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Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East by
Daniel C. Peterson

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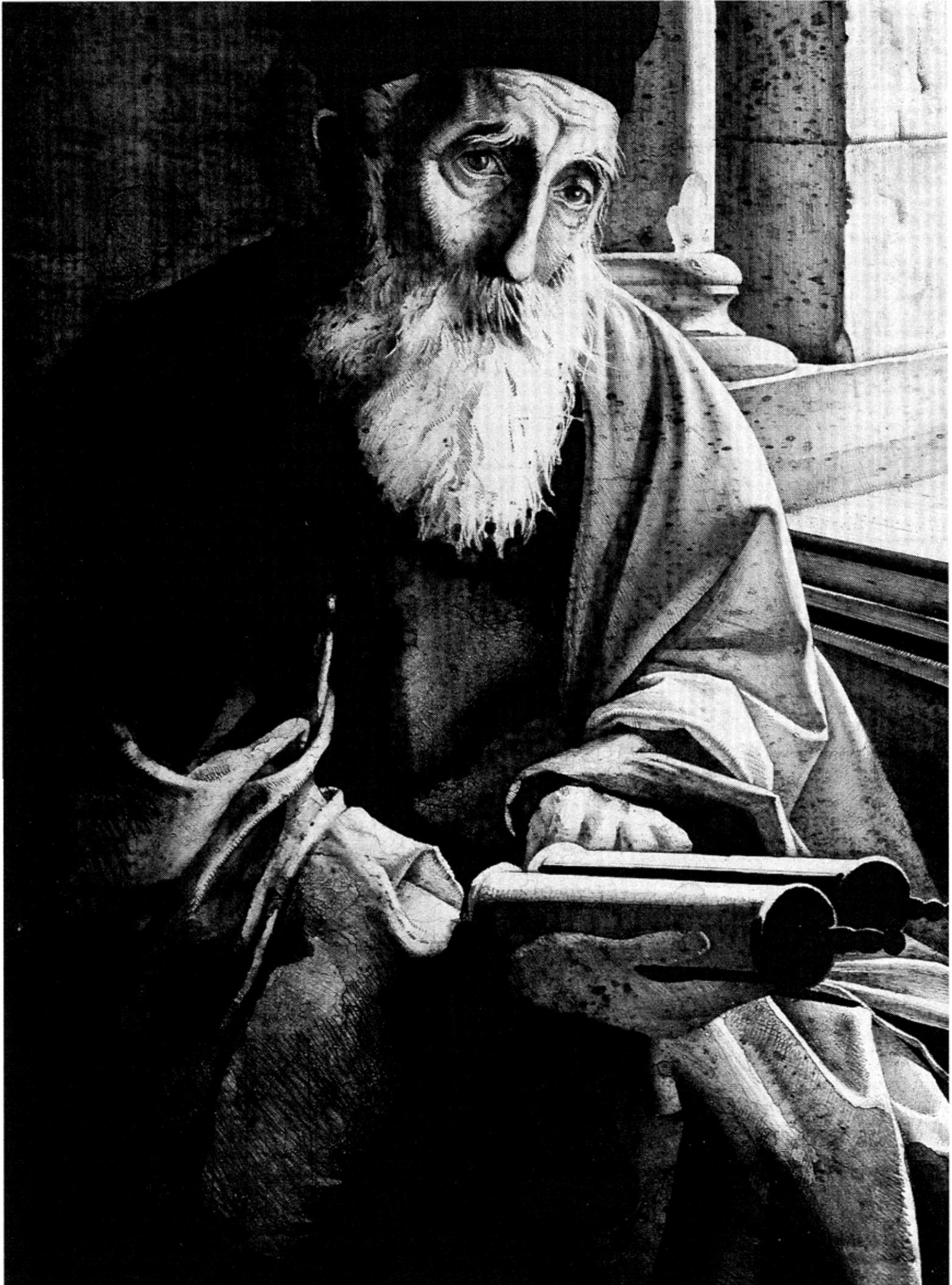
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Hagen Haltern, *Jeremiah Contemplates the Destruction to Come*. Watercolor and graphite on paper, 8" x 10", reversed, 1980. Collection of the Museum of Church History and Art.

Book Reviews

DANIEL C. PETERSON. *Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East*. Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992. 374 pp. Index. \$12.95.

Reviewed by James A. Toronto, Assistant Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University.

The Holy Lands of the Middle East have long held a particular fascination for Latter-day Saints. From Joseph Smith's time to the present, numerous LDS tourists, scholars, and Church officials have visited biblical sites in Palestine (present-day Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip), Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. Several of these Mormon pilgrims have written about their experiences and expressed their views on the relationship between the restored gospel and contemporary events in the modern Middle East. Since 1948, when the state of Israel was created, the amount of LDS writing about the Middle East has increased significantly. Such writing received an additional impetus in 1969, when the first BYU study-abroad program in Jerusalem was established.

Most of the LDS literature about political and religious issues in the Middle East is narrow in scope and superficial in analysis. The majority of authors since 1948 have sought to show (primarily on the basis of their interpretation of LDS scriptures) that Israel's emergence as a nation and her military victories against neighboring Arab countries are the modern fulfillment of ancient prophecies about the gathering of the Jews. A major leitmotif has been that the creation of Israel is a modern replay of the Old Testament epic: God sustaining his covenant people against their enemies in a miraculous and successful bid to build a home in the promised land. Such reasoning leads to the conclusion that Israelis are good guys, God's people; Arabs and Muslims are bad guys, God's enemies; and the

LDS Church and its doctrine provide unwavering support for the former in their struggle against the latter.¹

The paucity of careful, well-informed writing by Mormon authors about the modern Middle East makes Daniel Peterson's book *Abraham Divided* a welcome addition to the corpus of LDS literature on the subject. It is an ambitious, groundbreaking effort to place the Arab-Israeli conflict in its historical, political, and religious context and to provide a comprehensive and balanced analysis from an LDS point of view. Because Peterson brings to his task a rare combination of academic training, linguistic skills, gospel knowledge, and in-country experience that few previous LDS writers have possessed, the book succeeds overall in presenting a timely, provocative, and convincing message.

Peterson's main point is that Latter-day Saints, if they are to fulfill their destiny as peacemakers in the region, must understand and respect all the peoples of the Holy Land—Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He develops this theme by analyzing the historical, political, and religious factors that lie at the root of the Middle East conflict. Two key arguments emerge from this analysis: (1) a proper understanding of Middle Eastern history and of Islamic religion and civilization in particular will help us develop the same kind of respect and admiration for Muslims we traditionally accord the Jews; and (2) LDS doctrine does not advocate taking sides in the Arab-Israeli struggle but encourages a compassionate, impartial approach in our dealings with both Jews and Muslims.

Abraham Divided has something to offer any reader interested in Middle Eastern issues and comparative religion. Its comprehensive examination of religion, philosophy, and politics will enlighten the novice. Its in-depth discussion of Islamic history and doctrine will yield insights for the informed observer. And its methodology, which emphasizes comparison and contrast, will help readers, LDS or non-LDS, who want some basic knowledge of similarities and differences between Judaism, Islam, and LDS Christianity.

It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that this volume is an introductory survey and that its intended audience is primarily Latter-day Saints with little specialized knowledge of Middle Eastern studies. The book assumes a basic familiarity with LDS history

and scripture and little or no knowledge of the religious and political history of the Middle East. Knowing these limits will help both those who might be frustrated by constant allusions to, and parenthetical comments about, Mormon doctrine and those who might be expecting a more scholarly treatment of the subject. Given the book's lay readership, though, its approach is the most appropriate one. Peterson writes in an engaging, informal style and provides a serious, thoughtful analysis of complex issues without getting mired in academic hairsplitting and detailed documentation.

The main strength of the book lies in its perceptive discussion of two interrelated topics: the important contributions of Islamic doctrine and civilization to world history and the relationship of Mormonism to religious and political issues in the contemporary Middle East. In developing these themes, Peterson displays an impressive breadth of knowledge from a variety of academic disciplines. He includes frequent citations of historical and scriptural sources from Jewish, Islamic, and Christian traditions; theological and philosophical arguments from various authors; linguistic insights gleaned from comparisons of cognates and etymologies in Arabic, Hebrew, German, Greek, and Latin; and allusions to classical and popular literature (for example, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*). The wealth of information that undergirds the analysis is presented in elegant, lucid prose liberally sprinkled with witticisms,² all of which makes this a pleasant, stimulating book to read.

An Islamicist myself, I found Peterson's discussion of the early Islamic period interesting and persuasive. He is especially adept in his use of original Islamic sources—the Qur'an, Hadith, and early biographies of Muhammad—to inform his analysis of Muhammad's prophetic career and the development of Islamic doctrines and institutions.³ The book is particularly helpful in discussing some key points that are often slighted in introductory surveys of Islamic religion: the "Arabicness" of the Qur'an (130-32), the salvation of righteous non-Muslims (139), Islamic eschatology and afterlife (139-45), and the Islamic legal system (187-92). With his audience in mind, Peterson is always careful to avoid terminology and explanations that are too pedantic, and readers will appreciate his efforts to

provide reasonable transliterations and pronunciation hints for Arabic words. I enjoyed the thoughtful discussion of similarities and differences between Mormonism and Islam (158–76) and the effective use of Arabic poetry in the chapter on the modern Middle East to capture the pathos and passion of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The final chapter, “The Church in the Near East,” offers the most enlightened, insightful analysis of Mormonism’s relationship to the contemporary Middle East that can be found in LDS literature. This chapter alone makes the book worth its purchase price. Peterson’s long experience studying and living among the peoples of the Middle East has engendered a balanced, compassionate perspective that is evident in his portrayal of the challenges and opportunities facing the Church in its dealings with Jews and Muslims. He begins with an informative discussion of a forgotten chapter in LDS Church history: Mormon missionary efforts in the Middle East.⁴ Throughout this chapter (and the previous one on modern Middle Eastern history), Peterson takes pains to be evenhanded, pointing out that both the Jews and the Arabs have legitimate rights of inheritance in the Holy Land, both have been the victims of terrible suffering over the years, and both have been guilty of atrocities, hostage taking, and deceitful maneuvering in their struggle to reconcile conflicting claims. Peterson’s balanced approach is reflected in this comment:

If anything should be gained from a consideration of this painfully difficult dispute, it is that there is no easy answer, and that both sides will need to give and to forgive, to repent and reform, before Jerusalem shines with the full glory it is destined to have. We must never lose sight of that fact. We must never forget the complexity of the issues. (303)

Peterson eloquently and persuasively argues a point that has usually been ignored or misrepresented by Mormon authors—that LDS doctrine advocates an attitude of impartiality and compassion on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict:

There is no such thing, in this terribly complex matter, as “the Lord’s side.” Neither side is without sin, and neither side is without just cause. As a Church, we must attempt to steer a neutral course between various factions. As Latter-day Saints, we must hold ourselves and everyone who would seek our support to the standards of justice and charity that the gospel mandates. . . . The Lord’s

justice and mercy extend to all peoples of the earth. Every human individual of every race is his child, and the object of his love. Our task as individuals is to emulate that divine love. (367)

While the book's message and methodology as a whole are laudable, a few aspects detract from the otherwise high quality of analysis and could benefit from some fine-tuning in future revisions. First, some ideas and conclusions are less convincing because they seem hastily drawn or inadequately developed. One example is found in the discussion of Arab-Muslim influences on European civilization. The author avers that the Italian bell tower, or *campanile*, "seems to have been inspired by the Islamic minaret or prayer tower" and that "the multicolored marble that is so unusual and so characteristic of the churches in Florence, Italy . . . may owe its inspiration to the earlier multicolored buildings of Cairo" (220). While there are unquestionably some Islamic influences in the art, literature, and architecture of Italy, the two argued for here are not among them. Bell towers and multicolored marble buildings were present in Italy long before the advent of Islam in Arabia and therefore do not reflect Islamic motifs. In these two instances, the pattern of cultural borrowing would more likely have been just the opposite.

At times, Peterson's intellectual curiosity takes him beyond the solid ground of rigorous analysis onto the shifting sands (to use a Middle Eastern metaphor) of speculation. For example, he postulates that "the great and spacious building" of Lehi's dream "seems very like the ancient 'skyscraper' architecture of Yemen" (65); that the ravens who fed Elijah in the wilderness "may well be the Bedouin Arabs of the region" (69); that LDS teachings about Moses' father-in-law holding the priesthood are supported by "Arabic tradition, which seems to know Jethro under the name of Shu'ayb, whom it views as a great prophet" (69); that the Qur'anic figure Idris "is certainly to be identified with Enoch" (158); and that "our farewell 'So long!' derives from the Arabic *salaam*" (226). Each of these assertions contains an element of plausibility and adds spice to the reading, but each is controversial and impossible to substantiate. I am not arguing against the use of knowledgeable conjecture, especially in an informal work like this, but

I believe the speculative nature of these ideas requires more detailed substantiation than is provided.

I was puzzled to find that some topics of central importance to the book's theme are given only cursory treatment. The basic beliefs of Islam—the Five Pillars—are covered in five pages (151–56), with almsgiving described in two sentences and fasting in two paragraphs. Peterson's discussion of the two issues in Islam that are the hardest for a Western audience to understand and respect—the role of women and the concept of *jihad*—is far too abbreviated to effectively address the biases and distortions in most readers' minds. The section on “Treatment of Women” (149–51) is helpful but too brief to adequately explain some of the complicated and controversial issues that are raised, such as “paradisiacal *houris*,” distinctive gender roles, and seemingly discriminatory inheritance laws. The discussion of *jihad*—a term that has unfortunately become associated in the West with the idea of violence and “holy war” against non-Muslims—deals effectively with the concept of a “just war” in Islam. It fails, however, to point out the broader significance of *jihad* in Islamic piety: the “inner struggle” to overcome human pride and to obey God's will. In a volume dedicated to sensitizing its readers to negative stereotypes about Muslims, these crucial ideas deserve more attention.

Another area of concern has to do with stylistic and organizational features that undermine the book's thematic unity and clarity. The title and cover art are attractive but ambiguous. Readers may misunderstand or miss completely the connection between the two men (one old and one young, each holding a baby) and the title, *Abraham Divided*. Is one man Ishmael and the other Isaac? Is one a Muslim sheikh and the other a Jewish rabbi? Or does one represent the younger Abraham holding Ishmael and one the older Abraham holding Isaac (probably the artist's intended interpretation)? Key issues related to the theme of *Abraham Divided*—how and why the division between Ishmael and Isaac occurred; how this family split is interpreted variously in Islam, Judaism, and Mormonism; and what the division's implications are for interfaith dialogue—are not addressed directly and thoroughly.⁵

While the prologue is interesting and informative, readers would likely benefit more from a traditional introductory chapter

that clearly sets forth the central theme, provides a context and rationale for it, connects it to the book's title and cover design, and outlines related questions and issues to be addressed. Much of the prologue material is helpful in this regard, but most of it could be placed more profitably in the final chapter dealing with the Church's role in the Middle East. At times I found it difficult to understand the organizational logic and proportionality of chapters.⁶ A major technical flaw that the publisher must remedy in future editions is the index: it is an exercise in frustration trying to use it for cross-referencing or looking up even the most basic terms (for example, *Allah*, *Muhammad*, *Abraham*, *Jerusalem*, *Orson Hyde*, and *Gathering of the Jews* are cited once or not at all). The purpose of these comments and recommendations is to point out that a very good book can be made even better by sharpening its thematic focus and clarifying its organizational logic.

My concerns about *Abraham Divided* are relatively minor and are more than compensated for by the impressive breadth of coverage and depth of insight the book provides for the reader. *Abraham Divided* is to be greeted with enthusiasm by all LDS observers of the Middle East as a seminal work that will become a basic reference for all future efforts to explore issues related to Mormonism and modern Middle Eastern politics and religion. It lives up to its billing as "a fresh voice" (see the book's back cover) in the ongoing task of helping the LDS community better understand the sensitivities and vagaries of the Middle East problem. Daniel Peterson succeeds admirably in his aim to promote more awareness of and appreciation for the grandeur of Islamic civilization and for the complexity of the historical, political, and theological issues that lie at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We finally have a reliable volume that can confidently be recommended to readers interested in an LDS perspective of the Middle East, one that highlights the unique teachings of the restored gospel and presents a more broadly informed, evenhanded approach than has heretofore been available in the pro-Israel writings of most LDS and fundamentalist Christian writers.

In sharing a sympathetic view based on years of experience within the Middle East, Daniel Peterson has made an invaluable

contribution to the LDS community and to the broader discussion of Mormon-Muslim-Jewish relations. The book's lucid writing style, synthesis of information from a variety of academic disciplines, and wealth of perceptive ideas and interpretations, together with its wit and intelligence, make it a pleasurable must-read for every member of the Church interested in studying or visiting the holy lands of the Middle East.

Editorial Note: A revised edition of *Abraham Divided* is forthcoming.

NOTES

¹There are some exceptions in LDS literature about the modern Middle East. Over the years a handful of LDS authors have provided a more evenhanded analysis of issues related to Mormon doctrine and the Middle East: for example, James B. Mayfield, "Ishmael, Our Brother," *Ensign* 9 (June 1979): 24-32; Howard W. Hunter, *All Are Alike unto God*, Brigham Young University Devotional Speeches (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), 32-36; Spencer J. Palmer, ed., *Mormons and Muslims* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1983); and Joseph B. Platt, "Our Oasis of Faith," *Ensign* 18 (April 1988): 39-41. See also various Middle East-related articles in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

²One of my favorites is Peterson's description of why Mongol armies were so successful in combat:

Medieval sources report that the Mongols considered water so sacred that they refused to soil it by bathing in it. Instead, they anointed themselves in horse butter. Now, imagine. After, say, thirty years of horse butter anointings, the typical Mongol of the thirteenth century must have been a fairly potent individual. (All a Mongol army had to do was to get upwind of a town. The place was almost certain to surrender). (239)

³See, especially, pages 104-6 and the section entitled "What Are We to Make of Muhammad?" on pages 117-21 for examples of insightful observations from an LDS perspective about Muhammad's life and place as a prophetic figure.

⁴A more detailed rendering of this episode in Church history can be found in Steven W. Baldrige, *Grafting In: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Branch, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989). But the most thorough study is Rao H. Lindsay, "A History of the Missionary Activities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Near East, 1884-1929" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1958).

⁵The only mention of this point is found on page 90, where, from the Islamic perspective, the question of which son was nearly sacrificed by Abraham and where the event took place is briefly touched upon. Peterson points out that the Qur'an never mentions the name of the son to be sacrificed and that, as a result, "classical Muslim writers are evenly divided on the question." But his conclusion that it is "wrong" to "think that Muslims believe it was Ishmael, and not . . . Isaac" does not, in my view, adequately reflect how thinking on this subject has evolved. While this question was a point of debate in the classical period of Islamic history, it has ceased to be so in recent history. The nearly universal view in the Islamic world today, as reflected in Muslim print media, scholarly commentaries, popular literature, and Friday sermons, is that Ishmael is the subject of the Qur'anic story. The only controversy in Islam these days is whether the event took place on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem (as the Bible says) or near Mecca where other events of the Abraham-Ishmael-Hagar saga unfolded (as most modern Muslim writers hold).

⁶For example, almost half (15 of 37 pages) of the first chapter, "After the Testaments," focuses on historical developments in the period *before* the end of the testamental period. In the section on "Mathematics" (207-9), a discussion of Arabic influence on the Spanish language is initiated without a new heading. Given the focus of its content, the section entitled "Israel" (284) would more logically be labeled "Israel and Palestine" or "Israel and the West Bank/Gaza." The "Word Sampler" segment (220-27) is fascinating but at seven pages seems disproportionately long, especially when the Five Pillars of Islam, as noted before, received only five pages.