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Poetry in the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Richard Dilworth Rust

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Abstract: Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. Arranging this memorable thought from the Book of Mormon into two lines reveals its poetic character. Arranged in four lines, its neat structure is even more apparent. In this case, understanding the structure enhances our understanding of the meaning: the fall of Adam allows mankind to exist, and the potential destiny of mankind can bring ultimate joy.

Rather than being an isolated example, this brief piece is just one of numerous poetic passages throughout the Book of Mormon, which are usually unrecognized as poetry because they are printed as prose. When arranged as verse, however, the poetic parts of the Book of Mormon are unveiled as having great beauty and power.

Chapter 10

POETRY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Richard Dilworth Rust

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 that men might be;
 and men are,
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 (2 Nephi 2:25)

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Poetic Features of the Psalm of Nephi

A fine example of strength and lyricism in Book of Mormon poetry may be found in the following segment of what has been called the Psalm of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 4:15–35). (In this and subsequent poems, the line arrangement is mine.)

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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.

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?

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

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!

(vv. 28–33a)

The dominant poetic feature of the Psalm of Nephi is parallelism. An idea expressed in one line is completed, amplified, contrasted, or reversed in the subsequent line or lines. Both completion and contrast are evident in these lines:

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.

(vv. 21–22)

The second line completes the thought begun in the first line;

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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 the next verse:

Behold, he hath heard my cry by day,
and he hath given me knowledge by visions in
the nighttime.

(v. 23)

“Nighttime” contrasts with “day.” The intensification comes in the greater detail communicated in the second line where the Lord’s response to Nephi’s cry is identified.

Both opposition and repetition of an idea in reverse order are found in these lines. (Here and in all subsequent passages, italics are mine, to clarify the parallels.)

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.

(v. 33)

Intensification of thought and feeling are especially evident in the following lines. Here two kinds of movement (travel through the wilderness and then over the ocean) are expressed. These are joined with increasing divine aid – from “support,” through “leading,” to “preservation”:

My God hath been my support;
he hath led me through mine afflictions in the
wilderness;
and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the
great deep.

(v. 20)

The next passage illustrates inverted parallelism or chiasmus (literally, a crossing). The subjects of the phrases in chiasmus are basically reversed in order in the second half. The impact of line 1 is amplified in line 3; the words “soul” and “heart” are returned to in reverse order in lines 7 and 9. “Sin” (l. 2), which

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is the “enemy of my soul” (l. 4), is replaced with their opposites, the “Lord” (l. 8) and “God” (l. 10). While in lines 1 through 4 Nephi’s appeals to the soul and heart are accompanied by advice on what not to do—“no longer droop,” “give place no more”—the mirror use of *heart* and *soul* in lines 7 through 10 tells what should be done—“rejoice,” “praise.” These sandwich the center two lines (5 and 6) of commanding oneself not to falter.

- 1 Awake, my *soul*!
- 2 No longer droop in *sin*.
- 3 Rejoice, O my *heart*,
- 4 and give place no more for the enemy of my
soul.
- 5 Do not anger again because of mine enemies.
- 6 Do not slacken my strength because of mine
afflictions.
- 7 Rejoice, O my *heart*,
- 8 and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will
praise thee forever;
- 9 yea, my *soul* will rejoice in thee,
- 10 my God, and the rock of my salvation.
(vv. 28–30)

The Poetry of Isaiah and the Book of Mormon

Each of the features we have seen is characteristic of poetry found in the Old Testament. Especially in the books of First and Second Nephi, this resemblance is what we would expect when we consider that Nephi delighted in the words of Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:5) and that Nephi and his brother Jacob quoted much from Isaiah—one of the greatest poets of the Old Testament. When they present poetry of their own, it sounds much like Isaiah. Arranged in poetic lines, the following example of a passage that Jacob quoted from Isaiah reveals the rhythm of ideas and the great poetic power of Isaiah:

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

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The isles shall wait upon me,
and on mine arm shall they trust.
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.
But my salvation shall be forever,
and my righteousness shall not be abolished.
(2 Nephi 8:5–6;
cf. Isaiah 51:5–6)

In its rhythm, this passage begins with “righteousness” and “salvation” and ends with “salvation” and “righteousness” — which are, of course, closely related to each other. In the middle are two contrasts of the heavens and the earth.

Having just quoted this passage and others from Isaiah, Jacob employed poetry himself to help sustain the high level of what he had just been teaching the people. While his poetry is not as vivid as Isaiah’s, it contains some of the same elevated expression and rich comparison.

O the greatness and the justice of our God!
For he executeth all his words,
and they have gone forth out of his mouth,
and his law must be fulfilled.
But, behold, the righteous,
the saints of the Holy One of Israel,
they who have believed in the Holy One of Israel,
they who have endured the crosses of the world,
and despised the shame of it,
they shall inherit the kingdom of God,
which was prepared for them from the foundation of
the world,
and their joy shall be full forever. . . .

O then, my beloved brethren,
come unto the Lord, the Holy One.
Remember that his paths are righteous.
Behold, the way for man is narrow,

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but it lieth in a straight course before him,
and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel;
and he employeth no servant there;
and there is none other way save it be by the gate;
for he cannot be deceived,
for the Lord God is his name.

(2 Nephi 9:17–18, 41)

Poetry and Prophecy

As with the poetry of the Old Testament, Book of Mormon poetry was used to make the passage more unified and memorable. Because of its effects, poetry was not used in the Book of Mormon to report common events. Instead, it was used for more formal speech, such as sermons, instructions, and especially prophecy. When a Book of Mormon prophet said or implied, “Thus saith the Lord,” what followed likely was poetic. Since *prophecy* means “to utter by divine interpretation,” we would expect the prophetic message to be of an elevated nature, rather than simply phrased in everyday language. Poetry helps the prophetic message to reach beneath surface meanings by adding rhythmic repetitions intended to focus our attention and touch our souls.

Scholars who have analyzed Biblical poetry have emphasized the correlation between prophecy and the use of poetry. David Noel Freedman wrote that, for “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 effects and residues; [but] only poetry can convey the mystery of the miraculous and its meaning for those present.”¹ Robert Alter agreed: “Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry.”²

Through poetry, according to T. R. Henn, prophecies exalt the heart of man: words and imagery acquire depth by repetition, and there is a peculiar exaltation proper to the chant.³ As Edgar

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Allan 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."⁴ This noble effect is the intent of Book of Mormon poetry as much as that of the Bible.

Early in the Book of Mormon, in the second chapter, we can detect a shift from Nephi's prose to the Lord's poetry. Nephi's prose is a straightforward description of events. But when the Lord speaks, we see a number of poetic elements that give force to his words, make them more memorable, and increase the levels of meaning: There is a rhythm resulting from a structure of cause-and-effect relationships (following the pattern "inasmuch as ye or they do x , ye or they shall receive y "). There is repetition with an rising order of significance ("land of promise," "land which I have prepared for you," and "land which is choice above all other lands"). And the concluding two patterns in the last four lines show contrast between punishment and blessing.

Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words; and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them. And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying:

Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith,
for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness
of heart.

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments,
ye shall prosper,
and shall be led to a land of promise;
yea, even a land which I have prepared for you;
yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.
And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against
thee,
they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.
And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my
commandments,
thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy
brethren.

(1 Nephi 2:18–22)

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We find a similar shift in Alma 7:8–9:

Now as to this thing I do not know; but this much I do know, that the Lord God hath power to do all things which are according to his word. But behold, the Spirit hath said this much unto me, saying: Cry unto this people, saying –

Repent ye, and prepare the way of the Lord,
And walk in his paths, which are straight;
For behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand,
And the Son of God cometh upon the face of the earth.

In Alma's excerpt, one idea builds on another. Personal repentance is the foundation for preparing the way of the Lord, then preparing leads to action ("walk in his paths"). Personal actions then become the basis for the universal – the general expectation of first the coming of the kingdom of heaven and second the more specific coming of the Lord.

The next poem is about God's power promised to Nephi the son of Helaman. The idea is first expressed as increasing levels of physical power (famine, to pestilence, to destruction). Then it is given spiritual significance (sealed/loosed in heaven). Destructive power builds in intensity from rending the temple, to leveling a mountain, to the climax of divine power that will smite the people. With the confidence that comes from having seen this vision of God's power, Nephi was ready to declare the simple but meaningful message: "Except ye repent ye shall be smitten, even unto destruction."

As he was thus pondering . . . the wickedness of the people of the Nephites, . . . a voice came unto him saying: . . .

Behold, thou art Nephi, and I am God.
Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels,
that ye shall have power over this people,
and shall smite the earth with famine,

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and with pestilence,
and destruction,
according to the wickedness of this people.
Behold, I give unto you power,
that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed
in heaven;
and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be
loosed in heaven;
and thus shall ye have power among this people.
And thus, if ye shall say unto this temple
it shall be rent in twain,
it shall be done.
And if ye shall say unto this mountain,
Be thou cast down and become smooth,
it shall be done.
And behold, if ye shall say
that God shall smite this people,
it shall come to pass.
And now behold, I command you,
that ye shall go and declare unto this people,
that thus saith the Lord God, who is the Almighty:
Except ye repent ye shall be smitten,
even unto destruction.

And behold, now it came to pass that when the Lord had spoken these words unto Nephi, he did stop and did not go unto his own house, but did return unto the multitudes who were scattered about upon the face of the land, and began to declare unto them the word of the Lord which had been spoken unto him, concerning their destruction if they did not repent (Helaman 10:3, 6–12).

Three Other Book of Mormon Poems

Finally, a close look at three more poems from the Book of Mormon will show how they are carefully designed to reach the heart as well as the mind. First, the prayer of worship and praise by Zenos in Alma 33 is marked by simplicity and clarity. Its

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power is developed by repetition that varies slightly but meaningfully:

- 1 Thou art merciful, O God,
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.
- 2 Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children
when they cry unto thee,
to be heard of thee and not of men,
and thou wilt hear them.
- 3 Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me,
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;
yea, thou didst hear my cries,
and wast angry with mine enemies,
and thou didst visit them in thine anger with
speedy destruction.
- 4 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,

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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.
(Alma 33:4–11)

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, moving the focus from place (stanza 1) to human or social environment (stanza 3). In either case, however, whether with fellow saints (“thy congregations”) or with foes (“mine enemies”), Zenos was 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 expressed gratitude that his enemies were turned to him (that is, their hearts were softened toward him). But in the third, when they renewed 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 climactic close the intensified power created throughout the poem by the repetition of “merciful.” This stanza moves from past (“thou didst hear me”) to future (“I will cry unto thee”) to present (“thou hast turned thy judgments away”), closing with the powerful and final repeated phrase: “Because of thy Son.”

The poem builds intensity with variations on “hear,” “cry,” and “merciful.” These three words are developed in the first stanza, with “thou didst hear me” working as a repeating climax. They are interlinked in the second stanza, with the principle of prayer being applied to all of God’s prayerful children. Then in

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the third stanza, when we come to “thou didst hear my cries,” we feel the emotional shrillness of “cries” in the context of Zeno’s being “despised by mine enemies”; here the tension has increased as well. The fourth and last stanza resolves the problem and has a calming effect. The preceding stanza repeats the expressions “enemies,” “angry/anger,” and “destruction”; in contrast, the last stanza emphasizes “sincerity,” “joy,” and especially the repeated “because of thy Son.”

In this second example, Alma’s instruction to his son Helaman contains this elevated poetic exhortation:

- 1 O, remember, my son, and *learn* wisdom in thy youth;
- 2 yea, *learn* in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.
- 3 Yea, and *cry unto God* for all thy support;
- 4 yea, let all thy *doings* be *unto the Lord*,
- 5 and whithersoever thou *goest* let it be *in the Lord*;
- 6 yea, let all thy *thoughts* be directed *unto the Lord*;
- 7 yea, let the *affections* of thy heart be placed *upon the Lord forever*.
- 8 Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings,
- 9 and he will direct thee for good;
- 10 yea, when thou liest down at *night* lie down unto the Lord,
- 11 that he may watch over you in your sleep;
- 12 and when thou risest in the *morning*
- 13 let thy heart be full of thanks unto God;
- 14 and if ye do these things,
- 15 ye shall be lifted up at the *last day*.

(Alma 37:35–37)

The second line adds to the kind of learning found in the first. Line three sets up a relationship with God that in the next four lines receives greater importance and emphasis, moving from crying, to doing, to going, and, in lines six and seven, from thoughts to affections. The relationship advocated between

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Helaman and the Lord in the second half of the poem is more intimate, starting with “counsel with the Lord” (contrast with the more distant “cry unto God” in the first half). The paired opposites of times of day are used in the climax of the poem. The actions of lying down at night unto the Lord and rising in the morning with thanks unto God are followed by being lifted up at the last day.

In the third example, notice the poetic repetitions in Moroni’s account of the song of the Jaredites and then in his narrative “hymn” describing their preservation. (Italics here emphasize repetitions, synonyms, and opposites.)

They did *sing praises unto the Lord*;
yea, the brother of Jared did *sing praises unto the Lord*,
and he did thank and *praise the Lord*
all the *day* long;
and when the *night* came,
they did not cease to *praise the Lord*.

And thus they were driven forth;
and no *monster* of the sea could break them,
neither *whale* that could mar them;
and they did have light continually,
whether it was *above the water* or *under the water*.
And thus they were driven forth,
three hundred and forty and four days upon the
water.

And they did *land upon the shore of the promised land*.
And when they had *set their feet upon the shores of the*
promised land
they *bowed themselves down* upon the face of the *land*,
and did *humble themselves before the Lord*,
and did *shed tears of joy before the Lord*,
because of the multitude of his tender mercies over
them.

(Ether 6:9–12)

These and other poetic passages show how much more the Book of Mormon can open up with more extensive and thorough

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poetic analysis. Evidence of the abundant poetry in the book should also encourage us to listen to exalted Book of Mormon passages, especially the words of the Lord. Read out loud, the poetic elements of the Book of Mormon will resonate, touching us as beautiful music does. Feeling the Christ-centered poetry of the book, one may well be stirred to cry with Nephi:

I glory in plainness;
I glory in truth;
I glory in my Jesus,
for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.
(2 Nephi 33:6)

Or we may be led to feel the poetic force of Abinadi's testimony of Christ:

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)

Notes

1. "Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: An Essay on Biblical Poetry," in *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu*, ed. John Maier and Vincent Toller (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 92.
2. *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 141.
3. See "The Bible as Literature," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Surrey, England: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), 12-13.
4. "Twice-told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne; a Review," *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, p. 298.