RE-SETTING JACOB'S DISLOCATED THIGH

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The publication of *The United Methodist Hymnal* in 1989 was one of the major publishing events of this century, and most complex, many-sided, and exhaustive in its inquiries and researches. Some indication of this is given by its editor, Carlton R. Young, in his *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*. It was my privilege to participate in the Wesley Consultation, and to prepare the text and footnote for one of Charles Wesley's longest and perhaps greatest poems, first published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1742, in fourteen stanzas, based on Genesis 32:24–32, and titled, “Wrestling Jacob.” About this his famous predecessor, Isaac Watts (1674–1748), stated: “That single poem, *Wrestling Jacob*, was worth all the verses he himself had written.”

In this instance a selection of four verses was set to music in *The United Methodist Hymnal* for congregational use (#386), but the full fourteen verses were printed as a devotional poem, to follow the dramatic dialogue through to its completion (#387).

Inevitably in such a huge undertaking there were many misprints. Eight pages were issued with the first printing of May 1989 informing the readers that some hymnals in their initial mailing “were inadvertently taken from a storage area for defective copies.” Subsequent copies duly corrected these passages, which usually involved a few words at the foot of a page, or perhaps a sentence. I discovered, however, even in my own corrected replacement copy, serious dislocation of the verses of “Wrestling Jacob,” which could only be healed by the complete reprinting of the whole page. I reported this as soon as I discovered it—to learn that it was apparently caused by the misplacement of a column or columns of type. I realized that by this time, however, literally millions of copies were already in circulation. It was obviously quite impracticable to expect any radical alteration at this stage. I decided that by some freak of modern technology the sporadic readers of “Wrestling Jacob” were going to be puzzled and disappointed by the apparent lack of continuity in Wesley’s famed poem.

Seven years later I realize that it would be a sad mistake for me not to “come clean” on what the author had actually written. I re-read after Wesley the same obscure passage about Jacob’s flight from Laban with his new family, towards a probably angry brother Esau: “And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man [i.e., God] with him until the breaking of the day; and when he [God] saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched [rather, struck] the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him.”
The first six verses of the poem reiterate the length and resolve of Jacob’s agonized struggle, with its thrice-repeated: “Wrestling, I will not let thee go, Till I thy name, thy nature know.” Verse 6 ends with renewed confidence:

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.

Then technology strikes its crippling blow, interposing verse 13, “Contended...” There follows a renewal of the original plea (linked with a semi-threat), in verses 7 and 8:

My strength is gone, my nature dies,
I sink beneath thy weighty 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.

Now Charles returns to the King James text: “And [God] said, Let me go, for the day breaketh [when other-worldly presences must leave]. And [Jacob] said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.” The blessing pleaded is the name and nature of the wrestler, and is revealed in 9—not simply God, but “God-man,” the Savior:

‘Tis Love! ‘tis Love! thou diestd 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—
The Nature, and thy Name is Love.

This immense revelation is hammered into the last lines of the closing five verses, 10, 11, 12, the misplaced 13, and 14, as Wesley’s personal testimony:

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,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy Nature, and thy Name is LOVE.