CHARLES WESLEY’S GREATEST POEM

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The year 1988 marks the 250th anniversary of Charles Wesley’s Whitsunday experience and the 200th anniversary of his death. One of his hymns is related to both his conversion and his death, as well as to many of his sermons. Unfortunately the hymn seems to be scarcely known among rank and file American Methodists, even though selected stanzas from it have appeared in most of our principal hymnals since 1821. Moreover, it has been widely regarded as Wesley’s greatest poem, though not his finest hymn.

One of Wesley’s favorite sermon subjects was the story of Jacob wrestling with a mysterious stranger as recorded in Gen. 32:22-32. His journal, even with the entire year 1742 missing, mentions eight sermons on this passage from May 24, 1741, to May 20, 1748. For the first of these, in Bristol, the journal entry begins “I preached on Jacob wrestling for the blessing.”¹ For the following July 16 he noted that in the evening at Cardiff “My subject was ‘Wrestling Jacob.’”² That was to become also the subject—and title—of his greatest poem.

When Charles and his brother John published Hymns and Sacred Poems in 1742, “Wrestling Jacob” was included. The poem is based on Gen. 32:22—32, part of the story of Jacob’s return to Canaan from Padan-aram. In the King James Version, familiar to Wesley, we read that on the bank of the River Jabbok “there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.” Jacob’s thigh was put out of joint, but his “adversary” bestowed on him a new name, Israel, before departing at sunrise.

The details of the struggle described in this passage have been variously construed by different scholars, but there is general agreement that the principal result of the encounter was a kind of spiritual regeneration for Jacob, so that not only his name but also his nature was changed. The new nature was the blessing he needed, and the new name given to him was a confirmation of that blessing. Hos. 12:4 credits Jacob with “power over the angel” but adds that “he wept, and made supplication to him,” so that in this view the blessing was won not by physical conquest but through tears and prayer, through humble and earnest entreaty.

²Ibid., 288.
In a sermon on “Wrestling Jacob” during Holy Week of 1941 Bernard L. Manning, an English Congregationalist layman, declared of this story, “Charles Wesley, in the hymn that you are going to sing in a few minutes, has said the best things that have ever been said to explain it to us.”

For Charles Wesley, Christ was the subject not only of the New Testament but of the Old Testament as well. It was inevitable that in his hands the story of Jacob’s wrestling would become an allegory of the spiritual struggle of any petinent who, in an encounter with Christ, becomes a new creature. “Any petinent” could include Wesley himself. First person singular pronouns occur sixty-seven times in the poem. One feels that the voice is Jacob’s but the heart is Wesley’s.

The poem follows, in facsimile from the original edition of Hymns and Sacred Poems, 1742.

**Wrestling Jacob**

1 Come, 0 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.

2 I need not tell Thee who I am,
   My Misery, or Sin declare,
   Thyself has call’d 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?

3 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.

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5 In line 82 “Heart” was corrected to “Hart” in the Errata. In line 70 “it’s” should be “its” but was not corrected. Modern hymnals replace “Bowels” by “mercies” in line 53, interchange the comma and semicolon in lines 68–69, and delete the two commas in line 77. Appreciation is hereby expressed to the Music School Library of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, for permission to use its copy of the 1742 Hymns and Sacred Poems.
Charles Wesley's Greatest Poem

4 Wilt Thou not yet to me reveal
   Thy new, unutterable Name?
Tell me, I still beseech Thee, tell,
   To know it Now resolv'd I am;
Wrestling I will not let Thee go,
   Till I Thy Name, Thy Nature know.

5 '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.

6 What tho' 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.

7 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.

8 Yield to me Now—for I am weak;
   But confident in Self-despair:
Speak to my Heart, in Blessings speak,
   Be conquer'd by my Instant Prayer,
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,
   And tell me, if Thy Name is Love.

9 '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 Bowels move,
   Thy Nature, and Thy Name is Love.

10 My Prayer hath Power with God; the Grace
   Unspeakable I now receive,
Thro' 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.
11 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.

12 The Sun of Righteousness on Me  
    Hath rose with Healing in his Wings,  
Wither'd my Nature's Strength; from Thee  
    My Soul it's Life and Succour brings,  
My Help is all laid up above;  
    Thy Nature, and Thy Name is Love.

13 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.

14 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 Heart fly home,  
Thro' all Eternity to prove  
    Thy nature, and Thy Name is Love.

Although the poem is obviously based on the Genesis story, it is just as obviously a radical revision of the story. What Wesley gives us is Gen. 32:22-32 “imitated in the language of the New Testament,” to use the description Isaac Watts applied to his own metrical psalms. It is true that the language of Genesis appears at times (“Thigh ... Sinew ... Power with God”) and that some of the other numerous biblical allusions are to the Old Testament, but the poem is not really about a physical contest alongside the River Jabbok. Moreover, instead of a dialogue, with action, Wesley offers us a dramatic monologue, with the action implied (“In vain Thou strugglest to get free”).

For the first half of the poem the monologist, the Jacob figure, is the defiant adversary of the unknown Traveller. Yet it appears that his goal is not to throw down his opponent but rather to cling to him in an effort to discover the identity, the name and nature, of this stranger who has already elicited a confession of sin and misery. While the demand for a name is repeated as the condition for the Traveller's release, clues to his identity begin to appear: “Thyself has call’d me by my Name” (Isa. 43:1), “Look on Thy Hands” (Isa. 49:16), “the Man that died for me,” “Thy new, unutterable Name,” and “the God-man.” As the Jacob figure's perception of the nature of his supposed
adversary gradually changes, his defiance becomes mixed with admissions of pain, weakness, and failing strength. Stubborn resistance to the inevitable surrender leads to such seeming paradoxes as "When I am weak then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:12), “Faint to rise,” and “I fall ... I stand.”

This ambivalent mood extends into the first part of stanza 8, which begins confidently with almost impudent boldness—"Yield to me Now"—despite the admitted weakness and “Self-despair.” Then, despairing of self, the penitent—for we may now call him that—turns to prayer and pleads for a blessing, a revelation. Having already confessed that “my Nature dies,” his reliance on self gives way to faith in the one so recently regarded as an adversary and whose name is now on the tip of his tongue.

He has moved from the puzzlement of “Who art Thou?” to the hopeful but tentative “Tell me, if Thy Name is Love.” Immediately the joyous assurance comes: It is Love! This is the Man that died for me! The night of doubt is gone, morning breaks, and shadows flee (S. of S. 2:17). If the poem were read aloud, “‘Tis Love, ’tis Love! Thou diest for Me” might well be a shout, and yet the revelation it proclaims came not in earthquake, wind, or fire, but through a still small voice, “Thy Whisper in my Heart.”

The secret is now fully revealed in the climactic line, “Pure Universal Love Thou art,” and is repeatedly affirmed in “Thy Nature, and Thy Name is Love.” God’s “unspeakable” grace is gratefully received. The Traveller, once unknown and dimly seen, is now recognized as “Saviour” and as a “Friend” who, unlike the shadowy figure in the Genesis story, will not leave at sunrise, or ever, for his love and mercy are not only redemptive but everlasting.

Following the full disclosure of the identity of the Traveller the remainder of the poem looks forward to the new life in Christ, from the first dawn, marked by the appearance of the Sun of Righteousness, through the relatively short journey on earth, and throughout all eternity. In adapting “the sun rose upon him” from Gen. 32:31, Wesley borrows from La. 4:2 and from his own earlier lines, “The Sun of righteousness on thee / Hath rose, with healing in his wings.” These lines appear in a poem headed “Congratulation to a Friend Believing in Christ” and presumably addressed to his brother in 1738.6

Stanzas 12 and 13 (see Note 5 for punctuation) express a strong sense of dependence, as in “My Help is all laid up above” and “On Thee alone for Strength depend.” However, the poem closes in exultation and triumph, recalling “The lame take the prey” (Isa. 33:23)

and “Then shall the lame man leap as an hart” (Isa. 35:6). Victory over “Hell, Earth, and Sin” is confidently predicted—and that with ease! The pilgrim joyfully pursues his way to his eternal home, where he will be able to “prove” what has already been whispered to his heart, “Thy Nature, and Thy Name is Love.”

“Wrestling Jacob” is presumed to be to some extent autobiographical, related to Charles Wesley’s own experience on May 21, 1738. There are elements in his journal for May 1738 which also appear in “Wrestling Jacob,” notably his resistance to belief, his realization of his weakness, and his reliance on a higher power. The association of the poem with his conversion is evidently recognized by the placement of a much shortened version of it in The Book of Hymns (#529) in the section for “Anniversaries: Aldersgate.” In that section are also found Wesley’s “And Can It Be That I Should Gain” (#527) and “Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin” (#528). Both of these were written soon after the May 21 experience, and one of them, probably the latter, was sung in celebration and thanksgiving on the evening of May 24 when Charles was visited by a group of friends bringing his brother in triumph from the meeting in nearby Aldersgate Street at which John’s heart was strangely warmed.

Since the publication of “Wrestling Jacob” in 1742 there have been many comments by competent critics which, taken together, justify our regarding this as Wesley’s greatest poem. One of the earliest and most quoted comments was attributed to Isaac Watts by John Wesley: “Dr. Watts did not scruple to say that that single poem ‘Wrestling Jacob’ was worth all the verses he himself had written.”7 We need not suppose that Watts intended for this judgment to be taken literally. Manning was only partly facetious in saying that Watts spoke “with the generosity of a Congregationalist and the exaggeration of a preacher.”8 In the same vein, Nutter was doubtless correct in stating that Watts “simply meant that he greatly admired the production.”9 At any rate, Watts evidently thought highly of the poem.

“Wrestling Jacob” was generously praised by James Montgomery (1771–1854), himself a gifted poet: “Among Charles Wesley’s highest achievements may be recorded, ‘Come, O thou Traveller unknown,’ in which with consummate art he carries on the action of a lyrical drama.”10 The Rev. John Kirk (1760–1851), a Catholic priest, referred to “the complete finish and rhythm of the verse” and listed several

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7Ibid., 773.
other features that "have won the commendation of all competent critics." 11

To these statements may be added other judgments that are brief but emphatic in their praise of our poem.

"Probably the finest sacred lyric in the language." 12

"Among the masterpieces of devotional poetry." 13

"Deemed by many the finest thing he ever wrote." 14

"If not his greatest hymn, unquestionably his finest poem." 15

One of the admirable features of the poem is the ingenuity of its conception or design—the likening of Jacob's experience to that of conversion. A promising conception may fail at the point of execution, but critics have credited Wesley with carrying out his design with language that keeps the drama moving, that precisely describes the changes in the narrator as he progresses from the night of misery and sin to the dawn of "grace unspeakable." The intensity, the depth of feeling conveyed by the language, has often been noticed. This intensity is heightened at points by the use of paradox or seeming paradox (oxymoron) as in lines 34–36, 43–44, and 46.

Yet Wesley writes under control. Kirk's comment on "complete finish and rhythm" has been mentioned. Even the paradoxes are, in their context, credible expressions of a soul passing from self-despair to trust, from doubt to assurance. The skillful use of repetition for emphasis while avoiding monotony has been discussed by Frank Baker. 16

Despite the outpouring of praise for "Wrestling Jacob" as a devotional poem, it has not often been included in non-Methodist hymnals in the United States. Even Methodists seldom if ever see "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown" listed in the Sunday bulletin. Its length and its intensity have been cited as obstacles to its use as a congregational hymn. Some critics contend that the average congregation cannot readily, on cue and as a body, share the poem's feelings ranging from the depths of despair to the heights of spiritual joy. A different view has been expressed by the late Erik Routley (1917–82), a distinguished hymnologist: "I am here defending its use as a hymn and its inclusion

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11 Ibid.
12 W. Garrett Horder, The Hymn Lover, 2nd ed. (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1892 or later), 113.
in hymnals, because I believe that here you have a hymn whose deep mysterious language will unerringly lead the singer toward a depth of faith which no other hymn can quite achieve for him."

The problem of length has been handled by division or by the omission of certain stanzas, although the severe reduction to four stanzas, as in *The Book of Hymns*, results in the loss of much of the thought and feeling. British Wesleyan Methodists have retained the twelve stanzas (omitting the original fifth and seventh) to which John Wesley reduced the hymn in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. That non-Methodists in America have not abandoned the hymn is evidenced by its appearance, albeit with only four stanzas, in two hymnals published in 1985, *The Hymnal 1982* (Episcopal) and *Rejoice in the Lord* (Reformed Church in America).

**The Poem Remembered**

When Charles Wesley died in London on March 29, 1788, John was in or near Madeley, Shropshire, about 125 miles to the northwest. He was on a journey that would take him as far north as Glasgow and Edinburgh, with visits to Methodist societies along the way. A letter informing him of his brother's death was sent from London on March 29 by the Rev. Samuel Bradburn, the assistant at the chapel on City Road, but it was misdirected. As a result John did not learn of the death until April 4, the day before the funeral, which he was thus unable to attend, having gone still farther north to Macclesfield, in Cheshire. Within a half-hour of receiving Bradburn's letter, he wrote to Charles' widow.

John resumed his journey and about two weeks later was preaching in Bolton, eleven miles northwest of Manchester. As he had often done over more than four decades, he chose "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown" for the congregation to sing. Although he had omitted two of its stanzas in the 1780 *Collection*, he had shown his regard for Charles' writing in this poem by not changing a single word in the remaining twelve stanzas. Now at Bolton he began to give out the hymn, but after the lines

My Company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee

he broke into tears, sat down, and buried his face in his hands. The words "gone, and I am left alone" were naturally associated with his own bereavement, for he had lost one who for fifty years was figuratively, and often literally, by his side. The congregation well knew

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the cause of his tears, and grieved with him. Soon he recovered his composure and was able to continue the service. No doubt the old man, nearing eighty-five, found comfort in the later lines

   What tho' my shrinking Flesh complain,
   And murmur to contend so long,
   I rise superior to my Pain,
   When I am weak then I am strong.

Charles Wesley was laid to rest in the graveyard of Marylebone Parish Church, near his home. About three years later John was buried three miles to the east, behind the chapel on City Road. In their death they were divided, but the brothers are memorialized together by a tablet in Westminster Abbey. Nearly a century after they died the lovely Acton-Adams memorial to them was placed in the Abbey in 1876, in the south aisle near the choir. At that time the Dean of Westminster was Arthur P. Stanley, who was one of the speakers for the unveiling ceremony. Although we do not have a full account of his remarks, we do know that he spoke of “Wrestling Jacob” and specifically that he quoted the third and fourth lines of the poem, lines which, because of the recent death of his wife, had assumed for him the same poignant significance that they had held for John Wesley at Bolton.

Many General Conferences, or other appropriate authorities of the various Methodist bodies in American history, have seen fit to approve the inclusion of some form of “Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown” in their principal hymnals. It is gratifying to learn that the committee preparing the new United Methodist Book of Hymns has decided to recommend the retention of the hymn, with stanzas 1, 2, 8, 9, in the revised hymnal. Thus, assuming approval by the 1988 General Conference in St. Louis, the users of that revision will still have available, though in a version much shorter than the original, this historic hymn. Even so, that page in the hymnal will fall far short of conveying the full richness of “Wrestling Jacob,” so it is hoped that this article will help to answer the purpose of those who would like to read and reflect upon the complete text of Charles Wesley’s greatest poem.

18This information was kindly provided by Mrs. Marjorie Tuell, chair of the Committee on Texts.