Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon Richard Dilworth Rust

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Book Reviews


Reviewed by Steven Walker, Professor of English, Brigham Young University.

Feasting on the Word is both a heartfelt and a thoughtful book, as clearly reasoned as it is faithful. That wedding of the rational and the religious works well for a volume which argues that the literary dimensions of the Book of Mormon contribute deliberately and dramatically to its religious impact. Author Dil Rust’s explicit purpose is to “set forth a literary testimony of the Book of Mormon, to show how the impact of what the Book of Mormon says often is created through how it is said” (2; italics in original).

He shows that clearly. Feasting on the Word gives a helpful introduction into what might be the most underappreciated dimension of the Book of Mormon, providing a useful overview of the literary aspects of the scripture. Rust offers up a complete menu of Book of Mormon literary considerations, from the most minor embellishments to the largest questions. He lays out for us a smorgasbord of literary insights into the narrative, the poetry, the sermons, the letters, the imagery, the typology, even the epic elements of the Book of Mormon. He titles his final chapter “Larger Perspectives,” and he’s especially good at that larger end of the literary spectrum, with cosmic issues, as when he focuses on what Hugh Nibley thinks may be the central issue of the book—the underlying question of why “there has been chosen for our attention a story of how and why two previous civilizations on this continent were utterly destroyed.”1

Rust is especially good at overview, managing a sweep of vision that takes in the big picture that readers who focus on individual
passages may miss. He helps us see that “the final shape of the book is what God intended” (245-46): “The book begins with Lehi’s vision of the descent of Christ . . . and ends with Moroni’s anticipation of being lifted up” (229). Rust shows us that the “overall structure of the Book of Mormon is like a triangle” of “concern for the Lamanites’ receiving the gospel”; the “apex of the triangle is an account of a great spiritual change among the Lamanites” that “occurs in the physical center of the Book of Mormon” (234). He enables us to better read that larger structure through such practical lenses as his assertion that “the book of Ether is a key to its latter-day audience on how to read the Book of Mormon” (241).

All this is in invitational form. The most impressive aspect of Feasting on the Word to me is its accessibility. For all the learnedness of its author, the discussion rarely lapses into pedantry—perhaps only when the author insists on bringing up *apophasis* and reminding us it is “also called *paraleipsis*” (152). I mention that slip only to suggest how easily this study could have sunk itself in jargon; the exception proves the rule of the book’s user friendliness. Clear application of literary paraphernalia makes this work unusually invitational literary criticism, clarifying for us a great deal of complex material rather than confusing us with it. Given the inclusiveness of the approach and the complexity of the subject, I was struck with the book’s consistent readability. Rust’s language is as invitingly “plain” as the Book of Mormon’s plain language he so much admires—as “easy to understand” (11) as Nephi’s.

And Feasting on the Word is a well-thought-through book. Dil Rust is a widely respected professor of American literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his careful research shows: Rust has read extensively and incorporated much of the field’s best scholarship into his updated overview of the Book of Mormon from a literary perspective. The overview nature of Rust’s book does not permit him to be as subtle in his applications as some of the original thinkers he summarizes for us. His quotation of Robert Alter’s discussion of narrative “type-scenes,” for instance, makes us realize that where Rust is seeing the pattern, Alter is working more deeply with variations on it (23-24). His application of Erich Auerbach’s biblical analysis to Book of Mormon narrative, too, invites in-depth application of the kind Auerbach
manages with the Bible (147, 197–98, 200–201). Though he cites Nibley's identification of Lehi's poem as *Qasīda*, he doesn't have time to delve into the subtleties of its similes (93).

So the overview strength of the volume is also its weakness. Useful as I find its overview, I wish the book could have included less naming of literary phenomena and more investigation of them. As helpful an initiation as this book is to the study of the Book of Mormon as literature, I wanted it to push more often beyond pointing out literary aspects into more exploring of their applications and implications. I wish it could have gone farther even where it went farthest, in its cosmic considerations. I would have liked, for instance, a larger exploration of apocalyptic scenes such as the epic scenes in 1 Nephi 1 and 14 and 3 Nephi 8–11—Christ's crucially central appearance gets surprisingly short shrift. And the terrible battle scenes that ended the Nephite and Jaredite civilizations, which for me generate much of the power of the book, could be mined in greater depth for their apocalyptic aspects. Necessary as summary is for Rust's purposes, his study contributes most to me when it is most detailed. I like particularly, for example, his explication of specific poems in the fourth chapter. Those in-depth analyses, like his thorough examinations of letters that lead to insights into biographical dimensions of the Book of Mormon, seem to me groundbreaking work. I'd like more of that.

Which is, I suspect, Professor Rust's underlying point: much more should be done with literary study of the Book of Mormon. Readers who know something of this field are likely to yearn for more detailed investigation, and that yearning for more is precisely the reaction Rust aims to provoke—this volume is an invitation to work at greater depth the field Dilworth Rust has laid out for us. *Feasting on the Word* brings us up to speed on what has been done with literary study of the Book of Mormon and opens up possibilities for future study. The book's feast, always nourishing and, at its specific best, succulent, provides an appetizer for more literary study of scripture.

For the general readership of the Church, that is a significant boon. Anyone who savors or who would like to savor reading the Book of Mormon should not miss *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*. From his delicious literary
perspective, a perspective augmenting the blander doctrinal view we have grown used to, Professor Rust persuades us that the Book of Mormon makes wider claims on its readers: “These writings in all their richness of style, complexity of poetry, vividness of imagery, and memorability of narrative, reach both the mind and the heart” (246). I echo enthusiastically, as I think most readers of the book will echo, its essential conclusion: “The content of the Book of Mormon is inseparable from the way it is presented. It is a literary testimony of Christ” (246).

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