



WRESTLING WITH AGENCY

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In the Book of Mormon, the word wrestle is found in only two places. Enos explains “the wrestle which I had before God (Enos 1:2)” while Alma was “wrestling with God in mighty prayer” (Alma 8:10). Using such an aggressive verb when describing one’s interaction with God creates a bold statement. Evidence suggests that Mormon borrowed this word, as well as several others, from Enos’ autobiographical account to create a connection between the two messengers of God. He utilizes their analogous beginnings but varying conclusions to teach a powerful lesson on the Lord’s respect for agency.

The storylines of Alma and Enos follow a comparable pattern. Enos was hunting in the forest when “the words which [he] had often heard [his] father speak . . . sunk deep into [his] heart” (Enos 1:3). Alma was persecuting the Church when an angel appeared to him. The angel said, “the Lord hath heard the prayers . . . of his servant, Alma, who is thy father” (Mosiah 27:14). As Enos knelt in prayer, the voice of the Lord came unto him and told him his sins were forgiven (Enos 1:5). Alma suffered for two days before he awoke from his stupor declaring, “[I] have been redeemed of the Lord” (Mosiah 27: 24). Each was personally and miraculously redeemed through the faith of their fathers.

After Enos was assured of his redemption, he then proceeded to pray for his brethren (Enos 1:9). The Lord spoke to him again (Enos 1:10, 12). After Alma explained what had happened to him in the time that “he became weak,” he “began from this time forward to teach the people” (Mosiah 27:19, 32). Each prophet, following their personal salvation, became concerned with the status of their brethren’s souls.

Although not much detail is given of Enos' life, he does tell us that he then went forth "prophesying," and "testifying" (Enos 1:19). Alma gave up the judgment seat, a position of great political power, and chose to preach to many of the Nephites. He spent much of his later life teaching in several cities including Zarahemla, Mormon, and Gideon. After divine communication, each man went forth and preached.

Despite Enos' diligent efforts, however, his "labors were vain" (Enos 1:20). He could not convince the Lamanites to follow the ways of God. Alma's ministry to Amalickiah was, perhaps, the most difficult in all his time preaching. He labored among the wicked people and did not experience much success. Each prophet struggled in their ministry.

Enos and Alma's narratives follow a similar pattern as well as share a general theme within the Book of Mormon of personal redemption followed by concern for others' redemption. Once they made the decision to seek forgiveness, they went forth to help others come to the realization that they needed to repent. They yearned for the salvation of their wicked brethren but neither experienced much success in their respective time preaching. Their accounts seem connected by content.

However, the linked stories go deeper than that. The syntax is remarkably similar throughout the accounts, although the writing styles vary. The book of Enos is a memoir written in the first person. Enos describes his personal journey to God and his subsequent ministry among both people of the Americas. Alma's story of his ministry to the people of Ammonihah is a historical narrative written in the third person. The historian Mormon summarized these events from records handed down to him, embedding quotes from his subjects within the stories.

Furthermore, the third person perspective implies Mormon chose his vocabulary with care and created this link between Enos' life and Alma's ministry to Ammonihah intentionally. Or, at least, that Alma chose the mirrored vocabulary and Mormon made the conscious decision to maintain the connection.

As Enos and Alma labored over the need for repentance, they both cried out in "mighty prayer" (Enos 1:4, Alma 8:10). When the voice of God comes unto Enos, He praises Enos saying, "thou shalt be blessed" (Enos 1:5). Alma has a similar encounter with an angel. After praying and sorrowing over the rejection of the people, a messenger from God comes to him. In fact, it is the very same angel that commanded him to stop his destruction of the Church. The angel begins his message with "blessed art thou, Alma" (Alma 8:15). Each disciple reached for God in their despair and each was praised for his diligence.

The most striking similarities in language come in the words "wrestle" and "hungered." The word wrestle is found only twice in the entire Book of Mormon, in Enos and in Alma 8. Both times wrestle is used it is in relation to God. Enos wrestled "before God" and Alma wrestled "with God" (Enos 1:2, Alma 8:10). The 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary defines wrestle as "to struggle, to strive, to contend" (Webster's). This is a very aggressive, action-oriented word to be used when describing communication with God. Prayers often include a lot of passive, emotion-oriented vocabulary. In addition, the jargon is typically extremely respectful. This contrast from the norm creates a striking picture.

But why would they wrestle if they were asking for something the Lord wants to give? The answer is found in the root of what they were asking for. As Enos "cried unto him," he

wrestled with his own sin. He struggled “before God” because his conflict was internal. He prayed in “supplication for [his] own soul” (Enos 1:4). When Alma wrestled “with God,” he was not praying for his own salvation. He was petitioning the Almighty to “pour out his Spirit upon the people.” He contended *with* God, pushing against the limits of His power. He was asking “that he might baptize them unto repentance.” God cannot grant baptism unto unwilling participants. This is evident in how Alma “labored much in the spirit” (Alma 8:10).

Hungered is found in three places. Once in Enos, once in Alma 8, and once in a recounting of the story in Alma 8. Enos states that his “soul hungered; and [he] kneeled down before [his] Maker.” Hunger connotes a physical response to a lack of food, but context leads the reader to believe it is a spiritual hunger Enos is experiencing. He describes his soul as hungered and not his body. Furthermore, Enos’ response to his hungering is immediately followed by him kneeling down before his maker (Enos 1:4). It is further evidenced that hungered has spiritual connotations in Enos’ response as he “cried unto him,” feeding his craving with divine communication (Enos 1:4).

When Alma returned to the city of Ammonihah, “he was an hungered.” The verse states he asked for “something to eat” (Alma 8:19). Physically, he hungered for food. The context of Enos implies he hungered spiritually. Prior to this encounter, Alma was “wading through much tribulation and anguish of soul” for his brethren (Alma 8:14). After the angel spoke to him, he “returned speedily to Ammonihah” (Alma 8:18). Alma was eager to preach to his brethren. He hungered for their redemption. And he was fed through the fellowship and generosity of a faithful Nephite within the city. This Nephite, Amulek, first replies to Alma’s requests by stating that he knows Alma is a “holy prophet of God” (Alma 8:20). This response seems out of place as

an answer to a request for food, unless Amulek is not thinking about physical nourishment. He is declaring his faith and providing spiritual support to the depleted, “weighed down” Alma (Alma 8:14).

However, if “hungered” is being used as an intransitive verb, according to its 1828 definition it means “to desire with great eagerness; to long for” (Webster’s). Although Alma specifically requests food, he is only speaking of a strong desire. When this word is used in the context of Alma’s supplications to baptize the wicked people of Ammonihah, it indicates his eagerness for more widespread salvation.

But Alma preached often throughout his life. In Zarahemla, he spoke of repentance and he was able to “establish the order of the church” (Alma 5:4). When Alma goes among the Zoramites, he again uses emotionally heavy language. His heart begins “to sicken” because of their wickedness and he felt “great sorrow” (Alma 31:1-2). Each of these ministries parallels Alma’s preaching in Ammonihah in one way or another, but in neither instance does Alma repeat his “wrestling with God” (Alma 8:10).

What would be Mormon’s reason to connect this particular ministry to the prayers of Enos? One answer could be that these words were chosen to describe “a linguistic exchange” (Givens). In the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Terryl A. Givens suggests that such language creates a tone of dialogue within the Book of Mormon. Prayers are described as conversations not just impressions. However, this reasoning does not fully explain why wrestle was not used in any other accounts. To be used in only these two places implies a deeper meaning than simply dialogical language.

The answer is to demonstrate the Lord's views on agency. God will warn, exhort, and explain, but He will not force His children to righteousness. This is evidenced through Enos' pleadings and the Lord's answers, as well as the events surrounding Alma's initial preaching to Ammonihah and his return. Each story holds a subtle message on the eternal laws governing agency, but that theme is further exploited through the contrast of a prayer answered and a prayer denied. Both men were mighty, spiritual powerhouses. They "hungered" for the redemption of their brethren, but all their appeals to the Almighty could not go against humanity's right to choose for themselves. This is where they wrestled with the limits of God's power over man.

When Enos prayed for the salvation of his brethren, the Nephites, the Lord replied, "I will visit thy brethren according to their diligence." The inclusion of "according" indicates that God's presence among them is contingent on their choices. He declares later in the verse "I curse [this land] not save it be for the cause of iniquity" (Enos 1:10). The Lord is explaining to Enos that consequences, good or bad, are the direct result of choices. This is a common motif throughout the Book of Mormon. His prophets constantly warned that blessings were reliant on righteousness. Salvation is only given to those who ask of it themselves. It cannot be granted to an entire people who have not striven for it.

In Enos 1:11, Enos goes on to pray "with many long strugglings" for the Lamanites; he "labored with all diligence." Enos emphasizes that he beseeched God for the salvation of His other children. Enos cried out ardently until the Lord answers, saying He will grant unto His servant according "to [his] desires" (Enos 1:12). In response, Enos alters what he is asking for, requesting what can be given. He prays for the preservation of the record of the Nephites. The

Lord covenants to grant this desire “that perhaps they might be brought unto salvation” (1:13). It seems God will not force righteous living on the Lamanites, but He will protect a record that can bring them to a virtuous lifestyle.

The Nephites preached earnestly among the Lamanites, but in the end, they failed to make a significant impact. The people of Nephi went out and sought “diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God.” However, their “labors were vain” (Enos 1:20). This shows, again, the eternal laws that rule what God can and cannot do, or rather what He will and will not do. Despite how much Enos pleaded and how many Nephites went forth, the Lord would not take away their right to choose.

This was much like Alma’s initial ministry to the people of Ammonihah. He prayed that the Lord would “pour out his Spirit upon the people in the city” (Alma 8:10). The people refused to listen and cast him out. He left, deeply sorrowed by his failure, and it was during this departure that an angel visited him. The angel declared, “behold, I am he that delivered [the first message] unto you” (Alma 8:15). He reminded Alma of the circumstances of his conversion, but he also created a connection between Alma’s redemption and his failure to convert the people of Ammonihah. Alma’s attempts to destroy the Church were called out; his conversion was a beneficial side effect. The angel says his purpose is to “convince” Alma of God’s power (Mosiah 27:14). He does not demand repentance. The angel reminds Alma of the sacrifices of his father and others before him for the gospel, but he does not demand that Alma repent (Mosiah 27:16). The Lord was not forcing Alma into the fold, but He was preventing Alma from inflicting any more harm upon the people of His Church. Alma’s conversion was a result of seeing the truth and power of God. Alma decided to take that experience seriously and repent of his sins. In

Ammonihah, Alma prayed that “he might baptize [the people] unto repentance” (Alma 8:10). He believed his faith would guarantee success but he neglected to think about their agency.

The angel goes on to coach Alma in how he will preach, saying, “say unto them, except they repent the Lord God will destroy them” (Alma 8:16). He is telling Alma to follow the pattern of exhortation. The Lord will not exact punishment unless His people have been fully warned of the impending consequences. He will give His children every opportunity for repentance. This was a teaching moment for Alma. He needed to approach his ministry from a new direction, presenting choices and results. Prior to this encounter with his angel, Alma’s plan for preaching was to “[bear] down in pure testimony against them” (Alma 4:19).

The angel, then, sends Alma back to Ammonihah stating, “they do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty of thy people” (Alma 8:17). Even in their wickedness, God will protect their agency. This could be an allusion to the ongoing conflict between king-men and freemen. The king-men are constantly seeking to take away the democratic system of judges and either replace it with one dictatorial king or a powerful oligarchy. This form of governance is evidenced in the actions of the chief judge and his supporters in Ammonihah when they burn the wives and children of believers without consulting all the people (Alma 14:8). God is commanding Alma to return to warn them of the impending danger. He is warning the people of the prison they are putting themselves in through their riotous living, but He is also protecting the righteous Nephites from the wayward choices of their brethren. There were numerous cities Alma converted before Ammonihah. Just as God promises destruction if His people do not repent, He also covenants that they will be protected if they are righteous. The Lord must uphold both sides of His promises, and Alma is His instrument for such.

Mormon knew the records he held well. As he summarized this account, he chose to create a link between the stories of Enos and Alma in order to teach his readers about agency. He utilized similar phrasing as well as unique, aggressive words to create a memorable relationship for his audience. He then included commentary on agency by speaking of consequences, liberty, and divine requests. Enos' prayers were answered because he prayed for what God could give; the protection of the record of his people. Alma's prayers were rejected because God cannot force His people to repentance. It must be a choice they make.

These lessons on agency are important when it comes to personal prayer and ministry. When we pray, we must take into account the people we are praying for and how what we are praying for affects them. We can ask for the ability to approach ministry from an effective angle. We can ask for God to soften others' hearts so they will hear our message. We can ask that the knowledge we present will be understood and accepted. But we cannot ask Him to save our brethren. His children must strive for that redemption first. This is evident in Helaman 10:5 when God grants Nephi, a descendant of Alma, the power "even that all things shall be done unto thee." Nephi is given this ability because he "shalt not ask that which is contrary to [God's] will." Nephi proved he could handle the responsibility of such great authority because he knew what to ask. The Lord had to correct Enos in his supplications thus he did not gain full access to God's sealing power.

The Bible Dictionary states that prayer is "the act by which the will of the Father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other." Enos and Alma's stories demonstrate their struggles to align their wills with God and recognize how the Lord wants to

direct His children. When other prophets understood this alignment, they were granted the sealing power, just as Nephi was.

When it comes to ministry within His church, we can learn from Alma's mistakes. We should warn of the impending consequences of actions (both evil and good). We should speak of the benefit of obedient living. We should pray, as Enos did, for the tools to potentially convert. But we should always respect our brethren's ability to choose for themselves.

Abstract

In the Book of Mormon, the word *wrestle*, a distinctive and aggressive verb, is found in only two places: Enos 1:2 and Alma 8:10. Using that word to discuss prayer is a bold statement about one's relationship to God and points to other similarities between the chapters, such as analogous beginnings, strikingly similar diction, allo-repetition, and various parallelisms. These similarities suggest that Mormon borrowed the word "wrestle" from Enos' autobiographical account to create a connection between the two messengers of God and their stories. That connection is strengthened by the similarities, while the varying conclusions and other subtle changes in diction highlights the Lord's respect for agency.

Works Cited

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