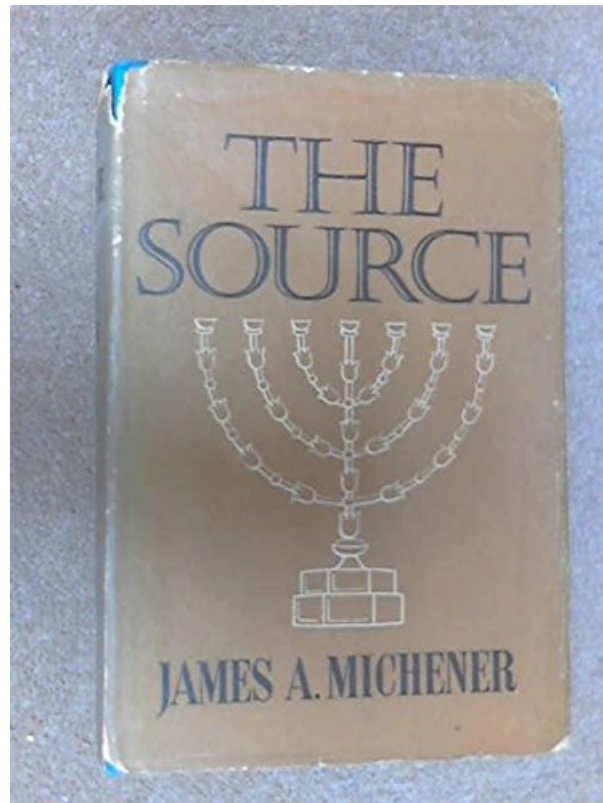
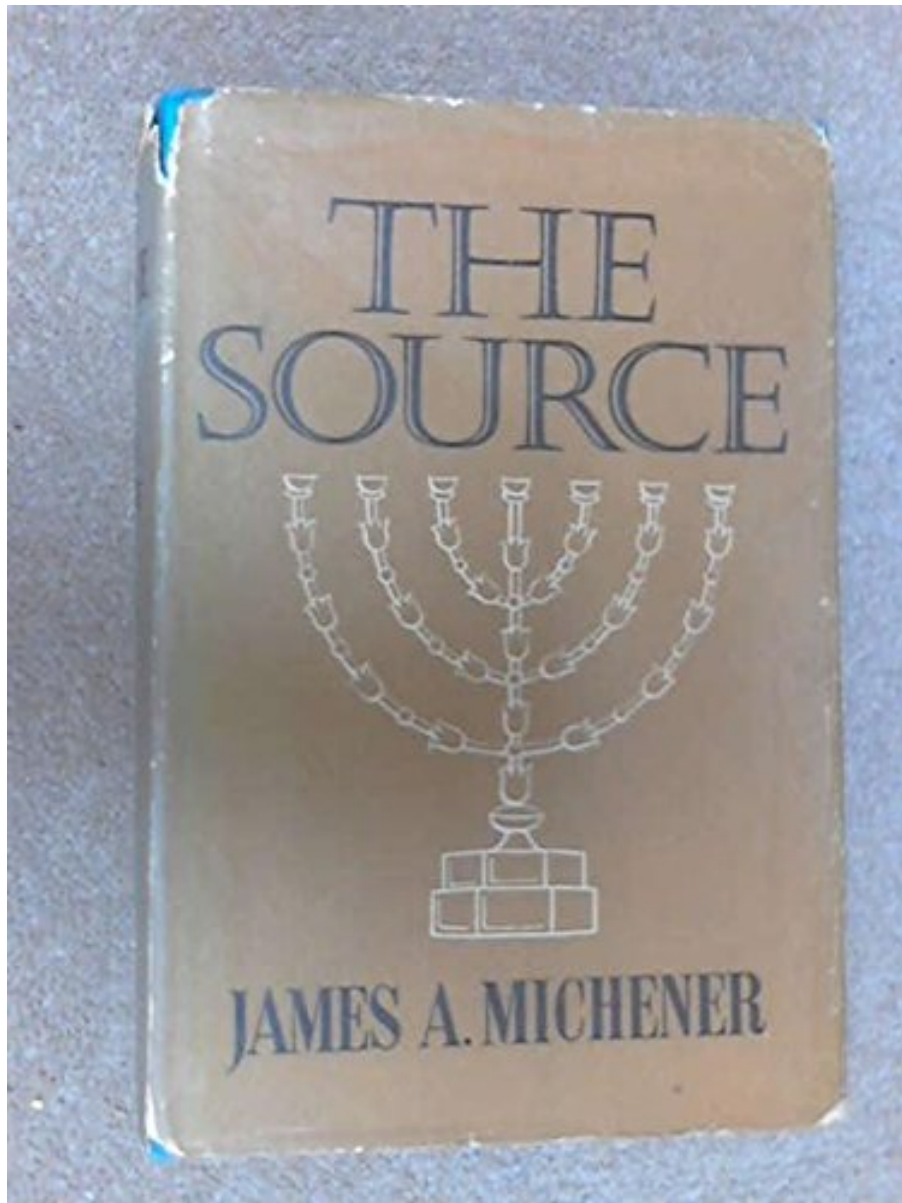


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Amazingly prescient insights wrapped in a schmaltzy, highly improbable tale...

By John P. Jones III

I've read several Michener novels, starting with "Hawaii." I first read "Caravans" some thirty years ago, and since Afghanistan is far from the "back-water" it once was, but has been a major foreign policy concern of the United States, and a focus of our military in a war that will likely exceed the other longest war, Vietnam, I decided to give it a re-read. There is also the personal connection; I once traveled across the country, by local transport, for 11 days in 1971; and my nephew is now with the Marines in Helmund province.

The most stunning aspect of the book is the date it was written: 1963! It is worth saying twice: 1963. At a time when not one American in 500 had heard of the terms "Sunni" and "Shia," and even the few that had may not have been aware of the difference. Yet Michener book is chock full of insights and predictions that came to pass. Consider: (the Afghan, Nazrullah is speaking) "When a thousand men like me have rebuilt Kabul and made it as great as The City once was, either the Russians or the Americans will come with their airplanes and bomb it rubble." Michener was wrong only on the conjunction: instead of "or" it should have been "and." Or consider: "You must not think of Islam as a religion of the desert," Nur warned. "It has much vitality and the world has not yet heard the last of it." Another is: "Don't be afraid of looking stupid, because one of these days we could be driven into war across this terrain, and you'd be the only American who'd ever seen parts of it." And yet one more: (the Afghan leader Shan Khan is speaking) "You Americans seem inordinately preoccupied with the "chaderi" (now normally referred to as the `burka').

The novel is set in 1946, before Pakistan was a nation, and the British still ruled India. Kabul was the ultimate in remote diplomatic postings with virtually no amenities, and Michener depicts a realistic scene of the camaraderie among the expatriates there, which would ring authentic to an expat in Riyadh in the `70's. The storyline involves a young American Embassy official, Mark Miller, driven by the political concerns of a US Senator, to determine the fate of a young American woman, with a Bryn Mawr education, who married an Afghan, and is now "missing." In the process, he crosses the length and width of the country. Along the way, many a topic is tackled, from the developmental efforts of the "enlightened" Afghan elite vis-à-vis the religious conservatives represented by the mullahs; the alienation from upper-class American life of a young woman who is seeking the authenticity of the "primitive"; the relationship of a Jew with a German who performed despicable acts on Jews as a Nazi; tackling the question of whether Americans would have been capable of the same barbarities with their own Negro population; how academia serves as a justifying adjunct to the power elites; the desertification of the country due to over irrigation, and how that might equally apply to Denver, CO; and there are also some beautiful descriptions of the Afghan topography. The insight I appreciated the most, and have seen time and time again, was when the American, sure of his

knowledge, was showing the native the "correct" way of accomplishing a task, only to be gently remonstrated by the Afghan who pointed out that they had their own way of doing things, and sometimes they might be superior. The case in point was the bridges the Germans had built, that didn't work in the Afghan climate.

So what's not to like? Alas, plenty. With all the above wonderful subjects, the tale itself is highly improbable, with extremely unlikely personal dynamics. For his latter books, Michener hired a team of fact-checkers, and it would have been most beneficial if he had had with this one. I found his closing "Note to the Reader" most useful, because he states when he was in Afghanistan, and where he traveled, and that he witnessed some of the scenes depicted. When Miller and team are going to rescue an American engineer with a broken leg, Michener describes desert crossings with temperatures at 130 F; yet the month is March, with highest temperatures of 90 F. How did Miller learn Pashto, when he must have been in Burma during WW II, flying the "hump" into China? In fact, the principals, like the young American "missing" woman, Ellen Jasper, moved around like there was no WW II going on. It is unlikely the Kochi would have taken the circular route described to reach the Oxus, since there was virtually no vegetation for them to eat along the way. Why not go straight up the Khyber Pass from Jhelum? And there are numerous other problems, but the principal one is the interaction of the characters, and those interactions continue to deteriorate, so that finishing the novel was a relief.

For the subject matter, prescience of his predictions, and the "setting," I'd give Michener the full 5-stars, but the "connective tissue" of the storyline and characters rates a 1-star, so I'll average it out for a 3-star.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A wonderful Michener book and definitely my favourite

By kalad levy

A wonderful Michener book and definitely my favourite, a beast at over 1200 pages of fine print coming in at 500,000 words. It traces a 'tell' in Israel over 12,000 years of history which is a mound where thousands of years of habitation have left layers of history as each civilization has been demolished over time and the new civilization built on top leaving a rising hill.

This similar to a town such as the Old City of Jersulaem which is now about 20 metres higher than its original beginnings thousands of years ago. Jesus didn't walk the streets of the present city, he walked then ten metres or more lower.

The historical fiction written in 1965 is based in the early 1960's during an archaeological dig and traces the various layers of civilizations from caveman to Caanites to Jewish to Christian to Muslim to the present.

It ponders the questions of Israel as a state in the 1960's woven through the individual stories of previous civilizations and their rise and fall. History in a sense repeating itself with the common denominator of change.

34 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

Great book--but NOT in Kindle edition.

By L. Whittle

I love this novel, and was very pleased to find it in Kindle as it is a long, bulky book. However, the number of typos and errors is incredible. I found them on almost every page. In the first section, for example, there is a lone describing a bird tucking grass into its nest--somehow the t was replaced with an f. Random punctuation marks appear in the middle of a word--such a abi;ding. I was very disappointed that this great novel didn't receive a decent editing job for the Kindle. If Michener was alive he would be outraged. Pay someone to check for errors before you send the book out on Kindle! Heck, I would do it--I have a BA and

MA in English and have taught English, and it really bothers me to see such sloppiness. Respect the author and his words.

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