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Wrestling before God

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Source: *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible*

Published: Toelle, UT; Heritage Press, 2003

Page(s): 98-101

Chapter 17

WRESTLING BEFORE GOD

“I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God.” (Enos 2)

Enos, one of the scribes who kept the small plates of Nephi, was the son of Nephi’s brother Jacob. In his record Enos appears to allude to the ancestor after whom his father was named: Jacob, who was renamed Israel by “a man” with whom he wrestled all night (Genesis 32:24–28). Enos may have had this event in mind when he wrote of “the wrestle which I had before God, before I received a remission of my sins” (Enos 2).

When Enos wrote about his wrestling, he evidently was referring not only to his struggle to overcome sin but also to his prayers for both the Lamanites and the Nephites (see vv. 9–18). He wrote of “struggling in the spirit” while praying for his own people (v. 10) and noted that he “prayed unto [God] with many long strugglings, for [his] brethren, the Lamanites” (v. 11). Similar terminology is found in Alma 8:10, where we read that “Alma labored much in the spirit, wrestling with God in mighty prayer, that he would pour out his Spirit upon the people who were in the city; that he would also grant that he might baptize them unto repentance.” These two examples suggest that wrestling with God can refer to prayer in behalf of those who have fallen away from the truth.

In similar fashion, Jacob may have been praying for his brother Esau during his wrestle with the angel. At the time, Jacob was returning to his homeland after a

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sojourn of two decades in the land of Syria. He had left on bad terms with Esau, who wanted to kill him (Genesis 27:41–45). Now, in the midst of his efforts to placate Esau with gifts, Jacob prayed that God would deliver him and his family from his brother (Genesis 32:9–12).

The Nephites and Lamanites for whom Enos prayed were very much like Jacob and Esau. Nephi, like Jacob, had to flee with his family because his elder brothers Laman and Lemuel sought to kill him (2 Nephi 5:1–7). Nephi's people were settled and industrious, constructing a temple and other buildings (2 Nephi 5:15–17), while the Lamanites became “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). Enos later provided this description of the Lamanites:

They became wild and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax.” (Enos 20)

Similarly, the Bible describes Esau as “a cunning hunter, a man of the field” (Genesis 25:26), who loved to hunt with the bow (Genesis 27:1–5). Before God forgave his sins, Enos “went to hunt beasts in the forests,” where he remembered the words of his father, which prompted him to seek God's forgiveness (Enos 3–4). By describing himself as a hunter, Enos may have been comparing his preconversion self to the Lamanites and to Esau.

Additional evidence suggesting that Enos had his ancestor Jacob in mind is found in his words “I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God” (Enos 2). In

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Hebrew the words before God would be *liphney el*, literally “to the face of God.” The name of the place where Jacob wrestled all night, Peniel, is from the same Hebrew phrase. “And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30).

After his wrestle with God, Enos expressed the hope that, at the resurrection, he would “stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure” (Enos 27). This passage is also reminiscent of Jacob’s reunion and reconciliation with his brother Esau the day after his nightlong wrestle. Jacob said to his brother, “I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me” (Genesis 33:10). Just as Esau was “pleased” when Jacob saw his face, Enos hoped to see the face of God “with pleasure.”

Enos noted that the Lamanites wanted to destroy the records of the Nephites (Enos 14). Evidently this was because these records gave validity to various Nephite claims, including the right to possess the land that God had given them (see Enos 10). Some noncanonical Jewish texts reflect a similar tale of the dispute between Jacob and Esau. *Jasher* 27:12–14 recounts Jacob’s purchase of the birthright in exchange for the pottage and notes that “Jacob wrote the whole of this in a book, and he testified the same with witnesses, and he sealed it, and the book remained in the hands of Jacob.” Later, after returning from Syria, Jacob wrote a “book of purchase” for the property agreement he struck with Esau after Isaac died.¹ He put it with “the command and the statutes and the revealed book, and he placed them in an earthen vessel in

¹ Jacob’s purchase of the rights to the cave of Machpelah from Esau is mentioned by Rashi on Genesis 46:6, citing *Midrash Tanhuma*. According to *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 36, a deed was drawn up for Abraham’s purchase of that cave as a burial place.

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order that they should remain for a long time, and he delivered them into the hands of his children” (Jasher 47:26–29). When Esau’s family challenged the right of Jacob’s sons to bury their father in the cave, the Israelites produced “all the records; the record of the purchase, the sealed record and the open record, and also all the first records in which all the transactions of the birth right are written” (Jasher 56:55–57).²

Enos prayed that God would preserve the Nephite records (Enos 1:13, 15–16), and they were eventually buried in the ground in a stone box by Moroni, who delivered them to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Enos’s use of the term *preserve* may reflect the words of Jacob following his night-long wrestling, in which he said, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30).

The subtlety of Enos’s allusion to his ancestor Jacob, and the way he seems to compare the situation of the Nephites and Lamanites with that of Jacob and Esau, suggests an acute awareness of the scriptural account. It may also reflect additional material found on the brass plates of Laban and represented in early Jewish tradition. Such subtlety would not be expected from an uneducated farm boy such as Joseph Smith, who dictated the entire Book of Mormon in approximately sixty days. Consequently, we see these allusions to the biblical account as further evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and another example of the complexity of this masterpiece of literature.

² This story is also found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sotah* 16a), *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 39, and Rashi on Genesis 49:21.