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Enos’s Adaptations of the
Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis**

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“AND THERE WRESTLED A MAN WITH HIM” (GENESIS 32:24): ENOS’S ADAPTATIONS OF THE ONOMASTIC WORDPLAY OF GENESIS

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: In this brief note, I will suggest several instances in which the Book of Mormon prophet Enos utilizes wordplay on his own name, the name of his father “Jacob,” the place name “Peniel,” and Jacob’s new name “Israel” in order to connect his experiences to those of his ancestor Jacob in Genesis 32-33, thus infusing them with greater meaning. Familiarity with Jacob and Esau’s conciliatory “embrace” in Genesis 33 is essential to understanding how Enos views the atonement of Christ and the ultimate realization of its blessings in his life.

Over a decade ago, John Tvedtnes and Matt Roper insightfully noted that Enos’s autobiographical description of his “wrestle ... before God” (in Hebrew: **lipnê ʾēlōhîm*, “to the face of God”) was a literary allusion to Jacob the patriarch’s “wrestling” with a “man” at Peniel (“face of God”).¹ These authors did not note, however, that the word “wrestle” itself both in the Genesis narrative (Hebrew *yēʾābēq/ bēhēʾābēqô*, Genesis 32:24-25) and in Enos’s adaptation of it in his autobiography (Enos 1:2) constitutes a paronomasia (or a pun)² on “Jacob” (*Yaʾāqōb*).

1 John A. Tvedtnes, “Jacob and Enos: Wrestling before God,” *Insights* 21/5 (2001): 2-3.

2 Richard A. Lanham (*A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. [Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1991], 110) defines *paronomasia* as “playing on the sounds and meanings of words.”

In this brief note, I will suggest several instances in which Enos utilizes wordplay on his own name, the name of his father “Jacob,” the place name “Peniel,” and Jacob’s new name “Israel” in order to connect his experiences to those of his ancestor Jacob in Genesis 32-33, thus infusing them with greater meaning. Familiarity with Jacob and Esau’s conciliatory “embrace” in Genesis 33 is essential to understanding how Enos views the atonement of Christ and the ultimate realization of its blessings in his life.

Enos’s Transformative Jacob-like “Wrestle”

The impact of the ancestral stories about Jacob the biblical patriarch and his personal transformation are evident in the writing of his descendant, the Book of Mormon Jacob’s son Enos, whose autobiographical introduction contains wordplay both on his name and the name of his father, Jacob:

Behold, it came to pass that I, **Enos** [*’Ēnôš*, Heb. *’ēnôš* = “man”], knowing my father that he was a just **man**³ [*’iš/’ēnôš*]⁴—for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord—and blessed be the name of my God for it—And I will tell you of the **wrestle** [**hē’ābēq*] which I had before God [*lipnē ’ēlōhīm*, cf. Peniel],⁴ before I received a remission of my sins. (Enos 1:1–2)

Enos’s introduction recalls not only Nephi’s autobiographical wordplay on his own name (Nephi-Egyptian *nfr* [neh-fee] = “good,” “goodly,” 1 Nephi 1:1)⁵ but also the

3 Cf. the use of the phrase “just man” in Genesis 6:9: “Noah was a just man [*’iš ṣaddīq*] and perfect in his generations.”

4 Tvedtnes and Roper, “Jacob and Enos: Wrestling Before God.” 2–3.

5 See Matthew L. Bowen, “Wordplay on the Name Enos,” *Insights* 26/3 (2006): 2; on the wordplay in 1 Nephi 1:1, see Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2. On Nephi as Egyptian *nfr* and its pronunciation, see John Gee, “A

paronomasia on “Jacob” found throughout the Genesis narratives, especially the scene in Genesis 32, in which Jacob (*Ya’āqōb*) “passed over the ford **Jabbok**” (*Yabbōq*) and “there **wrestled** [*wayyē’ābēq*] a **man** [*’iš*, cf. *’ēnōš* with him” (32:22, 24; cf. “men,” *’ānāšīm*, 32:28)].⁶ In using the verb “wrestle” (Hebrew **’bq*), Enos creates an allusive pun that reminds his audience that his father, the “just man” mentioned in Enos 1:1, is named for their ancestor Jacob, who also had a “wrestle.”⁷ Patriarch Jacob’s transformative experience will be, in some measure, Enos the son of Jacob’s experience.

A New Name

In the Genesis narrative, Jacob refuses to break his hold on the “man” unless the “man” blesses him, whereupon the “man” bestows a new name on Jacob: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but *Israel* [*Yīsrā’ēl*] for **as a prince hast thou power** [*śārītā*, or better, **thou hast struggled**]⁸ with **God** [*’ēlōhīm*] and **men** [*’ānāšīm*, plural form of “Enos”]” (Genesis 32:28). The patriarch Jacob gives Jabbok the new name “Peniel” (*Pēniēl*,

Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189-91; and “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 1-5.

6 *’Ēnōš* is a poetic synonym of *’iš* (“man”) and both share the same plural form: *’ānāšīm*.

7 Notably, however, Jacob is not the active subject of the verb *wayyē’ābēq* in the biblical narrative, but the indirect passive object. A “man”—an *’iš*, the more common form or synonym of *’ēnōš*—is the subject of the verb *wayyē’ābēq*. Enos the “man” is also the agent: “the wrestle which I had before God.”

8 There are two **sry* roots in Hebrew: one is a biform of *śrr* (“rule, reign”; see Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 3:1362 [hereafter cited as *HALOT*]), the other means to “strive, contend with” (see *HALOT*, 3:1354), i.e., to “struggle with.” The latter seems to best fit the context (cf. “wrestling”). The author’s use of wordplay, however, allows for both: a “new name” is not infrequently a throne name. Compare Hosea 12:3-4 version of this story, where the sense of the verb as “struggle” better fits the narrative context as well.

“face of God”)⁹ because he had “seen **God face to face** [*’ēlōhîm pānîm ’el-pānîm*]” (Genesis 32:30), a name to which Enos alludes when he describes his wrestle as being “before God” (*lipnê ’ēlōhîm*, “to the face of God”) and “before my maker” (Enos 1:2, 4), as Tvedtnes and Roper have noted.¹⁰ The men that Jacob “struggled” with include the divine “man” that he wrestled at Peniel, Esau (in the womb and afterward), and Laban, whose daughters Jacob married. Jacob is eventually reconciled to all of these “men” (*’ānāšîm*).

At the conclusion of Enos’s wrestle, he is similarly “blessed”: “Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be **blessed**” (Enos 1:5). At this point, Enos “began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites” (1:9), and subsequently for the Lamanites (1:11). He is a changed “man” and he seems to allude to Jacob’s new name “Israel” when he describes his and his people’s later “strugglings” on behalf of and with the Lamanites (Enos 1:10, 11, 14). Through his “struggle,” Jacob’s life is “preserved” (Genesis 32:30). Amid these “strugglings,” Enos obtains a promise that the Nephite records would be “preserved” (1:15–18) and that one day the Lamanites would come to the same “knowledge of God” that he and the Nephites possessed. In other words, the Lamanites would be eventually reconciled to God (and thus to Enos himself!).

There seems to be a further pun envisaged by the use of the verb *rā’â*, to “see” in Genesis 32:20, and the giving of Jacob’s new name “Israel” (*Yîsrâ’ēl*) in connection with the verb *rā’â*, to “see” in Genesis 32:28–30 (it is a key word that also occurs at Genesis 32:2, 20, 25; 33:1, 5, 10; cf. Enos 1:8, 19, 27). The force of this implied or hidden non-etymological pun seems to be *’îš -*rā’â*-’ēl: A “man” (’îš) has “seen” (*rā’â*) “God” (’ēl[ōhîm]), and his “life is preserved.” Jacob’s “wrestle”—or the “wrestle” of the divine ’îš with him—is the pivotal, transformative event

9 Or, “Penuel” (*Pēnûēl*, Genesis 32:31).

10 Tvedtnes and Roper, “Jacob and Enos,” 2–3.

in the story of Jacob's life, who goes from being a grabber of his brother's "heel" (*ba'āqēb*, Genesis 25:26) and a "supplanter" ("Is not he rightly named Jacob? **for he hath supplanted me** [*wayya'qēbēni*] these two times," Genesis 27:36)¹¹ to one with whom his once-estranged brother can reconcile. Prior to his "wrestle" with the mysterious "man," Jacob sends a gift to Esau: "**I will appease him** [*ākappērâ pānâw*, literally, "I will **atone his face**"] with the present that goeth before me [*lēpānāy*], and afterward **I will see his face** [*er'eh panâw*]; peradventure he will accept of me [*yiśśā' pānāy*, he will lift up **my face**]" (Genesis 32:20). Jacob's "wrestle" at Jabbok/Peniel, in which he "prevails" with God, prepares the way for reconciliation with his brother Esau, and Enos's wrestle "before" God prepares the way for the eventual reconciliation of his brethren the Nephites and Lamanites with each other (see, for example, Alma 17–27) and God through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Jacob's and Enos's Atoning "Embraces"

Enos, like his ancestor Jacob and his father Jacob, longed to be reconciled or "atoned" with his brethren. After his "wrestle" with the "man" in Genesis 32, the very next pericope describes Jacob's "reconciliation" or "at-one-ment" with his estranged brother Esau. Jacob's humility is evident in his obeisance, to which Esau responds with an embrace:

And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau **ran** to meet him, **and embraced him** [*wayēḥabbēqēhū*], and **fell on his neck**, and **kissed him**: and they wept (Genesis 33:3–4).

¹¹ Jeremiah 9:4 [MT 9:3] also trades negatively on this wordplay on Jacob: "Take ye heed every one of his neighbour, and trust ye not in any brother: for every brother will utterly supplant [*āqōb ya'qōb*], and every neighbour will walk with slanders."

In the biblical account, the word “embraced” constitutes a paronomasia on the name “Jacob”¹² similar to the paronomasia on “wrestle” (*yē’ābēq*) and Jacob (*Ya’āqōb*). This wordplay is a sublime pun on “Jacob” that emphasizes his transformation from his former identity: he is no longer the “heel [-grabber]” or “usurper,” but “the embraced,” i.e., “the at-one-ed.” This pun confirms Hugh Nibley’s suggestion that “the word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled’ (*yē’āvēq*)” can just as well mean “embraced.”¹³ Jesus seems to allude directly to this event in his Parable of the Prodigal Son: “And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father **saw him**, and had compassion, and **ran**, and **fell on his neck**, and **kissed him**” (Luke 15:20). The Lord, speaking to Enoch, describes a similar “at-one-ment” between Enoch’s Zion and the Latter-day Zion: “Then shalt thou and all thy city **meet** them there, and **we will receive them into our bosom**, and **they shall see us**; and **we will fall upon their necks**, and **they shall fall upon our necks**, and **we will kiss each other**” (Moses 7:63).

12 Similar wordplay on “Jacob” in terms of embrace can be found in Genesis 29:13 and 48:10.

13 Hugh W. Nibley (*The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. [CWHN 16; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005], 434) writes, “One of the most puzzling episodes in the Bible has always been the story of Jacob’s wrestling with the Lord. When one considers that the word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled’ (*yē’āvēq*)” can just as well mean ‘embrace’ and that it was in this ritual embrace that Jacob received a new name and the bestowal of priestly and kingly power at sunrise (Genesis 32:24-30), the parallel to the Egyptian coronation embrace becomes at once apparent.” Notably, the Hebrew verbs **bq* (“wrestle”) and *hbq* (“embrace”) may both be related to Akkadian *epēqu(m)*, “to embrace; grow over, round.” See *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, ed. Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicolas Postgate; SANTAG 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 74.

Following this “divine” embrace, Jacob articulates his feelings about this “reconciliation” or “at-one-ment” in words that recall his “wrestle” at Peniel (“face of God”) where he saw God “face to face” (Genesis 32:30) and his earlier words (“I will see his face, and he will [lift up my face],” 32:20):

And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore **I have seen** [*rā’itî*] **thy face** [*pānêkā*], **as though I had seen** [*kir’ôt*]**the face of God** [*pěnhê ’ēlōhîm*], and **thou wast pleased with me** [or, “thou hast been reconciled to me”] (Genesis 33:10).

Enos, who goes down to the grave with the knowledge that the Lamanites will one day be reconciled to God (Enos 1:12-17),¹⁴ anticipates his final “reconciliation” and “atonement” to God in words that directly recall Genesis 32:20 and 33:10:

And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall **stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure**, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen. (Enos 1:27).

Enos’s words here, adapting Jacob’s words from the Jacob-Esau story, constitute a marvelous play on both “Peniel” and “Israel.” Enos rejoices in the eventual at-one-ment of his body and spirit, i.e., his becoming an immortal man, and he foresees that when he finally stands “before” God (cf. Peniel), he will “see his face with pleasure,” just as when Jacob “saw” Esau’s “face” and was finally reconciled to him (Genesis 33:1-4). He

14 Cf. Jacob’s words in on reconciliation and atonement in 2 Nephi 10:24-25 and Nephi’s words on reconciliation and grace in 25:21-23.

knows the Lord will embrace him (cf. 2 Nephi 1:15; 4:31–35; Alma 34:16; Mormon 5:11; Luke 15:20; Moses 7:63).

Prior to his “wrestle” before God and “strugglings” on behalf of his brethren, Enos had never “heard or seen” the Lord: “Because of thy faith in Christ, **whom thou hast never before heard nor seen**. And many years pass away before he shall manifest himself in the flesh; wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole” (Enos 1:8). However, Enos now foresees that when he is invited into the “place prepared for [him] in the mansions” of God the Father, he will have become like his ancestor Jacob/Israel, the wrestling “man-who-saw-God” (cf. Israel) and emerged transformed, “embraced,” and divine. “How is it done?”¹⁵ Enos asked (Enos 1:7). It was “done” through the atonement wrought out by Jesus Christ. Enos spent the rest of his life “prophesying of things to come, and testifying of the things which [he] had heard and **seen**,” i.e., of Jesus Christ and his atonement (Enos 1:19; cf. 1:8). He too had seen God.

Conclusion

In sum, the wordplay used and alluded to by Enos as discussed in the paper can be summarized in the following chart:

15 Possibly implying the idea that the Hebrew verb *šy/śh (to “make” or “do”) sounds very similar to “Esau” (*Ēśāw*). Notably, in Enos 1:3, Enos presents himself like Esau, a hunter (see Genesis 25:27 [*’iš yōdēa’ šayyīd*], 27:5, 30) or “man of the field” (*’iš śadeh*, 25:27). Jacob was an *’iš tom* (“plain man”) (Genesis 25:7).

16 Most still follow Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (BWANT 3/10; Stuttgart: W. Kolhammer, 1928), 173. See also HALOT, 2:872. Cf. 2 Nephi 6:2 and Jacob 1:20, where Jacob describes Nephi as his and the Nephites’ “protector.”

Name	Hebrew/Meaning	Level 1 wordplay	Level 2 wordplay	Level 3 wordplay
Jacob	<i>Ya'āqōb</i> ("May He [God] protect") ¹⁶	<i>bā'āqēb</i> ("on the heel," Genesis 25:26) <i>wayya'qēbēnī</i> ("he hath supplanted me," Genesis 27:36)	<i>wayyē'ābēq/ bēhē'ābēqō</i> ("and there wrestled") "in his wrestling," Genesis 32:24–25)	<i>wayēhabbēqēhū</i> ("and embraced him," Genesis 33:3–4; cf. 29:13 and 48:10)
Israel	<i>Yisrā'ēl</i> ("El [God] struggles," "El has power")	<i>śārītā</i> (*śry/*śrr) ("struggle" or "have power" with God," Genesis 32:28)	"struggling," "strugglings" (Enos 1:10–11, 14)	Implicit pun: <i>'iš-rā'ā -'ēl</i> ("man has seen God"; Genesis 32:30) <i>rā'ā -"see"</i> (Genesis 32:2, 20, 25, 30; 33:1, 5, 10; Enos 1:8, 19, 27)
Peniel	<i>Pēniēl</i> ("[The] Face of El")	<i>'ēlōhīm pānīm 'el-pānīm</i> ("God face-to-face, Genesis 32:30); <i>pēnē 'ēlōhīm</i> ("face of God," Genesis 33:10)	<i>lipnē 'ēlōhīm</i> ("before God," Enos 1:2) <i>lipnē</i> ("before" Enos 1:4)	The "atoned" or reconciled "face" seen (Genesis 32:20, 33:10; Enos 1:27)
Enos	<i>'Ēnōš</i> ("man" [poetic])	"just man" (Enos 1:1)	echoing <i>'iš</i> ("a man") in Genesis 32:24	echoing <i>'ānāšīm</i> ("men") in Genesis 32:28

There can be little doubt that Enos, in describing his transformative "wrestle before God" (Enos 1:2), alludes to his ancestor Jacob's transformative "wrestle" at Peniel, with a view to the name "Jacob" which was also borne by his father, whose teachings Enos also had to "wrestle" with and become reconciled to. Enos also subtly alludes to the meaning of his own name in using wordplay that recalls his uncle Nephi's autobiographical wordplay (1 Nephi 1:1) and the wrestling "man" and "men" of Genesis 32. Enos further insinuates through wordplay that he became "Israel," one who "struggled" with God and prevailed, and a "man" who had "seen" God.¹⁷ The breathtaking beauty of Enos's wordplay, however, cannot be appreciated until we recognize his allusions to Esau and Jacob's conciliatory "embrace" and Jacob's "seeing" the face of his brother, with mutual pleasure, as "the face of God." Enos

too became *Yiśrā'ēl* — a “man,” *’iš* or *’ēnôš* — who envisaged God and became like him through Jesus’s atonement and the resurrection that Jesus brought to pass.

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