This is implied in the original<sup>3</sup> by his new racial

1 J. Telford, *New Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated*, p. 181.

2 Now omitted from *Methodist Hymn-Book* (568). Accessible other instances are: MHB 203: 2; 387: 2; 736: 3-5. Cp. no. 523.

3 Gen. 32: 28.

name Israel, and is the interpretation in Hosea,<sup>4</sup> where Jacob, the people the Lord will punish, is he who strove with God. Wesley, who is aware of what the prophet has written,<sup>5</sup> goes back to Jacob the man. Or rather, he comes forward to Jacob of the new covenant, Christian man, who asks:

Art thou the Man that died for me?

More than a poet's fancy, this is a believer's profound appropriation of scripture. The original Jacob encountered a mysterious but gracious God, and prevailed with him. Wesley's Jacob, who is Wesley, encounters God-Man, and prevails with *him*. We read *Wrestling Jacob* from the New Testament, and reach the end of the story—the full conclusion in Christ to which the old covenant only pointed. For but one of old Jacob's prayers was answered—he gained the blessing but was not told the divine name. New Jacob makes the two prayers in one:

Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,  
Be conquer'd by my instant prayer . . .  
And tell me if thy name is Love.

*And he is told*—the new name, before Christ unutterable. And our ears are blessed beyond the desire of many prophets and kings and righteous men, and patriarchs:

Thy nature, and thy name is Love.

*Wrestling Jacob*,<sup>6</sup> as Dr. Rattenbury discerningly pointed out,<sup>7</sup> is Wesley's evangelical variant of a celebrated theme of the mystics—the Dark Night of the Soul; and he sets Wesley's beside a hymn of this latter title by St. John of the Cross:<sup>8</sup>

Oh, night, that led me, guiding night,  
Oh, night far sweeter than the dawn;  
Oh, night, that did so then unite  
The Loved with his Beloved,  
Transforming Lover in Beloved.

The difference is absolute and essentially is between two sorts or conceptions of love—eros and *agape*, the aesthetic and *the evangelical*,

<sup>4</sup> Hos. 12: 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> "In vain I have not wept, and strove"—"wept" is Hosea's word, not in the original narrative. And interestingly, the *Short Hymns on Select Passages* have two on the Hosea text (one better than the other, but neither adding anything to the *great* hymn), and none on the Genesis passage.

<sup>6</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1742. Full text: G. Osborn, *Wesley Poetical Works* II, pp. 173-6; F. Baker, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, no. 25. But it is well preserved at MHB 339, with all but two of the fourteen verses. Of the three one-word alterations inherited from its predecessor, one was even necessary (7: 5, "mercies" for "bowels"—"mercies" is Wesley's own word two verses on) and the others are too trivial to matter (2: 2, "and" for "or"; 10: 2, "risen" for "rose").

<sup>7</sup> J. E. Rattenbury, *Wesley's Legacy to the World*, pp. 128-30.

<sup>8</sup> Tr. G. Cunninghame Graham.

love I find in me and love that *comes to me*, love that is contemplation and love that is *grace*. Wesley's setting, too, is night—suggested rather than described, to be sensed more in retrospect when at last the morning shall break. It is dark night—I cannot see the One I still hold on to when my company has gone across the ford. Alone with him, I now address him:

Come . . .

This first word says the first thing I know about him—he *comes* to me, and though as yet unknown he shall reveal himself to me. Only so can I meet or know him. It is not my soul's dark night, or any subjective state, that gains the blessing, but *he* who *brings* it. Night itself has no mystic charm for Jacob, is but the dramatic background to darker night within:

I need not tell thee who I am,  
My misery or sin declare

—it is a sinner that wrestles with God, like the first Jacob. So at once the evangelical appeal, not to any love that is mine, but altogether to love that is of him, as yet the only Lover:

*Thyself* hast called me by *thy name*,  
Look on *thy hands*, and read it there.<sup>9</sup>

The mysticism is the one mystery of grace, the evangelical love of God:

Art thou the Man that died for me?  
The secret of *thy love* unfold.<sup>10</sup>

The secret is his name of Love. The whole hymn, a prayer, is comprehended in a single petition,

Tell me thy name  
and its answer:

Thy nature, and thy name is Love.

The prayer is wrestling prayer, but the initiative was never mine but his all along who first came to me. Nor shall the issue rest with me—it is not *that* I wrestle but *with whom* that shall decide.

When I am weak then am I strong

is Wrestling Jacob's great paradox—Paul's actually,<sup>11</sup> lifted bodily in surely literature's most unerring transference of thought and language from one man to another;

And

(adding finality even to that)

when my all of strength shall fail  
I shall with the God-man prevail.

<sup>9</sup> My italics.

<sup>10</sup> My italics.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor. 12: 10.

There is clear evangelical reason for the paradox. If I have no strength left, then necessarily the issue rests with the Other. That I none the less prevail is because of who this Other is—the Man that died for me, God-Man.

My prayer hath power with God

—but not because the prayer is powerful, still less I who pray: only because he to whom I pray is God of grace unspeakable. Instant prayer—mere, importunate asking, when all I can do is ask—will conquer only the God of grace.

In vain I have not wept, and strove

—but it would have been vain with any other sort of God, or with God on any other terms. My determination, wrestling, not to let him go would be Arminian, but not Pelagian—far more nearly Calvinist than at all Pelagian. I can spare my breath and moral effort unless *God*, his nature and very name, is Love. And this he only can tell me, love, understood in the Gospel, being his grace to me, and so the knowledge of it the revelation of himself. The new, unutterable name can only be disclosed to me, by him who bears it. This is my prayer, and he grants it because of what his name is. When I say to him,

I know thee . . . who thou art

the emphasis is all away from me and all on him, his nature and name, his character which is Love. I know him because he is evangelically known, my Saviour,

Jesus, the feeble sinner's Friend.

Not by mystical insight but

Through faith

—which answers to the revelation of God—

I see thee face to face:

I see thee face to face, and live.

The struggle, being graciously determined, issues not in some fuller realization of eros in the soul—my nature's strength is withered, I am all helplessness, all weakness, I depend on God alone for strength and have no power even to move from him (did an Arminian say that?)—but in the revelation to the soul of the agape of God, his name that is Love:

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! thou diedst for me.

It is a love that comes to me, even as day comes. Not so the other love, in night far sweeter than the dawn. That was an entering into the night, and dawn was to come only as an interruption to love. But the love was not agape. Agape *comes*, a gospel dawn. The wrestling was till the break of day, and the prevalence of Jacob's prayer is only now, as day is breaking. The dark night has revealed nothing and the struggle has availed nothing until, now,

The morning breaks, the shadows flee  
and God is revealed to Jacob:

PURE UNIVERSAL LOVE thou art.

This grand conclusion—UNIVERSAL LOVE—is firmly Arminian, for Wesley could never see how God's love could be other than universal:

To me, to all thy bowels move;  
Thy nature, and thy name is Love.

But his whole account of the love coming to a man is as decisively Calvinist: only God makes it morning, and that is how his love comes:

The Sun of Righteousness on me  
Hath rose with healing in his wings.

Jacob did not make the sun rise, it rose on Jacob. This is experimental religion, but first it is revealed religion: not my sight is determinative but God's light—the light of the Gospel. His whisper I hear in my heart ("I died for thee") is his historic Word, though he does immediately say it to me. I can wrestle through unending night for ever but will never, till I am told, in the last analysis *till he tells me*, know God-man who died for me.

This classic of the soul is one of the great theological hymns—an exposition of evangelical Christianity, so often misunderstood, sometimes misunderstanding itself, as being strong on feeling and weak on doctrine. The hymn, being a personal prayer, is of course about the man who prays, but is more importantly about God who answers his prayer. It is grace, as of the morning, that gives the answer; not spirituality, as of the night, that obtained it. Spirituality has collapsed, and it is at this point of collapse, where Wesley's all of strength has failed, that he prevails with God. We may speak of *evangelical spirituality*, but then all is of God. The central paradox, weakness and prevailing prayer, is the paradox finally of the divine objective centre to personal faith, the grace by which we lay hold on God, that love we feel which is God's love to us: always the fundamental *I*, always the most fundamental *thou*:

Nor wilt thou with the night depart,  
But stay, and love me to the end.

*Walsall, West Midlands*