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Abstract Review of *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (1997), by Richard Dilworth Rust.

Richard Dilworth Rust. *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997. viii + 293 pp., with index. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Madison U. Sowell

Fifty years ago, in 1947, Robert K. Thomas defended his ground-breaking B.A. thesis at Reed College on "A Literary Analysis of the Book of Mormon." In the intervening five decades numerous articles and a handful of good books and essay collections have appeared, highlighting various literary figures and typologies that characterize, enrich, and enliven the Book of Mormon narrative. Informed discussions of the book's exodus pattern, tree of life symbolism, and Hebrew literary structure—to cite but a trio of pertinent examples—have become rather commonplace in college classrooms and adult Sunday School classes that focus on the "keystone" of Mormonism.

So when one reads on the jacket flap of the book that the Book of Mormon "has *only recently* begun to be truly appreciated for its own literary merits" (emphasis mine) or in the *Front-runner* catalogue of LDS products (vol. 7, no. 3, p. 9) that a book on the literary testimony of the Book of Mormon is "unprecedented," one immediately frets about media hype and exaggerated claims. What well-read Latter-day Saint has not heard repeatedly about chiasmus or inverted parallelisms in the Book of Mormon? What devotee of Hugh Nibley does not have his or her own favorite list of Book of Mormon Hebraicisms? What serious scholar of the scriptures does not know the import of various *hapax legomena* that appear in such unique terms as *cureloms* and *cumoms* (Ether 9:19) and testify to the antiquity of the Book of Mormon record?

With queries such as these in mind, I approached R. D. Rust's *Feasting on the Word* with more than a touch of skepticism. Even the title piqued and vexed just a tad, not because of the savory imagery it evokes but because it echoes so closely another fine

Deseret Book publication by Dennis and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (1981), and thus may invite or foster confusion. The good news is that *Feasting on the Word*, like its quasi-homonymous predecessor, tenders a veritable plethora of insights, both literary and theological, and is highly readable besides. Significantly, the book situates its literary lessons in contexts that embrace and draw on writings of some of this century's most renowned anthropologists and littérateurs, including Erich Auerbach, Joseph Campbell, Frank Kermode, Mircea Eliade, and Arnold van Gennep. As a professor of literature myself, I enjoyed seeing my own academic discipline competently brought to bear on a text that I regard as both highly literary and pervasively sacred.

Divided into nine chapters, including the introduction, *Feasting on the Word* explores succinctly a rich array of Book of Mormon literary topics, including narrators and narratives (chap. 2), epic elements (chap. 3), poetry (chap. 4), sermons (chap. 5), letters and autobiography (chap. 6), imagery (chap. 7), and typology (chap. 8). The final chapter, subtitled "Larger Perspectives," discusses, *inter alia*, various liminalities (thresholds), Christological centering, the book of Ether as microcosm, and the Book of Mormon as Liahona. Over twenty pages of notes, a Works Cited section, and an index close the volume.

Chapter 2 examines four representative narratives developed via repetition and contrast: Nephi's quest for the brass plates, Ammon's missionary efforts among the Lamanites, Jacob's encounter with Sherem, and Alma's conflict with Korihor. In these examinations Rust appears sensitive to textual details that show how Mormon as editor repeated certain motifs, drew various parallels, and fashioned a number of contrasts in order to teach and convince.

The third chapter details elements common to epics and the Book of Mormon: a wide-ranging "scope; nationalistic emphasis, with narrative motifs including warfare and rulership; a historical impulse, with allusions to key events in the life of a nation; a supernatural context in which the action occurs; and an epic structure of episodic plot with recurrent patterns or situations" (p. 49). With these literary notions in mind, Rust persuasively argues that the book's protagonist—the "truly central hero"—is Jesus Christ

(p. 55). Other epic aspects are also shown to emerge in the intervention of supernatural beings, the ceremonial nature of various teaching moments (e.g., King Benjamin's extended address), and the *in medias res* nature of many of the book's narratives.

Next the author analyzes the Book of Mormon's prose for its poetic qualities, focusing specifically on parallelisms and reviewing various examples of chiasmus and anaphora. He achieves this analysis by setting up the prose lines as though they were poetry and concentrating on what he calls the "rhythmical development of ideas" (p. 67). The purpose of such "exalted poetic language," he argues, is that it "acts as a means of connecting earth and heaven" (p. 81).

Chapter 5 distinguishes the characteristics of various sermons. For example, close readings reveal why King Benjamin's address is so highly ceremonial, Jacob's so remarkably poetic, and Alma the Younger's so impassioned and personal. What is most interesting, Rust demonstrates how the paragraph numbers in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon reveal certain structural elements much better than do the verse arrangements in the 1981 edition. (See p. 117, also p. 239 of the final chapter, for this signal contribution.)

The sixth chapter briefly treats the confessional accounts of Nephi, Enos, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni as exemplifying the autobiographical genre and then concentrates on the style of several letters within the Book of Mormon corpus. Among these are the Moroni-Ammoron correspondence, Helaman's epistle to Moroni, the exchange between Moroni and Pahoran, Giddianhi's epistle to Lachoneus, and Mormon's to Moroni. For two reasons this is perhaps the only disappointing chapter in Rust's study. First, the very short section on autobiography (pp. 145-9) requires a much richer conceptual frame if the significance of a book that begins its first chapter with "I, Nephi," and its last chapter with "Now I, Moroni," is to be revealed. Modern literary theories abound as to the impulses behind autobiographies and what distinguishes them from memoirs, diaries, and journals. Rust would have done well to consult these, if only to add to the richness of his discussion. Second, the omission of any consideration of the epistolary nature of Alma the Younger's commandments and instructions to his sons Helaman (in Alma 36 and 37),

Shiblon (Alma 38), and Corianton (Alma 39 to 42) seems an oversight. While technically not epistles, these three recorded blessings or personalized charges from a father to his sons exemplify the key elements Rust defines for the most potent letters: one-to-one “accounts [that] that provide direct access into the thinking and feeling of various ‘fathers’” (p. 145); a type of “extempore conversation” (quoting Horace Walpole, p. 149) that is actually artfully constructed and meant to be read and mulled over in one’s mind, self-revelations that “reveal an intensity of feeling” (p. 149).

Chapters 7 and 8, on imagery and typology respectively, contain multiple insights into archetypal images (such as fire, light and darkness, captivity and deliverance, trees and waters of life), image clusters (sleeping and waking, heights and depths, wholeness and rending, swords and other weapons), and typological objects or events (the Liahona, the sixteen stones gathered by Jared’s brother, the act of tithing). The final chapter, as mentioned above, is more eclectic in its content and approach to the Book of Mormon but underscores once again Rust’s belief “that though individual authors wrote with distinctive styles and concerns, the final shape of the book is what God intended” (pp. 245–6).

In summary, I discovered *Feasting on the Word* to be reader-friendly, with careful explanations of all the terms taken from literary criticism. It is also faith promoting for the Latter-day Saint reader. While the terrain covered is vast and the coverage is occasionally superficial, this book nevertheless provides a refined panorama of the Book of Mormon as literature, a vista that simultaneously expands the mind and refreshes the spirit.