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Transcript

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Richard D. Rust

The Poetic Testimony of the Book of Mormon

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Summary:

In the Book of Mormon, God speaks to us in the most powerful, effective way possible by interconnecting truth, goodness, and beauty. A good deal of *what* the Book of Mormon says is in *how* it is said. Richard Rust offers examples of how the choice words and their structure help convey the testimony of the Book of Mormon.

Transcript
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The Poetic Testimony of the Book of Mormon

Richard D. Rust

I have entitled this *The Poetic Testimony of the Book of Mormon*. Coming out of one age the Book of Mormon materials have been selected and designed by inspired prophet artists to come forth in due time, as Moroni puts it in the title page, for people living in another age. When I say *designed*, I mean not only planned with a purpose, but shaped artistically so that form and content are totally integrated, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Handel's *Messiah*, or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel paintings.

My love of great literature and my testimony of the saving principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ converge as I see the Book of Mormon as sacred literature. To take a literary approach joined with spiritual sensitivity is reading with the heart, engaging our feelings. It is delighting in the way something is said, in a way to reveal its essence.

In the Book of Mormon, God speaks to us in the most powerful, effective way possible, by interconnecting truth, goodness, and beauty. The Book of Mormon contains a literary testimony; that is, a good deal of *what* the Book of Mormon says is in *how* it is said. The interconnection of beauty with truth and goodness leads us to Christ by appealing to us on many levels; that is, literary elements such as imagery and poetry help teach and motivate us in ways that touch our hearts and souls as well as our minds. We see feelingly, as the Earl of Gloucester puts it in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. We gain what Nathaniel Hawthorne calls "heart knowledge."

Nephi understood how this heart knowledge comes—through pondering scriptural truths with our heart, and delighting with our soul in the beautiful way in which those truths are presented. Nephi expresses, feelingly, the conflicting emotions he experienced after the death of his father, Lehi. He responds to the anger directed against him by his brothers, Laman and Lemuel, and their families, an animosity which soon after caused Nephi and his people to flee into the wilderness to escape destruction.

On the other hand Nephi expresses the joyful intensity of his trust in the Lord. His psalm is both a supplication, that is, a poetic cry of distress to the Lord in time of critical need, and a psalm of praise. And we can continue reading on this sheet that I have given you (2 Nephi 4:17–25; see figure 1, lines 6–25).

Figure 1

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. 5

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord,
in showing me his great and marvelous works,
my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am!
Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh;
my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. 10
I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins
which do so easily beset me.

And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins;
nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.

My God hath been my support;
he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; 15
and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.
He hath filled me with his love,
even unto the consuming of my flesh.

He hath confounded mine enemies,
unto the causing of them to quake before me. 20

Behold, he hath heard my cry by day,
and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime.
And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him;
yea, my voice have I sent up on high;
and angels came down and ministered unto me. 25

And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away

Figure 1, continued

upon exceedingly high mountains.
And mine eyes have beheld great things,
yea, even too great for man;
therefore I was bidden that I should not write them.
O then, if I have seen so great things, 30
if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath
visited men in so much mercy,
why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of
sorrow,
and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken,
because of mine afflictions?
And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? 35
Yea, why should I give way to temptations,
that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and
afflict my soul?
Why am I angry because of mine enemy?
Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin.
Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my
soul. 40
Do not anger again because of mine enemies.
Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.
Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say:
O Lord, I will praise thee forever;
yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my
salvation. 45
O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?
Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies?
Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

Figure 1, continued

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me,
because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! 50

O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me,
that I may walk in the path of the low valley,
that I may be strict in the plain road!

O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy
righteousness!

O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine
enemies! 55

Wilt thou make my path straight before me!

Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way--
but that thou wouldst clear my way before me,
and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. 60
I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh;

for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of
flesh.

Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh
his arm.

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh.

Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; 65

therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee;

yea, I will cry unto thee,

my God, the rock of my righteousness.

Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee,

my rock and mine everlasting God. 70

Figure 1, continued

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin.

Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger again because of mine enemies.

Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say:

O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea,

my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation.

In this passage we have read, the repeated words and phrases appeal to our auditory delight in rhythm and repetition. Through our imagination we respond to Nephi's metaphors, his saying one thing in terms of another. Further on in the psalm of Nephi he testifies, "my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation." He continues with a series of metaphors that present concrete images relating to such experiences as being delivered, shaking, being protected by a shut gate, and walking in a narrow path. These make it more possible for us to identify with him. And you may wish to look at lines forty-six to fifty-nine on your text (see figure 1).

The power of Nephi's words is most apparent when read aloud, and also when recognized as poetry, with its primary appeal to feeling. I discovered this through my own experience, and vicariously through the response of a Blackfoot Indian. When my family and I would read the Book of Mormon together each morning I would recognize passages, such as Nephi's psalm, as having an intensified nature.

Later, when I searched the Book of Mormon for its poetry, I better understood why I was responding with my feelings to these passages. With my friend, a graduate student in Public Health, I had a desire to see how a native American would respond to hearing the Book of Mormon. As I read Nephi's psalm to him, I could see how he was visibly moved. Afterwards, he told me he felt a stirring of emotions related to how he felt as a boy hearing chants and drumbeats. Especially, he said, he could feel and identify with Nephi's joy and sorrow. Read aloud, poetic lines like these do convey, emotionally, Nephi's depth of feeling. They become a form of music in stirring the spirit, more directly than words simply read with the eyes.

You may wish to look at lines sixty-five to seventy in this regard (see figure 1).

Since the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, according to revelation, a Christ-centered book entitled Another Testament of Jesus Christ would be expected to contain much prophecy. Because the Book of Mormon is published wholly as prose, though, we may not recognize that much of the prophecy in the book actually is poetry.

It is long been known that about a third of the Old Testament, especially Psalms, Job, and the prophetic books, is poetry. What is just being discovered is that a significant portion of the Book of Mormon is poetry as well. While Book of Mormon poetry appears in many places of elevated discourse, such as sermons and instructions, a close examination of the text will show that generally when a Book of Mormon prophet says or implies, "Thus saith the Lord," the passages that follow will be poetic. Since *prophecy* means to utter by divine interpretation, we would expect the prophetic message to be of an elevated nature.

Poetry helps the message reach beyond surface meanings by adding rhythmical repetitions that touch the soul. This accords with David Noel Freedman's view of the correlation between poetry and prophecy. He says, "In communication or action between heaven and earth, the appropriate language is that of poetry. Prose may be adequate to describe setting and circumstances and to sketch historical affects and residues; only poetry can convey the mystery of the miraculous and its meaning for those present" ("Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: An Essay on Biblical Poetry," in *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu*, ed. John Maier and Vincent Toller [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979], 92).

Robert Alter agrees; he says, "Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, . . . it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry" (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 141).

Through poetry, according to T. R. Henn, prophecies exalt the heart of man. Both words and imageries acquire depth by repetition. And there is a peculiar exaltation proper to the chant (see "The Bible as Literature," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley [Surrey, England: Thomas Nelson, 1962], 12-13).

Or, as Edgar Allen Poe put it in another context, "Without a certain continuity of effort—without a certain duration or repetition of purpose—the soul is never deeply moved. There must be the dropping of the water upon the rock" ("*Twice-told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne; a Review," *Graham's Magazine* [May 1842]: 298).

Nephi's soul is especially moved by the writings of Isaiah, one of the consummate poets of the Old Testament. "My soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah," he declares. He and his brother, Jacob, quote liberally from Isaiah, and then present poetry of their own, which has elements akin to those found in Isaiah.

Arranged in poetic lines, which I have done for you, the following example reveals, in an almost self-evident fashion, the rhythm of ideas and the great poetic power of Isaiah. It also allows us to see a number of major characteristics of Hebraic poetry.

You may wish first, though, to turn to 2 Nephi 8:5-6 to see how this appears in print as prose. And then compare it with the first example on your sheet (see figure 2).

The main characteristic of Isaiah's poetry is what Ruth F. Roberts calls, "a rhyme of thoughts, or a music of ideas"; or what Robert Alter in his book on

Figure 2

My righteousness is near;
my salvation is gone forth,
and mine arm shall judge the people.

The isles shall wait upon me,
and on mine arm shall they trust. 5

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look upon the earth beneath;
for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke,
and the earth shall wax old like a garment;
and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner. 10

But my salvation shall be forever,
and my righteousness shall not be abolished.

(2 Nephi 8:5-6; cf. Isaiah 51:5-6)

biblical poetry speaks of as “semantic parallelism.”

The second and third ideas in the passage from Isaiah: “My salvation is gone forth, and mine arm shall judge the people” are parallel to the first idea, “My righteousness is near.” They are not simply synonymous though, but amplify the nature of God’s righteousness. The idea of the fourth line is repeated in the fifth line.

With the passivity of “wait upon me” changed to the action of “trust in mine arm,” lines six and seven have parallelism of a pair of antonyms. “Look up to the heavens,” “look down to the earth.” This type of parallelism continues in the next two lines in which the destinies of the heaven and the earth are set next to each other, with line ten applying to the destiny of the earth to its inhabitants.

The last two lines repeat in reverse order the subjects of righteousness and salvation found in the first two lines. Let’s look at these again: “My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth,” but “my salvation shall be forever and my righteousness shall not be abolished.” In this inverted parallelism or chiasmus (literally, “a crossing”), the subject of the first line is mirrored in the last line, with that in the second found in the second to the last line. Whereas initially salvation is gone forth, in and beyond the simple existence of righteousness, in the end its eternal duration is emphasized, as is that of righteousness in an inverse way—it shall not be abolished.

The last lines also sustain the two overall ideas of the passage. The first that God’s people should trust him and his salvation; and the second, that they should not put their trust in the heavens and the earth since they are temporary, while the Lord’s righteousness will not die.

Having just quoted this passage and others from Isaiah, Jacob now employs poetry himself to help sustain the high level of the previous discourse. While Jacob’s poetry is not as vivid as Isaiah’s, it contains some of the same elevation of expression and richness of comparisons.

In the example that follows, Jacob integrates Isaiah in an effective way. You may wish to look at number two on your sheet (see figure 3).

We hear great parallelism in Jacob’s poetry. Jacob’s soul abhors sin and his heart (a synonym for soul) positively delights in righteousness. At the end of the passage Jacob uses parallel ideas which contain both synonyms—that is, “pray unto him” and “give thanks unto his holy name”; and antonyms—“day” and “night.”

While parallelism is the dominant characteristic of poetry in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, it is not the only one. In the last stanza, for example,

Figure 3

Behold, my soul abhorreth sin,
and my heart delighteth in righteousness;
and I will praise the holy name of my God.

Come, my brethren, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters;
and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; 5
yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Wherefore, do not spend money for that which is of no worth,
nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy.

Hearken diligently unto me,
and remember the words which I have spoken; 10
and come unto the Holy One of Israel,
and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted,
and let your soul delight in fatness.

Behold, my beloved brethren,
remember the words of your God; 15
pray unto him continually by day,
and give thanks unto his holy name by night.
Let your hearts rejoice.

(2 Ne. 9:49-52; cf. Isa. 55:1-2)

the poetic element is the rhythmical intensity of action which Jacob calls for. He simply asks his auditors first to behold, that is, hear him; then he wants them to remember, followed by the actions of praying and giving thanks—the humble and grateful element of prayer.

Poetry in the Book of Mormon contains many of the indicators of poetry set forth by Wilford G. E. Watson, in his book *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*. These indicators include: evident line forms, conciseness, unusual word order, regularity and symmetry, parallelism in various word forms, word pairs such as day/night, chiasmic patterns, and repetition in various forms.

We should also note the virtues of poetry in the world from which Lehi and his family came. According to the Jewish scholar, Moshe Greenberg, "With its engagement of the emotions and the imagination, poetry was the usual mode of persuasive discourse throughout the ancient near East. Through its compression poetry allows stark, un-tempered expression that, while powerful in its impact, awakens the kind of careful reflection that leads to the fuller apprehension of a subject. Moreover, the density of poetic language, compelling the reader to complement, to fill in gaps, fits its peculiarity for representing impassioned discourse, which by nature precedes in associative leaps rather than by logical development."

As with the poetry of the Old Testament, Book of Mormon poetry helps give the utterances in which it is found emphasis, unity, and memorability. In this regard, let us look again at Nephi's psalm. As with the passages from Isaiah and Jacob, the dominant poetic feature of the psalm of Nephi is parallelism. An idea expressed in one line is completed, amplified, contrasted, or reversed in a subsequent line or lines. Both completion and contrast are evident in line seventeen through twenty (see figure 1).

This second line completes the thought begun in the first line; similarly the fourth line completes the third. Taken together, the third and fourth lines contrast with the first two lines.

Contrast with intensification is found in lines twenty-one to twenty-two:

"Nighttime" contrasts with "day"; the intensification comes in the greater detail of the second line.

Intensification of thought and feeling are especially evident in lines fourteen to sixteen. Here there is movement through space: travel through wilderness and then over the ocean. This is joined with divine aid, which increases from support, through leading, to preservation.

A more intricate intensification is found in lines thirty-nine to forty-five.

The impact of the first line is amplified in the second. The last expands the significance of the two preceding lines. While the initial appeals to the soul and heart, say what *not to do*—no longer droop, give place no more—the mere use of “heart” and “soul” affirms what *to do*—“praise” and “rejoice.”

In 2 Nephi 28:21 (see figure 4), Nephi provides another striking example of chiasmus in Book of Mormon poetry. (This lyrical chiasmus was first noticed by John W. Welch.) I have marked this so you can see that “lull them away,” is used to begin and end, and that “all is well” is at the center point, in the ironic place that it is.

Look next at Ammon’s words in Alma 26 (see figure 5). Recognized, both visually and orally, the dominant poetic feature in Ammon’s defense is parallelism. For example, the denial of boasting in line 1 is completed in line 2. The declaration of joy in line 3 is amplified in lines 4 and 5. Not boasting of self, in line 8, is reversed in boasting of God in line 9. The affirmation of God’s strength, in line 10, is specified in the next line. And everlasting darkness and everlasting light are contrasted in lines 16 and 17.

In each of the three stanzas, there is an intensification and expansion of feeling. In the first, denial of boasting in his own strength and wisdom is turned into Ammon’s emphasis on joy and rejoicing in God. The second stanza moves from limitations of self to praise for the strength of God in exemplification of his miraculous power. The third stanza builds from the simple “let us glory” to “we will glory in the Lord” to “we will praise our God forever.”

The climax comes in “who can glory too much” being amplified by “who can say too much” followed by three parallel repetitions of “his praise.” This climax is appropriately concluded with the quietly understated reversal: “I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.” In tone this confirms his earlier confession that “I am nothing” and leaves ringing the repeated words of praise to God, while acknowledging the limitations of man to treat spiritual matters in language.

Let us now look at Zenos’s prayer of worship (see figure 6). This prayer by Zenos in Alma 33 is marked by simplicity and clarity. And Zenos, as you know, was an old world prophet quoted in the Book of Mormon, but not found in the Old Testament. This prayer is developed by repetition that gives this prayer power as the repetition varies slightly but meaningfully:

In the first stanza there is a movement from the dangerous exterior *wilderness*, a place where one encounters enemies, to the cultivated exterior *field*, to the safe interior *house*, to the even more secure interior *closet*.

The second stanza serves as a transition leading the focus from *place*

Figure 4

And others will he pacify,
and lull them away into carnal security,
that they will say:
All is well in Zion;
yea, Zion prospereth,
all is well--
and thus the devil cheateth their souls,
and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.
(2 Nephi 28:21)

Figure 5

I do not boast in my own strength,
nor in my own wisdom;
but behold, my joy is full,
yea, my heart is brim with joy,
and I will rejoice in my God.

5

Yea, I know that I am nothing;
as to my strength I am weak;
therefore I will not boast of myself,
but I will boast of my God,
for in his strength I can do all things;
yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land,
for which we will praise his name forever.

10

Yea, we have reason to praise him forever,
for he is the Most High God,
and has loosed our brethren from the chains of hell.

15

Yea, they were encircled about with everlasting darkness and
destruction;
but behold, he has brought them into his everlasting light,
yea, into everlasting salvation;
and they are encircled about with the matchless bounty of his love;
yea, and we have been instruments in his hands of doing this great
and marvelous work.

20

Figure 5, continued

Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord;
yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
yea, we will praise our God forever.

Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?

Yea, who can say too much of his great power,
and of his mercy,

25

and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?

Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.

(Alma 26:11-16)

Figure 6

Zenos's Prayer of Worship

Thou art merciful, O God, [stanza 1]
for thou hast heard my prayer,
even when I was in the wilderness;
yea, thou wast merciful
when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies,
and thou didst turn them to me.
Yea, O God, and thou wast merciful unto me
when I did cry unto thee in my field;
when I did cry unto thee in my prayer,
and thou didst hear me.
And again, O God, when I did turn to my house
thou didst hear me in my prayer.
And when I did turn unto my closet,
O Lord, and prayed unto thee,
thou didst hear me.

Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children [stanza 2]
when they cry unto thee,
to be heard of thee and not of men,
and thou wilt hear them.

Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me, [stanza 3]
and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations.
Yea, and thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out
and have been despised by mine enemies;

Figure 6, continued

Yea, thou didst hear my cries,
and wast angry with mine enemies,
and thou didst visit them in thine anger with speedy
destruction.

And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my sincerity;
and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me,
therefore I will cry unto thee in all mine afflictions,
for in thee is my joy;
for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me,
Because of thy Son.

[stanza 4]

(Alma 33:4-11)

found in stanza one to *human environment* found in stanza three. In either case, however, whether with fellow saints, that is *thy congregations*, or with foes, *mine enemies*, Zenos is confident in the integrity of his direct relationship with God, *to be heard of thee and not of men*.

The third stanza contains a striking variation from the first. In the first stanza, Zenos expresses gratitude that his enemies were turned to him—that is, their hearts were softened toward him. But in the third, when they renew their unkindness to him, casting him out and despising him, the prophet cried to God over his afflictions until God chose to punish Zenos's enemies.

The concluding stanza links Christ with the mercy referred to earlier, bringing to a climatic close the intensified power created throughout the poem, by the repetition of the word "merciful." This stanza moves from past, "thou didst hear me, to future, "I will cry unto thee," to the present, "thou hast turned thy judgments away," closing with the powerful and finely repeated phrase, "because of thy Son." And that is another evidence of that poetic testimony of the Book of Mormon.

The poem builds intensity with variations on *hear*, *cry*, and *merciful*. These three words are developed in the first stanza, with "thou didst hear" being intensified through repetition. They are interlinked in stanza two, with the principle of prayer being applied to all of God's prayerful children. Then, in stanza three when we come to "thou didst hear my cries," we feel the emotional shrillness of cries in the context of Zenos's being despised by "mine enemies." Here the tension is increased as well. The fourth and last stanza resolves the problem and has a calming effect. The preceding stanza repeats the expressions "enemies," "anger," and "destruction." In contrast, the last stanza emphasizes "sincerity," "joy," and especially the repeated "because of thy Son."

Let us now look at a separate sheet that starts with "Therefore may God grant" (see figure 7). Amulek's instructions on prayer are made memorable by the initial repetition of "cry," by frequent amplification, as in lines nine through twelve, and by the progressive development of prayer, from "call" to "cry" to "pour out your souls." Let us read this now (see figure 7).

I would like us now to consider Helaman 12:3–26. Mormon, writing in Helaman chapter twelve, progresses from prose to poetry as he waxes eloquent regarding the increasing wickedness of the Nephites. He says, at the very time when the Lord doth prosper his people, then is the time that they do harden their hearts (see figure 8).

This is powerful and sweeping poetry designed to stir its auditors to profit from Mormon's perspective. Mormon responds to the situation of the Nephites, whom he has just described. Implicitly he is stirred by the iniquity

Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren,
that ye may begin to exercise your faith unto repentance,
that ye begin to call upon his holy name,
that he would have mercy upon you;

Yea, cry unto him for mercy; 5
for he is mighty to save.

Yea, humble yourselves,
and continue in prayer unto him.

Cry unto him when ye are in your fields,
yea, over all your flocks. 10

Cry unto him in your houses,
yea, over all your household,
both morning, mid-day, and evening.

Yea, cry unto him against the power of your enemies.

Yea, cry unto him against the devil, 15
who is an enemy to all righteousness.

Cry unto him over the crops of your fields,
that ye may prosper in them.

Cry over the flocks of your fields,
that they may increase. 20

But this is not all;

ye must pour out your souls in your closets,
and your secret places,
and in your wilderness.

Yea, and when you do not cry unto the Lord, 25
let your hearts be full,

drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare,
and also for the welfare of those who are around you.

(Alma 34:17-27)

Figure 8

Helaman 12

[A]t the very time when [the Lord] doth prosper his people, . . . then is the time that they do harden their hearts. . . . And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him.

O how foolish, and how vain, [stanza 1]
and how evil, and devilish,
and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good,
are the children of men;
yea, how quick to hearken unto the words of the evil one, 5
and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world!
Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride;
yea, how quick to boast,
and do all manner of that which is iniquity;
and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, 10
and to give ear unto his counsels,
yea, how slow to walk in wisdom's paths!

Behold, they do not desire that the Lord their God, [stanza 2]
who hath created them, should rule and reign over them;
notwithstanding his great goodness and his mercy towards them, 15
they do set at naught his counsels,
and they will not that he should be their guide.

O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; [stanza 3]
yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth.
For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, 20
to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God.
Yea, behold at his voice do the hills and the mountains tremble and quake.
And by the power of his voice they are broken up, and become smooth,
yea, even like unto a valley.
Yea, by the power of his voice doth the whole earth shake; 25
Yea, by the power of his voice, do the foundations rock,
even to the very center.
Yea, and if he say unto the earth--Move--it is moved.
Yea, if he say unto the earth--
Thou shalt go back, that it lengthen out the day for many hours-- 30
it is done;
And thus, according to his word the earth goeth back,
and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still;
yea, and behold, this is so;
for surely it is the earth that moveth and not the sun. 35
And behold, also, if he say unto the waters of the great deep--
Be thou dried up--it is done.
Behold, if he say unto this mountain--
Be thou raised up, and come over and fall upon that city,
that it be buried up--behold it is done. 40

Figure 8, continued

And behold, if a man hide up a treasure in the earth, [stanza 4]
and the Lord shall say--Let it be accursed,
because of the iniquity of him who hath hid it up--
behold, it shall be accursed.

And if the Lord shall say--Be thou accursed, that no man shall find thee from this time
henceforth and forever-- 45
behold, no man getteth it henceforth and forever.

And behold, if the Lord shall say unto a man-- [stanza 5]
Because of thine iniquities, thou shalt be accursed forever--
it shall be done.

And if the Lord shall say-- 50
Because of thine iniquities thou shalt be cut off from my presence--
he will cause that it shall be so.

And wo unto him to whom he shall say this,
for it shall be unto him that will do iniquity,
and he cannot be saved; 55
therefore, for this cause, that men might be saved,
hath repentance been declared.

Therefore, blessed are they who will repent and hearken unto the voice of the Lord their
God; [stanza 6]

for these are they that shall be saved. 60

And may God grant, in his great fulness,
that men might be brought unto repentance and good works,

that they might be restored unto grace for grace,
according to their works.

And I would that all men might be saved.

65

But we read that in the great and last day there are some who shall be cast out, [stanza 7]
yea, who shall be cast off from the presence of the Lord;
Yea, who shall be consigned to a state of endless misery,
fulfilling the words which say:

They that have done good shall have everlasting life;

70

and they that have done evil shall have everlasting damnation.

And thus it is. Amen.

(Helaman 12:2-26)

of degenerating Nephites of his own time, and he looks down through time to the audience who would receive his works. Mormon's scope is vast; he presents the power of God to effect cataclysmic changes in the earth; he personalizes God to an individual. If the Lord shall say to a man, because of thine iniquities thou shalt be accursed forever, it shall be done.

He then closes by moving out in his thoughts to the dual possibilities of all mankind, to have everlasting life or have everlasting damnation. The first two lines set up the concentrated concern found throughout the remainder of the poem. There is a progression from *foolish*, to *vain*, to *evil*, to *devilish*. This culminates in the balance of opposites: "quick to do iniquity" and "slow to do good." The remainder of the stanza builds on the alternation of "quick" and "slow." The second stanza summarizes the position of the unfaithful children of men. In stanza three the vanity of man lifted up in pride is put into perspective. Man is actually less than the dust.

Then follows in ascending action concern with physical things. The dust of the earth is divided asunder by the command of God. Hills and mountains tremble and quake, then are broken up. The whole earth shakes, the foundations rock through the center, the earth moves and then it goes back, all showing the power of God.

Following this is a buildup again, with the potential of greater miracles. Waters of the great deep would be dried up and a mountain be raised and caused to fall upon a city. References to the physical power of the Lord prepare for specific and intensifying application to potential distress of the people. If a wicked man hide up a treasure, the Lord will curse it that it may not be found. A wicked man will be cursed forever. A wicked man will be cut off from God's presence.

Finally, there comes an appeal to iniquitous persons who have been stirred by this progression to repent. If they hearken to the voice of the Lord they shall be saved. The simple but effective conclusion contained in paired opposite lines specifies the everlasting judgments to those who have done good and those who have done evil. "And thus it is," Mormon says, quietly and briefly, affirming the truths of the whirlwind experience through which he has taken his auditors and also his readers.

Now, if you will turn with me to the passage in 3 Nephi 16. This passage is part of a larger declaration that builds power through use of the refrain: "O, house of Israel" (see figure 9).

With its penetrating power, stirring rhymes of ideas, and rich texture of striking words and memorable images, poetry in the Book of Mormon is indeed an appropriate medium through which the spirit of prophecy can be conveyed. Given the basic nature of poetry, it is best appreciated when heard.

Figure 9

And then will I remember my covenant which I have made unto my people, O house of Israel,

and I will bring my gospel unto them.

And I will show unto thee, O house of Israel,

that the Gentiles shall not have power over you;

but I will remember my covenant unto you, O house of Israel,

and ye shall come unto the knowledge of the fulness of my gospel.

But if the Gentiles will repent and return unto me, saith the Father,

behold they shall be numbered among my people, O house of Israel.

(3 Nephi 16:11-13)

He is the light and the life of the world;

yea, a light that is endless,

that can never be darkened;

yea, and also a life which is endless,

that there can be no more death.

(Mosiah 16:9)

The word of the Lord is a voice out of the dust. Read aloud, all the Book of Mormon passages will resonate, touching us as beautiful music does. Responding to the Christ-centered poetry of the book, we may well be stirred to acclaim with Abinadi, "He is the light and life of the world, yea, a light that is endless, that can never be darkened; yea, and also a life which is endless, that there can be no more death" (Mosiah 16:9).

Rust: That is the end of my formal presentation. I would really welcome questions that you have and a discussion that we might have further regarding a poetic testimony of the Book of Mormon.

Student: It certainly adds another dimension to interpreting the scriptures. I find it helpful to see it in the poetic format as it is read. To me it brings out the meaning much more clearly.

Rust: It certainly does. And indeed, it may take something that is almost impossible to understand, and make it clearer. This is the experience of my mother's Family Home Evening group. When I went back to Vernal, Utah, she invited me to talk with the ladies she invited into her home. They were studying Isaiah, but they were having a terrible time with Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. They said, we just can't get through this. And, I said, well, let me talk with you about Isaiah as poetry.

And so, we read it together as poetry, and I showed them how it is poetry and how poetry is to be read differently than prose. Those things that seemed difficult, and somehow jumbled one upon another, then made sense as they saw how one phrase was an idea that built upon another phrase, the preceding phrase, or that there are certain ideas that don't have to be sequential in time, nor even logical in terms of the narrative; but they do make sense in terms of the feeling involved.

And as we were reading these poems, I hope that you could feel that intensity building and realize that this is one of the characteristics of poetry. Indeed, the very center of poetry, as I teach poetry (at least at the University of North Carolina), is that poetry is designed to appeal to our feelings. It doesn't mean that it doesn't appeal to our minds as well, but it appeals to our hearts or souls. It stirs us, and it is rich in its imagery, so that we touch it, taste it, feel it. And that is the best words in the best order. It is something that stirs our feelings, our emotions; and Book of Mormon poetry does that. Any other questions or thoughts regarding what we have talked about?

Student: As a student of poetry, when you read the Book of Mormon, do you detect a difference in the poetic writings of Nephi or Jacob, or of Moroni,

or of some of the others? Do they seem different, to you, in the way they are presented?

Rust: Yes, but I have to confess that this did not come immediately to me. I published about this in 1983, and I have been living with the poetry for a long time, and loving it. But to go back to what I said earlier, I think it was when I was hearing my children read the Book of Mormon aloud, when I was not fastened to verses, chapter numbers, verse numbers, when I was not looking at the words on the page as prose, but when I was hearing them, I would hear that exaltation of thought that came as they were reading. And then I started looking for it.

I realize that the Psalm of Nephi had been identified years ago; Sidney Sperry said this is a psalm. And others had pointed to some poetry in the Book of Mormon. But then I really had to go back to an understanding of Hebraic poetry. This was an important key to me. I had studied this before, but I made an intensive study of poetry as found in the Old Testament especially, and also in the New Testament. And that gave me, if you will, equipment; it gave me means by which to identify it, as I went through and read it.

Also, I have studied the Book of Mormon by hearing it. I have all of the tapes and I listen to the Book of Mormon; and when I hear it, I can then tune in to all the passages, those elevated passages in the Book of Mormon, and hear how they are concerned with feeling or emotion.

A comparison might be to the opera. I don't know if you know opera or attend operas, but it is something I love, especially when I was a visiting professor in Germany. I would take my family to the opera, in the Mannheim Opera House, and we would listen to the opera and to the two major parts of the opera as it is in process.

One part is the recitative, and of course opera is entirely sung; but the recitative is "I am going to the store and I have to buy some bread." Well, I am making that a little bit humorous, but the recitative is telling the story line with the words. Then the second part is the aria; say a coloratura soprano would sing an aria, or a tenor would sing an aria, dwelling on the same words, repeating the same words again and again, with an increased emotional effect.

And, if you will, the poetry in the Book of Mormon is like a recitative. It tells a story line. The poetry is like the aria; it lifts and tells the heart what the feelings are. "He is the light and life of the world, yea, a light that is endless, a life which is endless." This is an aria, if you will—the repetition of these thoughts as they build.

There is something else, too, about the Book of Mormon poetry, which I have experienced and have taught in Germany. When I was a visiting professor in Switzerland, I spoke to the Swiss about Book of Mormon poetry, and I have also spoken to Germans about this too. But I read Book of Mormon poetry in German, and it translates into German just as readily as it translates into English. And the reason for that is that the Book of Mormon poetry, as a biblical poetry, is a poetry of ideas. See, in English we have what is called accentual-syllabic poetry; that is, it is poetry that depends on the rhythm of syllables and on rhyme.

But this poetry of the Book of Mormon doesn't depend on the syllables, nor does it depend on the rhyme, but it depends on the rhythm of these words and phrases; where you see those translated into Spanish, or German, or into English, they are the same.

Now, I have an opinion on what others have done, as well as my own work and my own searching the book, and reading the book through many times, so this discovery of poetry is an ongoing process. And yet, I had hoped that what I have shown you today will help you go back to the Book of Mormon and hear it, and also see, too, those repetitions of ideas, and to hear this exaltation of feeling. It is not all a matter of parallelism, but those ideas that are lyrically developed in the Book of Mormon, as the poetry of the book.

Student: You say the poetry shows through when translated into German. The translator that translates from English into German may not even be aware of what he is doing, but it is there.

Rust: That's right, that's right.

Student: And, Joseph Smith may not have been aware necessarily, he wasn't necessarily a poet, but when he translated it, it came through.

Rust: I don't think he was initially a poet, but as I read in the Doctrine and Covenants (in fact, I was also just reading the first two volumes of the papers of Joseph Smith, and the same is true there), I find that as he developed in knowledge and learning (he loved to learn) that he also developed a more poetic voice of his own. I don't even see how it would have been possible for him to have known all that would have been necessary to know regarding Hebraic poetry to be able to write the Book of Mormon, the poetry that is embedded in the Book of Mormon.

Indeed, I would think if he had, he would have wanted to signal it, and he didn't. Oliver Cowdery, who serves as one of his scribes, was just writing it out word after word, not even punctuating it, not putting capitalizations, not putting lines, not saying this is a poem; and the poetry of the Bible as well as the poetry of the Book of Mormon is not dramatically set off from the prose. I

would think of it as a rise and falling in feeling. As in an opera, one can move from a recitative into the aria and back into the recitative.

These people are not saying, I am now going to give you a poem. Ammon moved from his discussion of here I am and so on, and here are some problems, to this cry of the heart to his brethren. And the appropriate language to use was indeed poetry, but he would have just felt it. And he would have been immersed in it, of course. Because what did they take with them but the Old Testament, in effect—that is, what we have as the Old Testament plus more—writings of Zenos and that beautiful poetry which I showed you before. And he learned that as part of his knowledge base, his scriptural base. He certainly would have recognized that as a model.

Student: One more question. In the poetry, and in the chiasmus, in the Book of Mormon, I see evidence that the authors of the text, as we have it, put great effort into structuring it just that way. It doesn't just flow normally from the pen without a lot of thought and construction, does it?

Rust: I would turn you to Jack Welch's work with chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. He shares some things that are absolutely phenomenal in terms of structure.

There is something else there that we might know, might think about in terms of a vast difference between our way of learning and reading and knowing, and the way of knowing of the Book of Mormon people. I wouldn't have believed this, I suppose, except that it is in the Book of Mormon; it is also in Shakespeare. And that is, these people learned through their ears and remembered enormous amounts of material.

And so, in the play *Henry V* Shakespeare has the herald come in and he says: the King of France says, and he goes on, and on, and on, saying this is what the King of France says. And then he is through, and Henry says: send this back to the King of France, and he goes on and on, and on. The herald then goes back to France and repeats word for word what King Henry said.

Now, in the Book of Mormon (if you will recall this), Jesus (this is the resurrected Jesus) taught the Sermon at the Temple, which we often think of as the same, or very similar to the Sermon on the Mount. He taught the Sermon at the Temple, and you know how extensive that was. Then he said to his chosen twelve, all right, you teach this; and they were to teach. And it says in the Book of Mormon that they repeated it word for word as Jesus had given it to them.

Now, I can't do that, but they could. They could remember word for word what Jesus had said to them. In fact, they knew the beginning from the end, and they knew it from one end to the other. And they could sustain that large

block of knowledge. This is undoubtedly the way that Alma remembered what Abinadi had said all of these sermons of Abinadi and perhaps a great deal more than what we have. He had that same retentive power that the twelve disciples had, I am confident.

It is like what they call photographic memory. There are some people that have that. Robert Thomas at BYU, an emeritus professor now, had that. Bob Thomas told me that he could read a page and remember and quote it back word for word. It is a gift/curse that most mortals don't have. But he had that gift.

And there were people in the Book of Mormon that had that gift and could then work chiastically from the beginning of the sermon, as Alma does in Alma 36, where he is teaching his son. His account of his experience of conversion works chiastically, so he works this point, this point, this point to the very heart; and then he turns around and works back, with the same ideas that he had begun with, touching them. You go back to the crux of it, and you go back point for point back to where he began.

I am sure part of it is because he had that memory, and he expected his son Helaman to remember just as he had told it to him. And this is one of the things I am coming to discover as I study the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is part of my daily food; I can't go without eating (except fast Sundays, and other days I am fasting) and I read the Book of Mormon every day; and as I read the Book of Mormon, I feel more and more that this is a book to be understood and felt from beginning to end, to be considered as a whole. While verses are helpful for citations, we should not really be trapped by the verses of the Book of Mormon, but rather read it as a whole—read large units of it. We are to know it by reading it again and again and reading it in different ways, too, to know it as a whole so that we can feel the power of that book moving through us and can experience it as a whole, and then realize that it was given to us as a whole, for very important purposes as a whole.

Let me end with, if you will, from where I began. I spoke of this book as being a poetic testimony; and the testimony is to three different audiences:

First, to the audience to which it was delivered. Second, to the audience which would receive the Book of Mormon. Third, and most important, the audience living today—the audience for whom Mormon and Moroni designed this book. This poetry, which in many ways has been concealed (I trust for you—this was concealed until you saw it today, until you heard it today), is part of the testimony of the Book of Mormon, designed to invite us to come unto Christ. This is a Christ-centered book; this is the heart in the mirror—not only to think about Christ, but to feel about him. The poetry helps us in feeling that witness that Jesus is the Christ. And that is my testimony as well. Thank you.