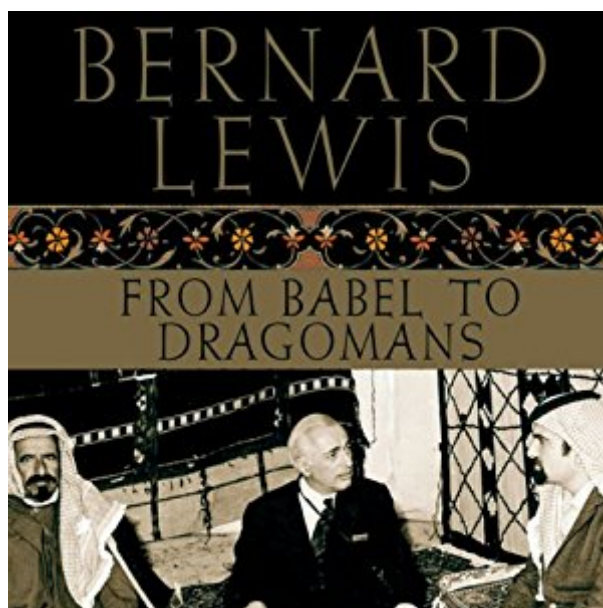


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From Babel To Dragomans: Interpreting The Middle East



Synopsis

Bernard Lewis is recognized around the globe as one of the leading authorities on Islam. Hailed as "the world's foremost Islamic scholar" (Wall Street Journal), as "a towering figure among experts on the culture and religion of the Muslim world" (Baltimore Sun), and as "the doyen of Middle Eastern studies" (New York Times), Lewis is nothing less than a national treasure, a trusted voice that politicians, journalists, historians, and the general public have all turned to for insight into the Middle East. Now, this revered authority has brought together writings and lectures that he has written over four decades, featuring his reflections on Middle Eastern history and foreign affairs, the Iranian Revolution, the state of Israel, the writing of history, and much more. The essays cover such urgent and compelling topics as "What Saddam Wrought", "Deconstructing Osama and His Evil Appeal", "The Middle East, Westernized Despite Itself", "The Enemies of God", and "Can Islam Be Secularized? "

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Customer Reviews

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.

This collection of 54 articles and reviews appearing over half a century (from 1953 to 2003), plus three pieces never before published, covers a wide range of subjects, arranged under the rubrics "Past History," "Current History," and "About History." This might suggest a grab-bag of random

writings fit only for academics. Not so. Almost all are relevant to contemporary concerns. And since Lewis has emerged as a leading molder of U.S. public opinion on Middle Eastern matters during the past two decades (and is generally believed to have influenced Bush administration policies), there is added interest in reading his work. It is revealing that Lewis chose not to arrange these writings in chronological order, as if to suggest that his interpretations, if not timeless, at least have a long shelf life. In fact, his writings do reveal a remarkable consistency of thought over the decades. His arguments, ever forceful and subtle (a rare accomplishment in itself), are not easily summarized and are too many to list. Suffice it to note that included here is his famous "The Roots of Muslim Rage," which, when it first appeared in 1990, introduced the buzz phrase/watchword "clash of civilizations". His several articles in support of the U.S. war of choice against Iraq (and the whole notion of an "axis of evil") reveal a Lewis who is more forceful than subtle.

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.

In reading and reviewing two of Bernard Lewis's recent books (*What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* 2002 and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Holy Terror* 2003) I was favorably impressed with not only his obvious erudition, but with his reasoned tone and his realistic perceptions. However, in this volume, which is a collection of some of his writings going back to the 1950s, I found myself a bit mystified. On the one hand there is the brilliance and eloquence for which the venerable historian is well known. On the other hand, there are some strange and unsettled statements which lead me to wonder if Professor Lewis has not lost some of his fabled acuity. First, there is the inclusion of a very short piece entitled "We Must Be Clear" that he wrote for the *Washington Post* a few days after September 11, 2001 in which he is anything but. Apparently Lewis wants the US to be clear about its intentions in the Middle East in light of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. He concludes that "What is needed is clarity in recognizing issues and alignments, firmness and determination in defining and applying policy." (p. 370) What this vague and essentially empty pronouncement follows is Lewis's apprehension that some states are "friends" on two levels, one "a deep mutual commitment" and the other "based on a perception of shared interests." (p. 369-370) One will permit me a "You don't say?" here. In this same piece Lewis mentions that Saddam Hussein "has made war against three of his neighbors..." and that the other states in the Middle East "are neither forgetful of the past nor confident of the future." What Saddam Hussein (and what his neighbors think about him) has to do with 9/11 is unclear. It's as if Lewis had something he wanted to say, some connection he wanted to draw, but was unable to be clear about it, perhaps for political reasons or because he thought he knew something he wasn't at liberty to

share. At any rate, even more disconcerting is the article entitled "A Time for Toppling" from the Wall Street Journal a year later (September 26, 2002) in which he seems to be a stalking horse for Bush's desire to invade Iraq. He doesn't however argue so much that Saddam Hussein is a danger to the US, but instead makes the claim that in order to solve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, it is first necessary to deal with Saddam. There is some legitimacy to this argument, and Lewis recalls Saddam's policy of rewarding the families of Palestinian suicide bombers with stipends of \$10,000 to \$25,000. However what is grievously wrongheaded about this "toppling" that Lewis seems unaware of--as was Bush and the neocons in the White House--is that in invading Iraq, the US would create massively more problems than it would solve, and would only exacerbate the predicament of the Israeli and Palestinian people, since the Arab and Muslim world would rally around a kindred Muslim nation invaded by a foreign power even if it was the fiefdom of a hated dictator. I am surprised that the usually wise and learned Professor Lewis could write so nakedly in favor of the foolishly aggressive policy of the Bush administration. Personally, I think Lewis revealed here the true heart of the historian: such a person may be incredibly wise and reasonable when he has time to think and rethink an issue and has the benefit of his research and a considerable experience; however when he is called upon to make a quick judgment on events still warm in the doing, his judgment may suffer. So let me recall the Bernard Lewis of the volumes mentioned above and let me quote from a couple of places in this collection in order to balance what would be, on the basis of these two articles, a misconception of the man. Consider, for example, this statement on the three Abrahamic religions of the Middle East: "If we look at them in a wider global perspective, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are different branches of the same religion.... Compared with the religions of India, of China and of other places, they are as alike as peas in a pod." Lewis goes on to make the point that when Muslim and Christian say to one another, "'You are an infidel and you will burn in hell,' they understand each other perfectly." However "Such an argument between a Christian or a Muslim on the one side and a Buddhist or a Hindu on the other" would have been "impossible" because "They would not have known what they were talking about." (pp. 200-201) This insight is from his essay "A Taxonomy of Group Hatred" which originally appeared in the Viennese review *Transit* in 1998-1999. This is a particularly good essay (published in English here for the first time) in which Lewis doesn't mince words about the human failing called hatred and gives a most interesting psychological and historical take on this most destructive emotion which he allies lamentably with the very essence of the human process of self-identity. He notes, "Loyalty to the tribe, however defined, and hatred of other tribes are at the very core of identity." (p. 203) There are 51 essays arranged in three parts, "Past History," "Current History," and "About History." There are

pieces on such diverse subjects as money, travel and food in addition to the usual political concerns of historians. Particularly good, because of the insight it affords us into the life of Bernard Lewis, is the Introduction in which he outlines his career as a Middle Eastern historian. I recommend this book for readers who want to increase their knowledge of the Middle East. Here is Lewis's own justification for such a study: "The history of Islam is a vital and essential part of human history without which even 'our' own history is not fully intelligible." (p. 412)

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