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Dehumanization and Peace

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DEHUMANIZATION AND PEACE

Kent P. Jackson

Abstract: *Those who follow world events are painfully aware that peace in the Middle East — and particularly in the Holy Land — seems eternally elusive. From a distance we watch events unfold which we are not able to fully comprehend because of that very distance. There are individuals who are burdened with the devastating reality of living with war and perpetual turmoil in the Holy Land. One of those is Sahar Qumsiyeh, a Palestinian Arab Latter-day Saint who grew up in the West Bank near Bethlehem. Her story of how she converted to Mormonism and learned how to find peace in a troubled world is recommended reading for every Latter-day Saint.*

Review of Sahar Qumsiyeh, *Peace for a Palestinian: One Woman's Story of Faith Amidst War in the Holy Land* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018). 176 pp. \$15.99.

Deseret Book is to be congratulated for its recent publication of *Peace for a Palestinian: One Woman's Story of Faith Amidst War in the Holy Land*. The author of this thoughtful and provocative book is Dr. Sahar Qumsiyeh, a Palestinian-Arab Latter-day Saint who was born in Jerusalem and grew up in the West Bank near Bethlehem. She converted to Mormonism while attending BYU in 1996 and has served since then as a Relief Society president, Primary president, district Relief Society president, and full-time missionary in England. She is now a professor of mathematics at BYU-Idaho.

The foreword to the book was written by Dr. Camille Fronk Olson.

The decision to publish the book was likely not an easy one for Deseret Book. It will take many of its readers out of their comfort zones and expose them to a reality they probably never considered before — the Palestinian side of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The book, however, is not about politics. It is a devotional book that explores religious lessons learned through experience. In its fifteen short chapters, the author describes the process by which she learned to find peace despite the harsh realities of the world around her, growing up in a land occupied by the military of another nation and being deprived of the security and peace Latter-day Saints in many countries take for granted.

The narrative is built around events from Qumsiyeh's life. Perhaps surprisingly, several of those events have to do with the difficulties she faced simply to go from her home near Bethlehem to attend church six miles away in Jerusalem. She describes how hard it was to travel through the various Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks to arrive at the BYU Jerusalem Center, where the local LDS branch meets. Often she had to devise imaginative and dangerous ways to make the journey, including climbing over walls, climbing through holes in walls, and sometimes simply praying that soldiers would not see her as she attempted to pass by them without being noticed. On one occasion, soldiers shot at her as she was attempting to make the trip.

Latter-day Saints in many locations, with Mormon friends and meetinghouses nearby, may have a hard time grasping why she was willing to take so many risks to attend church each week. But with no other Latter-day Saints in the town where she lived, with family members hostile to her conversion to Mormonism, and living in the West Bank with its dangers and degradations, attending church was the only time in her week when she could feel safe and at peace. She explains that to take the sacrament and enjoy the comfort that comes through worship with fellow believers, she was willing to face the uncertainty and danger.

A key strategy employed in the abuse of others is *dehumanization* — viewing one's opponents as less than worthy of concern (they're "the enemy") and thus absolving oneself of the need for empathy toward them. It is this strategy that has allowed soldiers, segregationists, terrorists, and extermination-camp operators to claim they were doing good while they were harming or killing other human beings. Qumsiyeh writes of how she and those around her experienced constant dehumanization from the Israelis, who seemed to her to be totally uncaring of the consequences of their actions on those they were hurting. But the important part about her story is that she also writes candidly of how her experiences led her, in turn, to also dehumanize the Israelis.

A turning point in her life came one day while she was receiving harsh treatment at a border crossing. Suddenly and unexpectedly, she came to see an Israeli soldier as a brother who deserved her love and forgiveness.

She had friends and classmates who were killed by Israeli soldiers, and her family members had suffered brutality from them. But to come to see this one soldier as someone deserving of her love and God's love changed her life and opened her heart to a new perspective on the world. People who really believe that all are brothers and sisters are no longer able to dehumanize anyone, and Qumsiyeh was surprised to find herself in that situation. The title *Peace for a Palestinian* doesn't refer to the political peace we hope will come soon to the Holy Land but rather to the inner peace Qumsiyeh found by more fully following the Prince of Peace.

This book will likely stretch the feelings of Latter-day Saint readers who have come to automatically embrace the idea that God endorses the policies of the State of Israel and that the Arabs are impediments to God's will. Sheltered from the kinds of realities Palestinians face daily, it is not difficult for many American Latter-day Saints to turn a blind eye. But the existence of Arab Latter-day Saints who worship in Arab LDS congregations in Bethlehem, Jordan, and Lebanon should teach Mormons everywhere that all are indeed alike unto God.

Many Latter-day Saints who have lived in the Middle East have come to feel the concerns of their fellow Saints who live under the conditions Qumsiyeh describes. Hopefully, anyone who genuinely cares about others can come to a new perspective, as Qumsiyeh did, by taking to heart words like these: "Race makes no difference; color makes no difference; nationality makes no difference. . . . Our Father does not favor one people over another. . . . Both the Jews and the Arabs are children of our Father. They are both children of promise, and as a church we do not take sides. We have love for and an interest in each."¹

In *Peace for a Palestinian*, Sahar Qumsiyeh candidly tells of her own conversion to those words. A good place for others to start their own conversion process will be to read her book.

Kent P. Jackson retired in June 2017 as a professor of religion at Brigham Young University, where he had taught since 1980. He has a BA in Ancient Studies from BYU and MA and PhD degrees in Near Eastern studies from the University of Michigan. His research interests include the Near East and the intersection of Mormonism and the Bible. He has authored or edited Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible; Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts; and A Bible Reader's

1. Howard W. Hunter, "All Are Alike unto God," 1979 *Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 35–36.

History of the Ancient World. *Professor Jackson is a former associate dean of religion and former associate director of the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.*