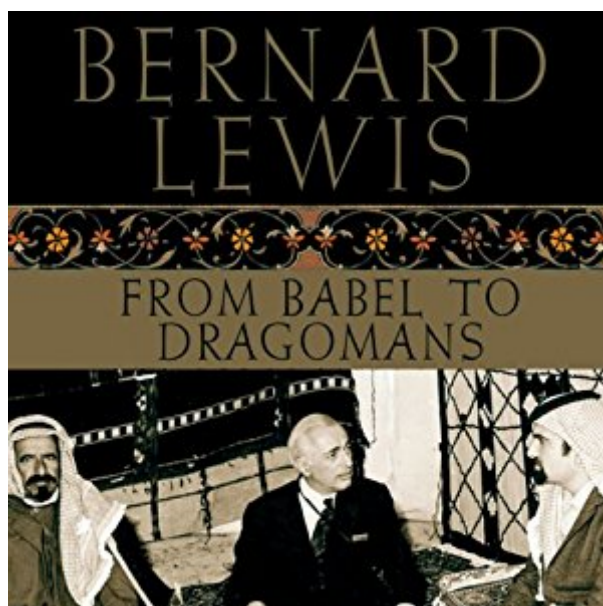


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From Babel To Dragomans: Interpreting The Middle East



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

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.

As a reader I have known more than one time in my life that very special pleasure of meeting a book, that lifts one spirit and one's mind, seems to put one in another higher realm entirely, and gives a kind of intellectual joy which certainly must be among life's greatest pleasures. Reading and meeting again the mind of Bernard Lewis in "From Babel to Dragomans" is such a pleasure. Collected in this work are essays of one of the great intellectual figures of this past half - century. Arguably the world's foremost authority on the Middle East (and most especially the Ottoman Empire) Lewis in these essays displays not only a vast learning but a civilized and often quietly humorous writing which continually inform and delight. In the title essay he elucidates the concept of the `dragoman' or `meturgaman' the translator and in so doing also helps us better understand the way societies which contained within themselves a rich variety of cultures and languages operated . In his remarkable essay " A Taxonomy of Hatred" he gives perhaps the most skilled argument I have ever seen for valuing and considering ` the other'. And this as he analyzes and explains how the instinctual hatred that seems to come to us naturally as primates is refined into something more elegant and deadly in human civilizations. As one who has been involved in the study of the Islamic world for over sixty years he brings a fine sense of the transformations that world has gone through in his lifetime while balancing this against what seem almost inherent cultural patterns these societies cannot free themselves of .

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