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**Abstract** Review of *The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon* (2004), by James T. Duke.

# THE BOOK OF MORMON AS LITERATURE

Richard Dilworth Rust

James Duke has performed a labor of love and deep devotion to the Book of Mormon in producing *The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon*. A professor at Brigham Young University for four decades, Duke specialized in the sociology of religion and also taught courses on the Book of Mormon. His treatment of this scripture obviously comes out of many years of study, pondering, and effort.

As its title suggests, the book is an extensive compendium of literary elements or forms, as Duke calls them, that cumulatively reveal the Book of Mormon to be a great literary masterpiece. Duke's work is, in effect, an encyclopedic presentation of themes, sermons, rhetorical structures, and the like. He treats ninety different terms, typically defining them, providing examples of them, and then listing their occurrences.

Duke developed his understanding of literary forms from books like Sidney B. Sperry's *Our Book of Mormon* (1947), Wilfred G. E. Watson's *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (1994), and Hugh W. Pinnock's *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (1999). The book, however, that had the most

Review of James T. Duke. *The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon*. Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2004. xii + 328 pp., with bibliography and index. \$24.95.

profound influence on Duke and that is cited repeatedly is Donald W. Parry's *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (1992, 1998). In a number of respects, Duke's work is an amplification of Parry's in that Duke frequently cites and enumerates Parry's patterns and then adds to them.

*The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon* is made up primarily of many lists that Duke hopes others will use for further exploration. His interpretation is often limited to pointing out that a pattern is beautiful and likely serves to help make the relevant passages memorable. Duke desires that what he has provided will encourage others to explore the Book of Mormon, especially in academic settings. As he says in his introduction, "Universities and colleges have long had a tradition of teaching one or more courses in 'The Bible as Literature.' Such courses are usually found in the English Department. However, to my knowledge no university has yet offered a course in 'The Book of Mormon as Literature.' My fondest wish would be that the present book would advance the recognition of the greatness of the literature found in the Book of Mormon" (p. 5). James Duke will be pleased to know that Charles Swift is now teaching "The Book of Mormon as Sacred Literature" as a new class for the honors program at Brigham Young University.

Duke confesses he is not trained in literary interpretation and thus makes minor errors such as calling some formulations using "like" or "as" similes when they are rather simply comparisons of like qualities. However, he counterbalances this by the thoroughness of his lists, by the depth of his study, and by his infectious love of the Book of Mormon. The spirit in which he has approached this work is a model for serious Latter-day Saint students of the Book of Mormon.

In his conclusion, Duke makes one statement that reveals what is probably a stumbling block to many in considering the Book of Mormon as a literary work: "I make no claim that literary style is as important as the spiritual content of the prophetic messages. In a sense, literary style is fluff, or the frosting on the cake" (p. 311). Duke then backs away from this view, though, saying: "Literary style helps people to pay attention to the message, remember it, and feel a sense of spirituality as well as

beauty. So literary style is really not fluff after all, but an essential ingredient in communicating God’s message to his children” (p. 312). I would add that literary style is not just the frosting on the cake called the Book of Mormon—it is an essential part of the cake. Plato had it right: truth, goodness, and beauty are three parts of a whole. “That which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually” (Moroni 7:13). Mormon the poet knew exactly what he was talking about: Truth, that “which is of God,” employs beauty (it “inviteth and enticeth”) to do good. Latter-day Saints appropriately sing, “Beautiful words of love / Coming from God above.”<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: “The Father, the Spirit, and the Son . . . stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. These three are equal. . . . The world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> My hope and expectation is that faithful scholars in the future will build on what James Duke and others have done to reveal more perfectly how form and content are integrated in the Book of Mormon to create a spiritual masterpiece made so in part by its literary aspects.

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1. “Oh, Holy Words of Truth and Love,” *Hymns*, no. 271.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: Munroe, 1844), 7.