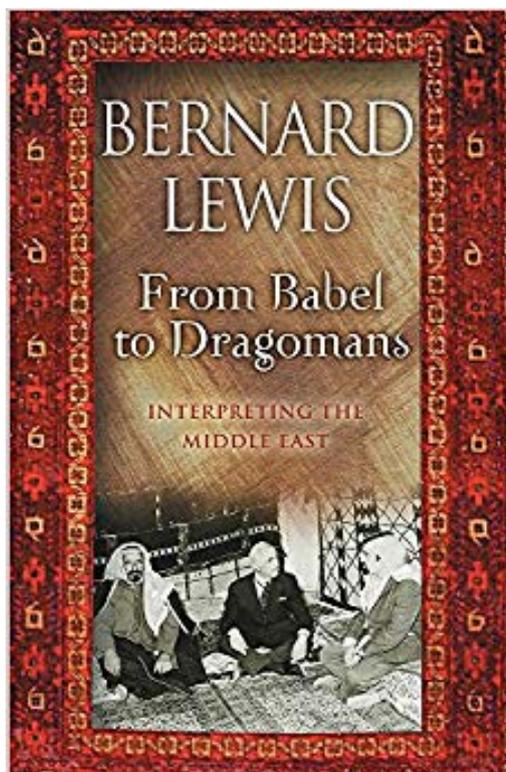


From Babel to Dragomans : Interpreting the Middle East by Bernard Lewis



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Reviews of the **From Babel to Dragomans : Interpreting the Middle East** by Bernard Lewis

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A book in the history genre that is so well written that the reading flies by, as with a good novel. Very informative, with a truly unbiased viewpoint.

Unh

This is a series of 51 short articles written by the author for various newspapers, magazines and reviews. Though the articles are arranged in roughly historical sequence, it's a sporadic, rather than a continuous coherent history. It covers every national, racial and religious group to occupy the ME from ancient to modern times, being more about history than a history per se. As indicated by the

title, the author leans heavily on language development to trace progress. Lewis is perceptive, astute and informational on language as well as history and politics. Translation of the Quran is forbidden. Clearly its not totally observed. His point that the Turks don't have a common language, doesn't seem significant for national Turks and translators, or is there more to it?

His history points out that Iran was Islamized, not Arabized.

The first Shiites in Iran were Arabs.

Shiism was reintroduced under the Safavid dynasty.

Jews survived only in Christian and Muslim areas.

Modern Hebrew is a revival of Yiddish brought to Israel by East

European settlers

Lewis cites Maimonides as saying history having no moral value is a waste of time.

The Suez canal was originally an Ottoman idea.

Turks were never preeminent at sea.

During the British mandate. in a throwback to the Crimean War Brits wanted to preserve Ottoman empire. The Russians wanted to destroy it.

The Sunni-Shiite split is not the only sectarian division in Islam, but is by far the most important.

Conflict within Islam is more significant than war with the West or Israel. Western focus on the Arab-Israel conflict is misdirected.

Hate is embedded in religion and education.

Arab Jewish hatred does not arise from racial considerations.

Anti-Zionism is not antisemitism but it is sometimes used as a cover.

Our view of modern Islam is contaminated, rather than enhanced, by consideration of the crusades which were a long delayed reaction to Islamic conquest of Christian holy areas by Jihad.

Much of the current status in politics is now out of date. Lewis says that for the moment the world seems disposed to leave them in peace, not very current. Political focus is on Saddam and Osama bin Laden. He Lewis asks "Will Muslims in Europe join the mainstream?" The book was perhaps too early to see recent events in France pointing to a negative answer.

Best are the comparisons of western and Islamic concepts of democracy, focusing largely on separation of church and state. Lewis observes that democracy is difficult to create and also to destroy. In a unique view of western development, it's the first time I've seen an author quote John Tyler as a paragon of democracy. Lewis deplores "political correctness" that is so inhibiting to serious consideration of history and current institutions. Over respect for Muslim institutions precludes Western media from reporting on slavery which is still extant throughout the Islamic world.

The book ends, or rather peters out, with references to Islamic literature sources. It's impressive but useful only to the specialist. In spite of exceptions, the book has very thoughtful insights and research that is well worth the time to wade through it.

catterpillar

Bernard Lewis is certainly one of the most articulate and prolific authorities on the subject of Islam and the Middle East.

In this compendium of essays and speeches on the topic covering the last 60 years, Lewis makes a palpable contribution to the subject and gives us some much needed answers.

Important points explain the Muslim prohibition on accepting the rule of non-Muslims, especially in lands that were ever under Islamic rule. This is illustrated by the Islamic faith's division of the world into the realms of Dar el Islam (House of Islam) and Dar el Harb (House of War) applied to any nation that is not under Islamic rule.

According to Islam, for misbelievers (non Muslims) to rule over true believers (Muslims) is evil and

blasphemous and leads to the corruption of religion and morality or even the abrogation of Allah's law.

This may go some way to explaining the conflicts around the world where Muslims are under the governance of non-Muslim majorities such as Indian Kashmir, Serbian Kosovo, Israel and when it had a Christian majority-Lebanon.

It also may explain why Muslims in Western and Central Europe demand a high degree of legal protection which those countries no longer give to Christianity and have never given to Jews. Or even demanding Sharia law in parts of Europe, and for example harassing and attacking non-Islamic women who they see as being dressed immodestly.

Lewis' study of propaganda in the pre-modern Middle East may go some way to explain how Islamic propaganda (under tutelage during the 20th century of Fascism, Nazism and Communism) developed against Israel and Jews.

He studies monarchy in the Middle East pointing out the important point that republics and democracy are not synonymous at all. In Europe the surviving monarchies are without exception constitutional democracies, while the tyrannies of the world today, are, almost without exception, republics.

He also mentions republican dynasties where rule belongs to a single family.

One also has to look at Syria of the Assads, Iraq before the liberation of 2003 (where Saddam was grooming his sons to take over from him) and Libya and Egypt (where Gaddafi and Mubarak respectively are grooming their sons to succeed them).

Perhaps my favourite chapter is an Address to meeting in Jerusalem entitled 'The British Mandate for Palestine in Historical Perspective'

Over here Lewis pictures the myth that there was ever a country in the Levant called 'Palestine'. While there were states in the region before the British Mandate, none of them were called 'Palestine'. Palestine was begun as a Greco-Roman term. The authorized version 'Old Testament' names 'Palestine' three times. all three were REMOVED in the revised edition because they are mistranslations of the word Philistia-Hebrew:Peleshet- not Palestine but Philistia.

The name was first used for two and then three provinces in the Roman Empire, survived briefly in the early Arab Empire and then disappeared. The Crusaders called the country the holy Land, and their state the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Under Ottoman rule people in the area identified themselves by religion or descent, most often by allegiance to a particular tribe. when they identified themselves by locality it was by the city or immediate district of province. so they would have been Jerusalemites or Jaffaites, or like the Syrians identified with the larger province of Syria (The Syrians regarded the Holy Land was regarded as a part thereof, as did many of it's Arab inhabitants).

Lewis dissects quite a few myths and propaganda ploys.

Including the purile argument that Arabs and pro-Arabs cannot possibly be anti-Semites because Arabs are themselves Semites.

The term anti-Semitism was an invention of the anti-Semites to provide a pseudo-scientific cover for Jew-hating and Jew-biting and did not apply to other Semitic peoples and certainly not Arabs.

Lewis also rights how universities and the powers that control academic and information discourse have repressed history that is not politically correct.

Hence students have been discouraged from studying the Arab role in the slave trade and slavery in the Middle East, even though the European slave trade of the 16th to 19th centuries was begun by the Arabs.

If this was made more apparent those who demand reparations for slavery from Europe and America would also have to demand the same from Arab states, which would certainly expose the anti-Western Third Worldist agenda.

He also points out that there is a very good argument for the case that, as the Crusades were preceded by Islamic Jihad against Christendom, there is a very good case for the argument that the Crusades were a long delayed, limited response to Muslim Jihad.

The author's 1970's essays on the hypocrisy of the United Nations are more true today than ever given the UN's obsessive focus on condemning Israel while ignoring all the real atrocities around the world.

A great exploration of the questions involving conflict in the Middle East region, though not an easy read.

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