

## God's Crucible

Reviewed by James Reston Jr.

The title of David Levering Lewis's surprising new book, *God's Crucible*, brings to mind another piece of ceramic phrasing, Colin Powell's warning to President Bush about invading Iraq: "You break it. You own it." The people and the land of Iraq that we now own as occupiers can be counted among the shards, but the invasion and occupation have also wreaked havoc on a culture, a country's history, and its religion. For better or worse, every American needs to have a certain working knowledge of the traditions of the Middle East, not only for the momentous task of putting the pieces back together in Iraq, but also to avoid such nightmares in the future and to judge the overheated rhetoric of politicians in the forthcoming American election.

"For a historian," Lewis writes in his preface, "thinking about the present means thinking about the past in the present." So it should be for the citizen as well.

*God's Crucible* begins with the rise of Islam in the 6th and 7th centuries from the ruins of the conflict between imperial Rome and imperial Persia. This rise, Lewis writes expansively, is nothing short of "the greatest revolution in power, religion, culture, and wealth in history." In the aftermath, the Fertile Crescent, the vast area of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, was forfeited to the Islamic upstarts in the Arabian peninsula.

Lewis's treatment of Islam's explosive beginnings and its expansion across North Africa into Europe is lucid, and his command of detail is encyclopedic. His narrative is enriched by Arabic sources that are often ignored by European scholars. For today's Arabs and Muslims, these seminal events live intensely in the present: the life of Muhammad, the violent struggle for Mecca and Medina, the first four caliphs, the writing of the Koran and the split of the Shiites and Sunnis. If only for practical reasons, all Americans need to understand these things.

In the second half of the book, Lewis turns to the European response to the Islamic invasion from the Iberian peninsula. The Muslims were defeated in 732 at Poitiers, in present-day France. This historic turning point led to the formation of an inchoate Europe in opposition to Islam. When Charlemagne became king of the Franks in the late 8th century, he developed the concept of holy war versus jihad. Folklore created iconic heroes like Roland -- slaughtered with his men at Roncevaux in 778 and memorialized in the "Song of Roland" -- who embodied European chivalry, manly courage and Christian valor in the face of the infidel. "Poitiers and Roncevaux nurtured an ideology of Holy War and in time," Lewis writes, "of national arrogance to counter the advance of Islam." Through mythology, history was framed as a titanic struggle between Christianity and Islam, a struggle for a Christian warrior caste that could only end when Muslims everywhere were defeated and converted to the true faith.

In his later chapters, there are other important insights. Islam did not stop dead in its tracks in 732, as many believe; Muslim attacks on central Europe not only continued but intensified. If the Islamic forces had prevailed over Charles Martel -- known as "The Hammer" -- at Poitiers, scholars at Oxford and the Sorbonne might have been teaching interpretations of the Koran instead of the Bible afterward. If Charlemagne had been successful in his invasion of Islamic

Spain in 778, the confrontation between Christianity and Islam there might have been accelerated by four centuries.

In Lewis's construction, Europe as a cohesive Christian dominion came into existence with Charlemagne. His coronation in Rome as the first Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800 certified the consolidation he had achieved during his 45-year reign. His palatine complex in Aachen stood in opposition to -- and in the shadow of -- Cordoba in Spain, the "brilliant ornament of the world," with its Great Mosque, its dazzling caliphal residence at Madinat al-Zahra, and its fabulous library. At this point, these two dominions, Christian and Islamic, stood in a fragile equipoise militarily, but Muslim Iberia was far superior culturally and economically.

In *God's Crucible*, answers to many urgent questions, currently in the public discourse, can be deduced. Is Islam essentially a violent religion? Why do Sunnis and Shiites kill one another over a genealogical disagreement? Must we worry about the dream of a worldwide caliphate today, or a terrorist fantasy about restoring the glory of al-Andalus in southern Spain? Is Europe really a Christian continent?

Lewis has made an important contribution to the growing body of literature on Muslim-Christian relations that has emerged after 9/11. But his book also shows how daunting the task of understanding the history of the Middle East is for the average American. He makes no concession here to the general reader. While the book is erudite, it is marred by stilted academic prose and an overemphasis, especially in the first half, on the minutiae of tribal and sectarian conflict. Because of this density, it can be difficult to concentrate on the larger narrative, and many of his insights are inaccessible to the people who most need them.

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