

## Jacob Wrestles with the Angel (Genesis 32:22-32)



Alexander Louis Leloir (1843-84), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1865

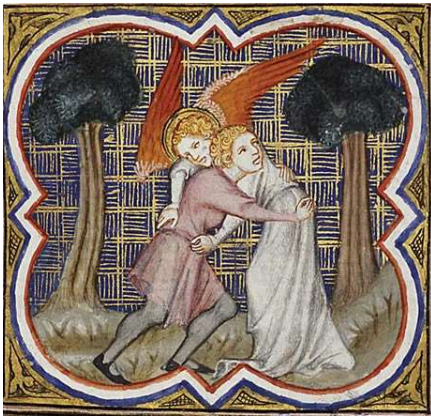
### Genesis 32

**32** <sup>22</sup> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. <sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "*Jacob*" ("supplanter"). <sup>28</sup> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel* ("strives with God"), for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place *Peniel* ("face of God"), saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

## Artistic Illumination

Medieval depictions of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, limited almost exclusively to miniatures in illuminated Bibles, have been straightforward, showing a man dressed in Medieval clothing wrestling with an angel, dressed in white robe and shown with wings on the back, what has become the conventional portrayal of an angel in Western art.

Fashion Sidenote: Penueil is not only the name Jacob gives the area, but is also a kind of clothing (in which the angel appeared) from which the French *peignoir* originated. Peignoir is usually made of muslin, chiffon, silk or other transparent material, an analogue of a men's dressing gown. Often trimmed with lace. In many paintings by medieval painters, the angel is depicted in something resembling a peignoir dress.



Likewise, the few examples of the story in Renaissance art carry on this conventional depiction, even as the pose of the opponents becomes more dynamic.

**Pietro Francesco Mazzuchelli (Italian, 1571-1626), *Jacob Wrestling With An Angel***



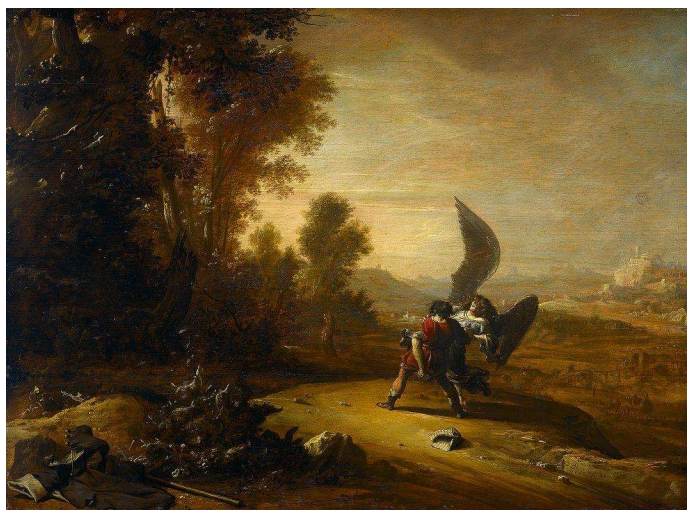
With the emergence of Dutch hegemony in the 1600s, artistic portrayals of the Biblical story diverge along two paths. The first path, taken by landscape painters, has the drama of the divine-human contest diminished, reduced to a negligible part of a larger backdrop, namely, the landscape. While one assumes this was done for practical reasons, in order to exhibit the artist's skill in portraying the natural environment, the visual diminishment reminds us of how this event, and all of the events of the Bible, are often considered by those outside as being of little significance, as being unworthy of even a footnote in the history of human civilization. But to the Jews, and Christians who follow after them, the encounters of Abraham and Jacob and Moses and others with God are of much greater significance and consequence than, say, the building of the pyramids in Egypt or the rise of the Roman Empire or the development of the nuclear bomb, or any of the other events that are the subject of world history.



**Frans Francken II (Belgian, 1581-1642), *The Struggle of Jacob and the Angel***



**Claude 'Lorrain' Gellee (France, c1600-82), *Landscape with Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, or Night, 1672***



**Bartholomeus Breenbergh (Dutch, 1598-1657), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, 1639***



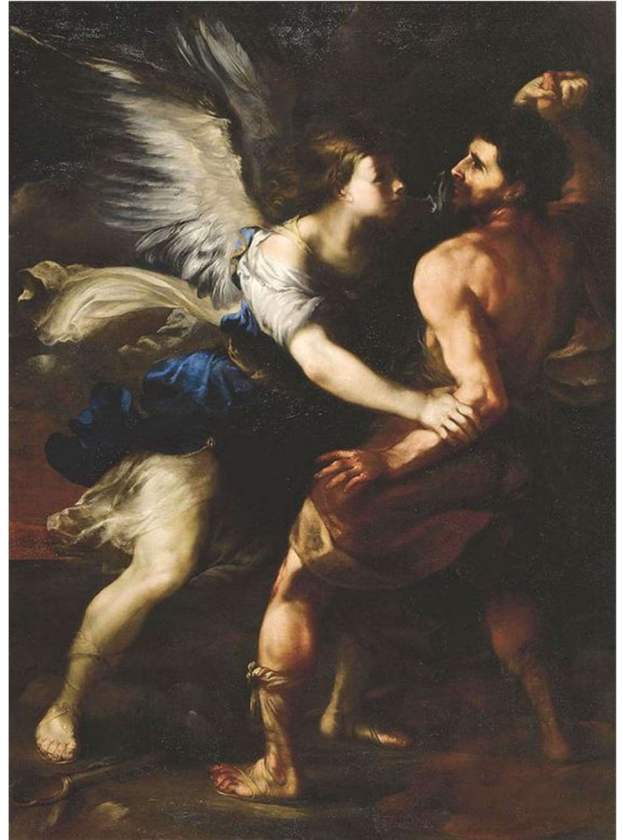
**David Teniers the Elder (Belgian, 1582-1649), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel***



The other path, taken largely by Italian artists, continued the pattern of dramatizing the contest between Jacob and the angel, using vivid colors and angular poses to emphasize the tension of the scene.



**Alessandro Magnasco (Italian, 1667-1749),**  
*Jacob Wrestling With the Angel*



**Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634-1705),**  
*Jacob wrestling with the Angel*



**Pier Francesco  
Mazzucchelli (Italian,  
1573 - 1626), *Jacob  
Wrestling the Angel,*  
c1610**



**Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634-1705), *Jacob  
Wrestling With The Angel,* 1694**



**Rembrandt Van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-69), *Jacob's Struggle with the Angel*, 1659**

Rembrandt captures the moment when the angel, seeing that he was not overpowering Jacob, "touched the structure of his thigh." But the angel does not at all look defeated. In fact, of the two, only Jacob is making efforts, the angel is calm and serene, he seems to embrace Jacob, and does not measure strength with him. This is not a fight of wrestlers, but a meeting full of special significance.



**Jurgen Ovens (Dutch, 1623-1678), *Jacob Fighting the Angel***

Really? .. And it seemed to me that he was hugging a girl. Then again, considering that this is an intimate encounter with God, as much as a wrestling match with an angel, it is not wholly inappropriate to liken it to an intimate embrace of a lover.



In the 1800s, this subject was taken up by popular illustrators of the Bible, whose etchings, woodcuts and prints continued the conventional man-vs.-angel theme with little advancement in the interpretation of the subject.



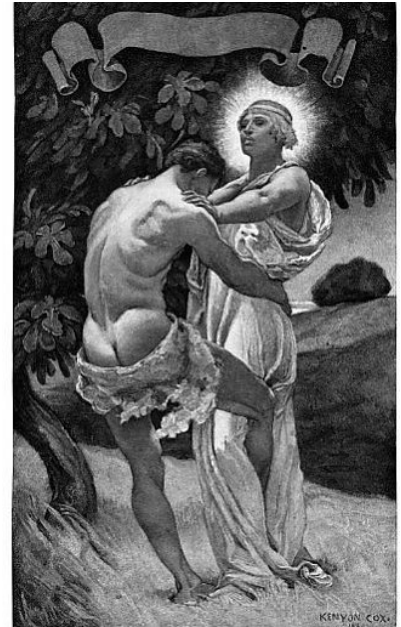
**Gustave Doré (French), 1855**

Despite its conventionality, Dore's print is perhaps the most ubiquitous portrayal of the subject.



**Page 160, Horne and Brewer, *The Bible and its story*, 1908**

Jacob begs the angel to stay longer, and continue to fight with him.



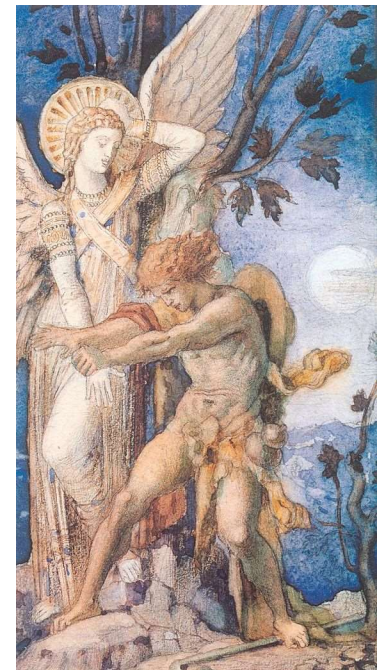
**Kenyon Cox (American), 1887**



**Edward von Steinle (Austrian), 1837**



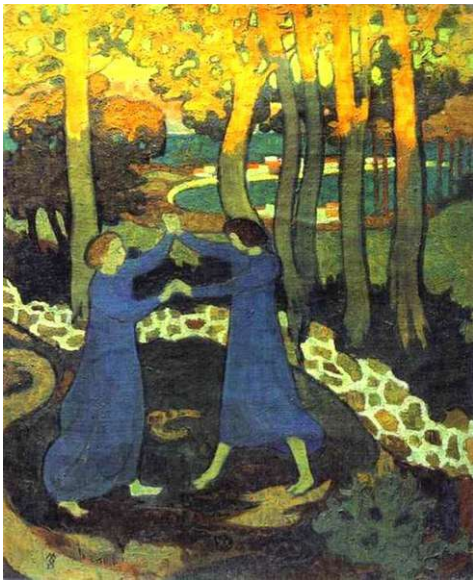
**Schnorr von Carolsfeld (German), 1860**



**Gustave Moreau (French), 1878**



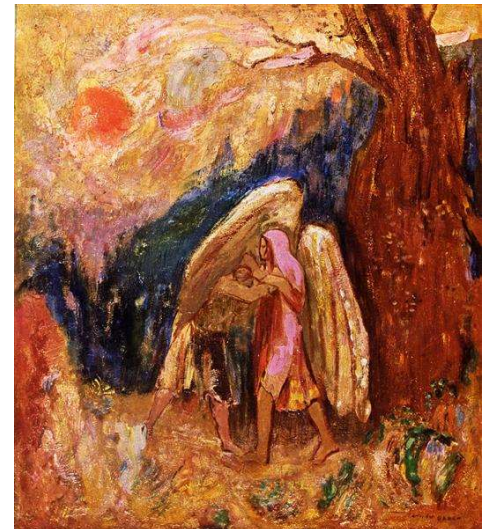
At the same time, several impressionist artists took up the subject for their revolutionary artistic stylings. Some well-known Impressionists, like Gauguin and Delacroix, offered interpretations of Jacob's wrestling with angels, but other lesser-known artists also took up the story, using techniques reminiscent of more-celebrated artists.



**Maurice Denis (French, 1870-1943), 1893**  
(compare to Paul Cézanne)



**Leon Joseph Florentin Bonnat (French, 1833-1922), c.1876**  
(compare to Vincent van Gogh)



**Odilon Redon (French, 1840-1916), c. 1905**  
(compare to Vincent van Gogh)



**Paul Gauguin (French, 1848-1903), *The Vision After the Sermon*, showing the episode envisioned by Breton villagers, 1888**

The title reminds us that 'Israel' is a name given not just to Jacob or to his descendants, but to everyone who encounters and wrestles with God, including those who wrestle after encountering God in the Word preached.



**Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798-1863), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1861**



In the 1900s depictions of Jacob wrestling with the angel take on a darker tone, becoming harder, muddier, heavier, “scratchier.” This shift to the rough and gloomy follows the emergence of Jews as artists in their own right and as the situation of Jews in Europe became more perilous in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, the struggle of Israel-the-person mirrored the struggle of Israel-the-people.



**Oluf Hartmann (Danish, 1879–1910), *Jakobs kamp med englen*, 1907**



**Max Beckmann (German, 1894–1950), *Jacob Wrestles with the Angel*, 1920**



**Maltby Sykes (American, 1911–1992), *Jacob and the Angel*, 1948**

Note, the angel is ephemeral, air in some sheets...



**Schmuël Bonneh (Polish-Israeli, 1930–99), *Jacob wrestling with the angel*, 1960**

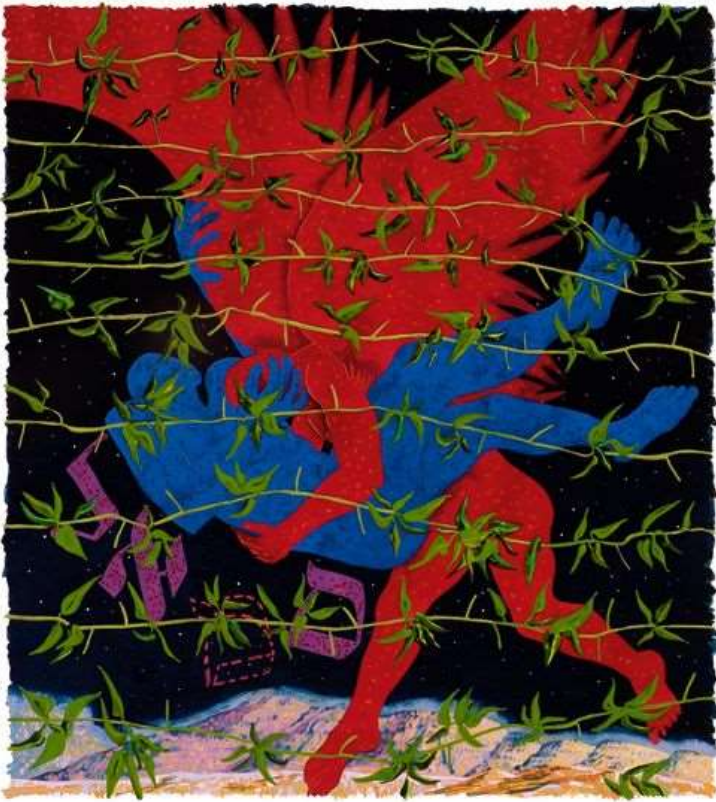


**Lynd Ward (American, 1905–85), *Genesis 32 (Jacob wrestles with the angel)*, 1967**



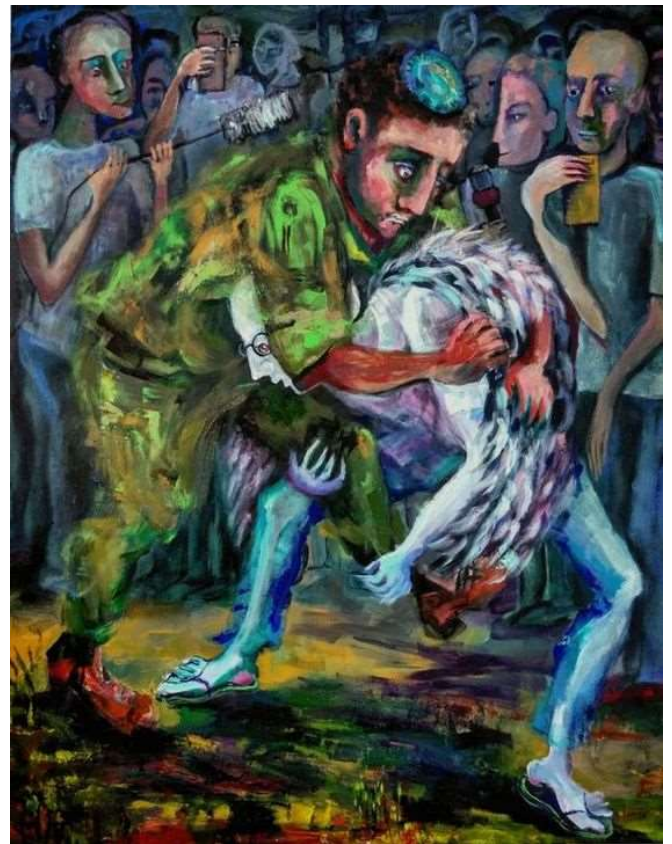
**Walter Habdank (German, 1930–2001), *Woodcut of Jacob wrestling with God*, from the Habdank Bibel (Pattloch, 1995)**





**Victor Majzner (Russian-Australian, b.1945),**  
*Vayishlach ("And he sent")* 2008

Here the struggle of Jacob is set behind lines of vines made to look like barbed wire of concentration camps that were destroyed in the year he was born



**Elisheva Nesis (Russian-Israeli),** *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (2017)

Dressed in modern Israeli military fatigues, "Israel" continues to strive with God as a nation.



**Marc Chagall (Belarusian, 1887-1985),** *The Falling Angel*, 1923-47



**Irving Amen (American, 1918-2011),** *Jacob and the Angel*, c.1960



**Benton Spruance (American, 1904-1967),** *Eternal Jacob*, 1952





**Jacob Epstein (British, 1880–1959), *Jacob and the Angel*, 1940-1**

Note the thickness, the heaviness of both figures and how the angel appears to be supporting Jacob.



**Philip Ratner (American), *Jacob's Angel*, contemporary**

In contrast to Epstein, the figures of Ratner's sculpture is spindly and rough, though both are distortions.



**Don Saco (American, 1928)**



**Nathan Rapoport (Polish-Israeli, 1911–87), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1978**

Both Saco's and Rapoport's sculptures seem to suggest a more "uplifting" perspective on the story of Jacob and the angel, except that in both the angel appears to be actively in retreat, trying to get away from Israel.



One of the interesting developments in the artistic depiction of the story of Jacob and the angel is the trend in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century towards depicting the struggle horizontally, with both Jacob and the angel pushing against or past each other, not away as when the angel wishes to exit. One could only speculate as to the meaning of this shift—the struggle is clearly this worldly, yet the nature of Jacob's partner is ambiguous—is the Stranger divine or human?



**Jack Baumgartner (American), 2012/2013**



**Brian Kershnik (American, b.1962), 2008**



**Boris Shapiro (Ukrainian), contemp.**



**Michael Cook (British), contemp.**



**Edward Knippers (American, b1946), 2012**





**Arthur Sussman (Eastern European-American, 1927-2008), 1995**

Jewish artist Sussman portrays this episode as a whirl of wings and arms, flailing, flapping, legs planted and upturned. The focal point is the face of Jacob, clearly struggling but still holding on tightly. Above his head is an orb of light, signifying the break of day, by which Jacob will be able to see his opponent's face for the first time. This painting doesn't capture just one moment in the narrative but many moments superimposed on one another. However, amid all the motion, Jacob's face remains fixed in an expression that seems to indicate that he is almost at the point of surrender. I imagine that this particular freeze frame captures the moment at which God pronounces his blessing on Jacob, right after he has given him the new name 'Israel' – 'he who strives with God.' Jacob is looking upward and inward as he realizes that validation, blessing and victory come from God alone, not from earthly fathers and definitely not from his own cunning.



**Wayne Forte (Filipino-American, 1950-), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel 2*, 1996**



**Hans Feibusch (German, 1898-1998), *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 2013**



**JC Styles (American), *Jacob wrestles with God*, c. 2010**





Edward Knippers (American, 1946-), *Jacob Wrestling the Angel*, 1990

Like most artists before him, Edward Knippers, an Anglican in northern Virginia, has interpreted in his first two depictions of Jacob's opponent (1990, 1998) as a massive and solidly muscled figure, whose impressive frame stands out dramatically against the twilight sky. This is no ethereal divine presence engaged in a wrestling match with Jacob, but a corporeal force to be reckoned with, who grapples with Jacob, skin on skin. You can almost feel the heat of exertion radiating from their bodies in the cool of the night. Through this painting, Knippers expresses his belief in an embodied divinity – a God active and present in the physical world. His angel looks fully human – if it weren't for the title of the painting, we might assume this image was simply of two wrestling men. The figures' nakedness too strips away any sense of time or place, allowing them to transcend the specific location of the biblical tradition to take on a more universal significance. As Knippers himself insists, "The human body is at the center of my artistic imagination because the body is an essential element in the Christian doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection. Disembodiment is not an option for the Christian." In his later two paintings of the scene (2008 and 2012 above), the same very physical angel is shrouded in fractured, cubist colors, suggesting something more than a natural human opponent. Together these four pieces present the ambiguity of the encounter—both the earthiness of the conflict and its spiritual dimension.

For an excellent discussion of Knippers' work, including this painting, see Ronald Reynoso, "The Cross, the Wilderness, and the Virgin: The Contemporary Christian Iconography of Edward Knipper" – available on [academia.edu](http://academia.edu).



Edward Knippers, *Jacob and the Angel*, 1998



Edward Knippers, *Jacob and the Angel*, 2008



## **Extra: Musical Interpretation**

SONG: “[Wrestling Jacob](#),” aka “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown” | Words by Charles Wesley, 1742 | Traditional Scottish melody (CANDLER / BONNIE DOON), from *The Hesperian Harp*, 1848 | Performed by Tim Eriksen, on *Soul of the January Hills*, 2010

Come, O thou Traveler 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 sin and misery 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 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.

'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.

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.

I know Thee, Savior, 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 on me  
Hath rose with healing in His wings,  
Withered my nature's strength; from Thee  
My soul its life and succor 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,  
Through all eternity to prove  
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.

In this hymn, Wesley merges his own faith struggle with the story of Jacob's literal wrestling with God at the Jabbok river. Holding on with a fierce resolve, the speaker demands to know the



name and nature of the elusive being with whom he grapples, and midway through the poem, both are revealed to him as Love.

Lastly, here is another hymn, reminiscent of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32

SONG: "[Lord, I cannot let Thee go](#)" | Words by John Newton, 1779 | Performed by Mac Meador, 2016

Lord, I cannot let Thee go,  
Till a blessing Thou bestow:  
Do not turn away Thy face,  
Mine's an urgent, pressing case.

Dost Thou ask me who I am?  
Ah! my Lord, Thou know'st my name;  
Yet the question gives a plea  
To support my suit with Thee.

Thou didst once a wretch behold,  
In rebellion blindly bold,  
Scorn Thy grace, Thy power defy:  
That poor rebel, Lord, was I.

Once a sinner, near despair,  
Sought Thy mercy seat by prayer;  
Mercy heard, and set him free:  
Lord, that mercy came to me.

Many days have passed since then,  
Many changes I have seen;  
Yet have been upheld till now;  
Who could hold me up but Thou?

Thou hast helped in every need;  
This emboldens me to plead:  
After so much mercy past,  
Canst Thou let me sink at last?

No, I must maintain my hold;  
'Tis Thy goodness makes me bold;  
I can no denial take,  
When I plead for Jesus' sake.