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Muhammad: Prophet of God

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Daniel C. Peterson. *Muhammad: Prophet of God*.
Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007

Reviewed by Thora Qaddumi

Islamic studies scholar Daniel C. Peterson has written a small book that speaks volumes about the man who, in about the year AD 610, while meditating in a cave near Mecca in Arabia, received a prophetic call that led to the establishment of a religion that today is claimed by almost a quarter of the world's inhabitants. It adds to the growing body of research by Peterson and other Latter-day Saint scholars that strengthens the Church's role as a voice of reason in an area rife with misunderstandings and ignorance—the Islamic world.¹

Although written from a strongly academic and scholarly perspective, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* is a book that offers an unusual opportunity for general readers without a firm foundation in Middle East history to gain an appreciation for the rich complexities of the culture, mores, and conflicting forces in the Arab world during the time of Muhammad.

By placing Muhammad in context—as a man of his times who was influenced by traditions and historical forces—Peterson plays a similar role to Richard Lyman Bushman in his “cultural biography of Mormonism's founder,” *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*.² Although Joseph and Muhammad are products of very different eras, each book portrays a prophet who is leading a religious restoration in a time of apostasy, and each depicts a leader who is strongly charismatic, sincere, and human.

A refreshing aspect of Peterson's account is his ability—enhanced by his linguistic credentials that enable him to go to original sources—to give glimpses into the philosophy and character of the man Muhammad, as well as of the prophet Muhammad. A few years after his death, the prophet's followers preserved in oral tradition extended conversations with Muhammad and then recorded and compiled them into the Qur'an and other records. Those who are not well acquainted with the Qur'an and accounts of Muhammad's life and sayings—called *ḥadīth*—will be impressed by the

many details Peterson includes. Readers will catch an inside glimpse into the prophet's thought processes and prophecies that affect various events.

Apart, perhaps, from Joseph Smith, Muhammad is the only major founder-prophet for whom a detailed biography exists. Peterson has used it selectively. To a nonbeliever in Islam, the broadened perspective he provides serves, in many cases, to increase respect for a man who anguishes over the death of a child, plays with his grandchildren, works to maintain peace with his wives, faces political and economic problems, makes difficult military decisions, and, through it all, has been thrust by divine intervention into the role of a prophet. Peterson notes that "Muhammad was not an ascetic, nor did he encourage asceticism in others," but he was, in no way, the "lustful debauchee" portrayed by anti-Muslim polemicists (179). Judged by the standards of his time and culture, it is fairer to categorize him as a man of honor and, in his attitudes toward women, relatively progressive.

Believers in Islam, however, may find the book's emphasis on cultural influences and the juxtaposition of mundane events relating to sacred prophecy a bit disturbing. Muhammad's earliest prophecies, received through the angel Gabriel, are general in nature, urging a return from idolatry to the worship of the God of Abraham or Allah (the Arabic equivalent to the English "God"). Later pronouncements are more specific. Muhammad reveals that, if water is not available, Muslims can use sand instead of water to clean themselves before praying—a ritual also taught to him by the angel Gabriel. Conveniently, this revelation is received exactly when his followers complain about his decision to set up camp because his wife has lost a prized necklace there in the desert.

Believers generally consider Muhammad's every action to be worthy of emulation. His every utterance, however, should not be considered from Allah. Peterson cites cases when he remains open to others' advice. During a military campaign, Muhammad orders his soldiers to halt at a well: "But one of his fighters, a member of the Media tribe of Khazraj, came to him and asked, 'O Messenger of God, this place that we are at now—Has God revealed it to you . . . or is it a matter of opinion and military strategy?'" When Muhammad says it is his own decision, the follower suggests a different strategy, and it proves, militarily, to be the right decision.

By stressing the historic and linguistic setting, Peterson sheds light on the forces that have shaped Islam and the fallacies of attributing current conflicts to religion rather than to underlying political and economic causes. Peterson lays the groundwork for the conflict by discussing the era before the birth of Muhammad, when the primary political opponents,

each seeking to control trade routes, were the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Persian-based Sassanid Empire.

Leaders of the Sassanid Empire, who resided in the Levant, an area where Muhammad conducted most of his trade, were Zoroastrians. Their subjects, living in family-based tribes, included Jews, Nestorian and Monophysite Christians, Manichaeans, Gnostics, and pagans (2). Muhammad's view of himself as the last prophet in the Abrahamic tradition emphasizes the strong parallels and shared beliefs among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His conflict is with pagans or idol worshippers, not with "people of the book," to whom he accords special status and protections. Peterson includes accounts of the anguish experienced by Muhammad's followers—and the prophet himself—due to his teaching that most of their venerated ancestors—even Muhammad's own mother—will be consigned to hell because they were polytheists.³

Peterson makes it clear that both Christians and Jews played a significant role in early Islamic history. In Islamic accounts, a Christian monk or hermit foretells the coming of Muhammad (42). When Muslims are allowed to enter the sacred sanctuary of the Ka'ba in Mecca and destroy the idols that are kept inside, they preserve an icon of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus that has been painted on its walls (31). The early death of the prophet's beloved son, whose mother was a Coptic Christian concubine, is one of the Prophet's deepest personal tragedies, especially since he has no other sons who survive beyond early childhood (156–57).

Jewish tribes figure strongly in the early days of Islam, mainly as traitors or political opponents of the Muslims. Muhammad is compliant in the effectual extermination of one Jewish tribe, and two other Jewish tribes are eventually exiled from the area. In other cases, he shows compassion, for example, when he pardons a Jewish woman who has attempted to poison him (139). Peterson's account helps explain the roots of the problems between the Muslims and Jews, which have been greatly magnified in modern times by the conflict for control of Palestine.

Peterson documents the rise of Islam out of the culture and traditions of the Arab tribes, including the Arabic emphasis on language, especially poetry. He explains that poets and prophets were essentially synonymous in pre-Islamic Arabia, as in the Old Testament, where poems are attributed to prophets. Arabs took their poets and poetry seriously. When the Muslims seized Mecca, it is believed that only four people were executed—and all were poets and writers who had satirized the prophet (148). Peterson also considers it significant that *sif*, the style of elevated prose in which pre-Islamic Arabian seers delivered their oracles, is used in the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as a direct revelation to Muhammad, who is said to

have been illiterate.⁴ The poetic form used has made it easier for even non-Arabic speakers to understand and memorize the Qur'an.⁵

The rise of Islam is also associated with the aforementioned Ka'ba,⁶ a shrine revered throughout the world by Muslims, who participate in the Haj, a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage designated by Muhammad as one of the "five pillars of Islam," along with profession of faith, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In Peterson's discussion, the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba is portrayed as a continuation of ancient tradition, though the association with idol worship is removed. Muhammad was a native of Mecca, where the dominant tribe, the Quraysh,⁷ were the guardians of the Ka'ba, which, according to Islamic—and even pre-Islamic—tradition, was built by Abraham on the site (already chosen by Adam, whose shrine there had been destroyed in the flood of Noah). Arabs believe that, when their honored forefather Abraham cast Hagar and her son Ishmael out of his presence, they traveled to an arid area near the present city of Mecca, where they were saved by the miraculous appearance of a spring that became known as Zamzam. According to tradition, Abraham came to visit his son there, and in the eastern corner of the Ka'ba is a meteoric stone that was brought to Abraham by an angel from a nearby hill during that visit (23–24).

While casting much light on both the man and the historical forces that set the stage for events that continue to dominate the world's political stage today, Peterson does not attempt in his analysis to go far beyond the lifetime of Muhammad and the early days of Islam. And, although the title of his book is *Muhammad: Prophet of God*, Peterson retains an academic distance. The book does not deny Muhammad's sincerity, but, in the same way LDS believers often scrutinize outside scholars, it is not written from a position of faith. It is, after all, written by a Christian and a historian, not a Muslim believer. By placing strong emphasis on cultural and historical factors, it deemphasizes the dramatic and hugely significant changes introduced by Muhammad. It does not attempt to explain how the message shared by a simple man named Muhammad has been able to tap into eternal yearnings of not only his native Arabic tribesmen but of billions of people throughout the world and transform their lives.

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1. Daniel C. Peterson, *Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 2001); *BYU Studies Special Issue: LDS Scholars Engage Islamic Thought* 40, no. 4 (2001).

2 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), cover.

3. Modern Islamic interpretations offer support for a less stringent prediction of the status in the afterlife for those who were not exposed to Muslim teachings while on earth (40).

4. Peterson disputes the Muslim claim that Muhammad was unable to read or write, since these skills would have been required of a person deeply involved in the caravan trade. However, he says the Prophet probably had no direct acquaintance with Christian scriptures.

5. A native Arab speaker, raised in the language and culture, may dispute some of Peterson's points relating to the early forms of Arabic poetry, while respecting the linguistic accomplishment of any Western scholar who is able to discuss the finer points of such poetry. Each line of the ancient Arabian *qasida*, or ode, is "a separate unit, a complete thought," according to Peterson (20), making it easy for references to pagan concepts to be removed by the time the poems were recorded. In such poems published in the Arabic language as "Sharh al-M'allaqat al-'Ashr" by Al-Khatib al-Tabrizi, however, the thought is continued for several lines.

6. The sanctuary's name, the Ka'ba, refers to its shape, with its four corners directed toward the four points of the compass.

7. Muhammad's father died before he was born. Peterson writes that his grandfather brought him into the Ka'ba and "presented the infant to God, offering a prayer of thanks for the gift of this boy as a substitute for his dead son" (36). Later, even before becoming a prophet, he served as the arbitrator during reconstruction of the shrine.