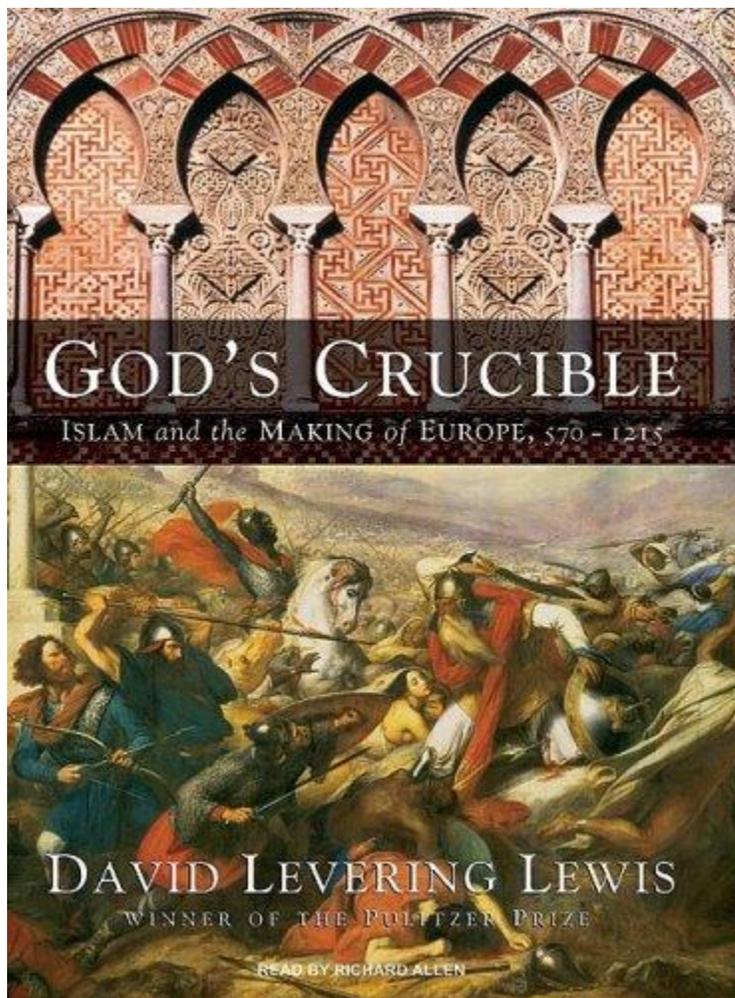


God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe

By David Levering Lewis



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

David Lettering Lewis *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe 570-1215*.

New York; W. W Norton, 2008. 473 pages. Illustrated.

This volume focuses on the rise of Islam from its origins in the life of the Prophet Mohammed until the Lateran Council of 1215, where Pope Innocent III declared

an unremitting, virtually exterminating crusade against all unbelievers outside the Catholic Church.

Lewis treats Mohammed without the snide tones of many exposés or the overly reverential tones of a believer. He focuses on what his organisational abilities achieved. He also places Islam's rise against the situation of the Byzantine Empire at that time and also against the empires to the east, where Islam also rapidly and simultaneously conquered. In the decades after Mohammed's death the very success of Islam led to the acrimonious fatal division between Shia and Sunni which still affects the world. Even within Islam's co-religionists assorted rivalries, feuds and wars slowed and then halted their series of rolling conquests. Although Lewis does not quite spell it out his presented evidence strongly suggests that if the Moslems had not splintered, but retained their vision of global conquest a divided feuding and militarily unprepared Europe would probably have been successfully conquered.

David Lettering Lewis shows how this situation arose. He also examines how a divided Europe, a fractious Byzantium and the unsettled East were governed after Rome fell and how the rise of Islam influenced and at times failed to influence the west. He spends much of this section examining Charlemagne, who became embroiled in Spanish politics, Charlemagne challenged the Moslem invaders who threatened his borders. An interesting section deals with the legend of Roland, the realities behind it and how the legend became part of European culture, playing a big part in shaping attitudes to Islam – and the battles against it.

Surprisingly Lewis does not focus on the Crusades for Jerusalem or the conflicts over the Christian kingdoms in Outremer, but to do so would have led to an unwieldy book at least twice the size of what exists here. His focus goes westwards to the Moslem attempts to take Iberia and France.

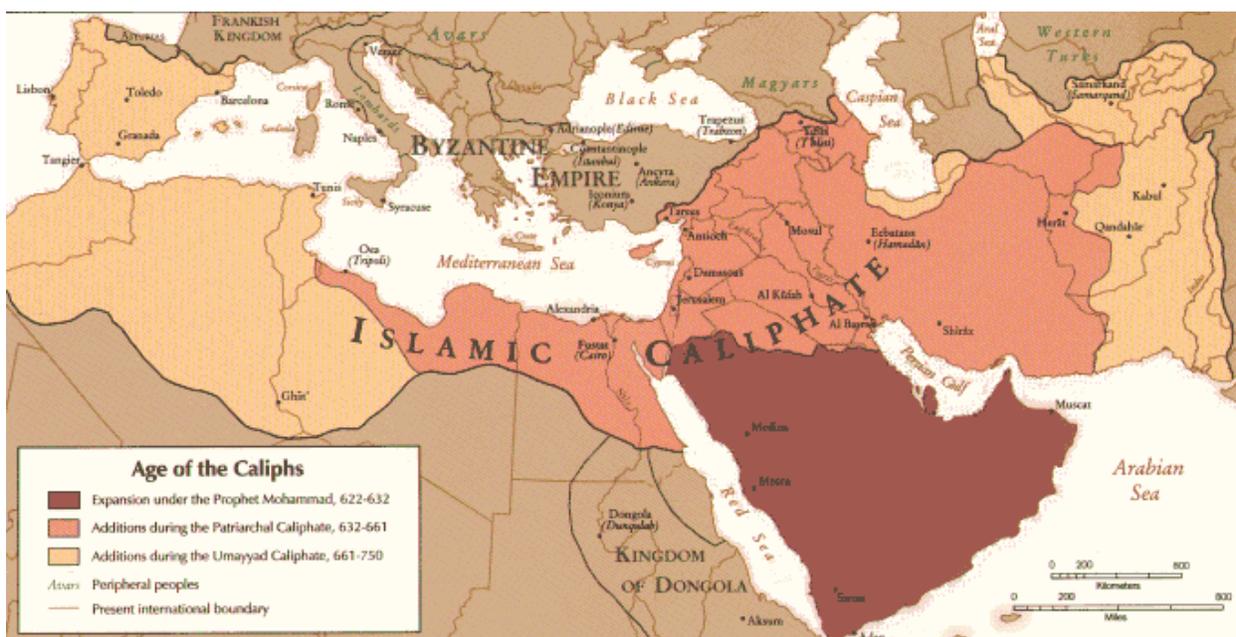
Much of this book focuses on the Spanish experience of Christians and Moslems from the eighth century Moorish invasion up to 1215, when the pope specifically targeted a reconquest of Moslem Spain and three Christian kings obliged with an invasion. Lewis presents the military, political economic and religious complexities, for there was not always a simple and monolithic Christian/Moslem divide based on hostility and warfare. In many areas decades of peace, tolerance and trade lasted. There was also the complex role of a third smaller segment – Spain's Jews. The three different groups would absorb much from each other, but it was the Arabs with their developments in agriculture, architecture, horticulture,

irrigation, music, science, medicine and scholarship who gave the most. Their achievements were not stopped by the Pyrenees, but would be adapted over much of Europe - eventually. Only chess and lutes took off quickly. Much of the Christian absorption would be delayed for hundreds of years. When William Harvey made his discoveries about blood circulation he was merely and unknowingly finding out what Arab physicians had known and written up six hundred years before. Even today the poetic achievements of Spain's Arab poets and philosophers are only starting to get their due in the west.



Multiculturalism: thirteenth century Moslem and Christian lute players in Andalusia

In Iberia Christians and Moslems were not monolithic forces, fanatically united in achieving the aim of conquering the world - or at least conquering Spain. Lewis writes of both sides caught up in endless internal squabbling which could develop into feuds and even internal wars. In such conflicts hatred of their co-religionists reached the stage where heretics were allied to achieve advantage. The supposedly great Christian crusader El Cid made a lucrative warlord's career this way. Levine corrects the fallacy that the victory of the Christians under Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732 stopped the intended Moslem invasion of Europe. It did delay the first attempt, but others were planned, even invasion forces were assembled, but internal rivalries in Islam caused seemingly temporary delays that were never resolved.



God's Crucible indeed: The spread of Islam from Mohammed's death until the eighth century.

The eleventh century invasion of Moslem Spain's kingdoms by the fanatical Islamic fundamentalist Almarid movement split Islamic Spain. Ethnically Berbers, they were correctly seen by the Spanish Arabs as narrow minded foreign invaders establishing a dictatorship. Tens of thousands of manuscripts they considered suspect were burned. Spanish Arab organisations, schools and factions were purged. Almarid priests and preachers established and then enforced puritanical rules concerning daily life. Worship of fellow Moslems was closely controlled.

The Almarids also embarked on reckless invasions and raids that ultimately weakened their forces and credibility while uniting their Christian enemies. Isis had a prototype here. The long term effect was that the majority of the population under their dictatorship were either apathetic or actively hostile towards their rulers, with the result that by the end of the eleventh century the vitally essential cities of Toledo and Valencia had been retaken by the Christians. The reconquest had achieved what would be a decisive point and Moslem power while still formidable for another three hundred years was waning.

At times Lewis's narration becomes a confusing, bewildering journey through the labyrinth of court intrigues, palace coups, murders and a succession of would be strongmen grasping for rule. This is not his fault, this is the path history has laid down, which he must follow. Ignoring the wearing complexities only leads to incorrect and dangerous simplicities.

What remains clearer is that in Moslem Christian relations the patterns were laid down early and are still being followed.



A fourteenth century detail from the Moslem palace at Granada

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