

## The Book of Mormon as Great Literature

*Feasting on the Word.* By Richard Dilworth Rust (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997).

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO when I was attending Bowling Green University as a graduate student, I was introduced to the writings of John Muir, the American naturalist. One of the approaches we used in studying Muir was to look at his long narratives and extract passages that were particularly lyrical—poetic. By way of illustration, my professor provided me with several passages poet Gary Snyder had extracted from Muir's work and transposed from prose to poetry. The power of Muir's works jumped off the page. It was because of those few poems that I arrived at the topic for my thesis. I chose to explore the poetic and lyrical passages in a number of Muir's books tracing his growth as a poet and a transcendentalist. In his book, *Feasting on the Word*, Richard Dilworth Rust examines the Book of Mormon for its poetic and literary quality. There can be no question of the importance of the Book of Mormon as a divinely inspired scripture, but seldom is it considered as a monumental piece of literature. The treatment it receives at the hands of Rust places it solidly in the category of not only good literature, but his case for it as great literature is so well founded, it must be accepted without argument.

His approach is that of solid scholarship, and he avoids the didacticism that comes so naturally when dealing with religious writings. I heard Raymond Carver, the American short story

writer and poet, once say that his stories needed to be read aloud; in fact it was his contention that all literature is better when it can be experienced on as many sensory levels as possible. Rust, in explaining how he came to this project, told of reading passages from the Book of Mormon aloud to his children and how the poetics became very apparent. By extracting lyrical passages such as 2 Nephi 4:15-16 and transposing them from chapter and verse into poetic verse, Rust makes clear his contention that the Book of Mormon is not only of theological value, but of important literary value as well.

For my soul delighteth in the scriptures,  
and my heart pondereth them,  
and writeth them for the learning  
and the profit of my children.  
Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord;  
and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.

Rust's argument is further strengthened by his clear comparisons with such revered writers as Shakespeare and Nathaniel Hawthorne for both style and content. The book is divided into chapters by topical ideas all leading to the conclusion that great literature is that which inspires the reader and elevates the human spirit. The divisions are as follows: introduction, narrators and narratives, epic elements, poetry, sermons, letters and autobiography, imagery, typology, and larger perspectives. By exploring the Book of Mormon from such perspectives, Rust adds a sustaining vote of