

Micah Morrison

## IN SEARCH OF THE LOST MESSIAH

Bloody and abandoned in Lebanon.

Lebanon has become for us a kind of empty parable about endless violence, a morality play with no moral, no message. It is a feudal land, an idea of a nation imposed upon reluctant lords and restless subjects. Ambitious men rise, fall, sons and brothers and newcomers take their place. Great concentration is needed to place in proper order the exact sequence of "important" assassinations and massacres and bombings; one often feels this is a deeply senseless exercise.

We have become more or less familiar with the current cast of characters strutting across the crowded Lebanese stage: the Christian president, Amin Gemayel; the Sunni Moslem prime minister, Rashid Karamah; the Druse leader, Walid Jumblatt; the Shia Moslem Nabih Berri; Arafat of the PLO; Assad of Syria. To each his fiefdom, to each his legacy of bloodshed. In American eyes, the symbol of mysterious Lebanon has come to be the Bekaa Valley, a zone of almost mythological sinisterness, with its hashish fields, its inexplicable terrorist gangs, its Western hostages. The Lebanese have learned to live with the madness. "You can't scare the Lebanese anymore," a former cabinet minister told the *New York Times*. "Whatever you do to them, they have been through it twice already. They aren't even afraid of the people they should be afraid of."

The Israelis have given up, gotten out. The Americans have given up, gotten out. The Syrians would like nothing more than to get out and retain control, but that is impossible, so they get in deeper and deeper. Arafat would like nothing more than to get back in, but the Syrians and the Shiites and the

Christians want him to stay out, so the fighting in that particular little war continues to sputter around the Palestinian slums and refugee camps. And if the Syrians or the Palestinians get in too deep, too close to the border in the south, the Israelis will come back in. No system of logic, no amount of "game plans" can encompass the Lebanese situation. The Shiites want more power, and they deserve it—but at whose expense? Not at the expense of the Christians, who are losing ground fast. Not at the expense of their Sunni brothers. Certainly not at the expense of the tenacious Druse. Are the Syrians letting terrorists infiltrate toward Israel's "security zone" in southern Lebanon? Are the Shiites? What is the "meaning" of the Syrian connection to European-based terror attempts against Israeli targets? What is the "significance" of the creeping advance of Syrian military units in southern Lebanon? Is Damascus planning to draw Israel back into Lebanon and make a grab across the Golan Heights? If so, would Israeli retaliation be a repeat of June 1982, when Jerusalem's forces decimated Syria's Soviet-supplied weaponry? Would the Russians allow this to happen again? Would a massive Soviet resupply effort bring the Americans back into the picture? Is Arafat, at odds with Assad, trying to provoke Israel into attacking Damascus? What is the Syrian game? What is the Israeli game?

Dangerous ideas and untested forces threaten the entrenched powers. Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon thought they could remake Lebanon. They were wrong. Hafez Assad thinks he can channel Lebanese geo-strategic resources into the service of his own designs for the region. So far he has not succeeded. Yassir Arafat thought Lebanon could be both an "alternate homeland" for the Palestinians and a launching pad for his war against the Jewish state, but he was driven out by the Israelis and returned to be driven

out again by his own people. In the Shia community, Lebanon's largest in number and weakest in political power, Nabih Berri's Amal movement competes with religious radicals who draw inspiration and material support from Khomeini's Iran. The idea of a radical Shiite republic in Lebanon makes just about everybody very, very nervous. For now, the Syrians are the less-than-omnipotent kingmakers in this chaotic country. But what happens if the Syrians buckle, if Christian power self-destructs—will the Shiites be the next kings of Lebanon?

In 1982, after months in Lebanon, the Israelis knew little about their Shia neighbors; knew little indeed, it seems in retrospect, about the murderous Lebanese thicket. Four months after the June invasion, the welcoming atmosphere was starting to fade but the Israelis were still seen as liberators, as the powerful nation that had come to expel their mutual enemy, the Palestinians, who in little more than a decade had turned their quiet backwater into a land of casual savagery. In the beginning the south Lebanese had thrown rice and rosewater; now the locals were

starting to say that it was time for Israel to go. Israeli commanders in the region were complacent: "the situation" was well in hand. The season of the suicide car-bombers lay ahead in the unimagined future.

In the fall of 1982, about four months into the occupation, I happened to be in southern Lebanon on a day that afforded me a glimpse of the Lebanese, and particularly the Shia, strangeness; of a way of life much different from ours, sustained by different myths, cultures, traditions. My ignorance of what was happening is, in some senses, unimportant. What is important, it seems to me, is what the event can show us about the arrogance of power, even a power full of the best intentions, as Israel was toward the local residents who did not take up arms against it.

We—journalists, academicians, and visitors upon whom Jerusalem wished to impress the notion of a "benign occupation"—were traveling in a small convoy of jeeps and buses from Beaufort Castle, an old Crusader fort that the PLO had used to direct fire into Israel, toward the town of Nabiteyeh. Mostly Shiite, a center of commerce before the PLO began to terrorize the



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region in the 1970s, Nabiteyeh's population had shrunk from around 30,000 to about 8,000 in the years of Palestinian dominance. Now, we heard, the old residents had begun to return. In Beirut in the last few weeks, the PLO had finally boarded the boats for Tunisia, president-elect Bashir Gemayel and many of his top aides had been killed by a bomb planted by a Syrian agent, and Christian forces had passed through Israeli lines and entered the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatilla to avenge the death of Bashir by murdering an unknown number—scores certainly, hundreds probably—of people, including women and children.

The latest killings, and the possible ramifications they would have on "the situation," were the main topics of conversation on the bus. Looking out the window, I saw across a dusty field on the outskirts of Nabiteyeh what appeared to be a large group of bare-chested joggers running in loose formation along a parallel road and rhythmically thrusting their arms skyward. As the narrow highway curved closer to the parallel road, it became apparent that the men were singing and striking themselves in the back with small whips and sticks as they ran. Our "guide," a young officer with an uncertain grasp of English, was completely bewildered but said with authority that they were probably taking part in some sort of "local holiday."

Black flags hung from many of the houses. On the bullet-pocked walls were slogans in Arabic, posters of the grimacing Ayatollah Khomeini, and many more posters—some fading, some fresh—of another cleric, a man with a much gentler, almost forlorn expression. Emphatic Arabic writing surrounded the posters of this man, which appeared in Shia strongholds throughout Lebanon. The street began to fill with people and cars. Our lead jeep stopped for a consultation with the bus drivers: it was decided that we would go around Nabiteyeh. A man with a blood-spattered sheet wrapped around his chest staggered by, smiling. A weird chanting cut through the day, and up ahead we could hear the sounds of a great crowd. It was too late to turn back. The convoy slowly moved up a side road that turned into an alley, wound up a hill, curved past white-walled houses thick with grape arbors, and dropped us right into the center of the city.

Here were more young men wrapped in bloody sheets and turbans, their eyes glazed, smiles fixed on their faces. Our convoy pushed slowly through the crowd. In front of one of the posters of the quizzical-looking cleric, a teenager called out to us. As I looked

down at him from the bus window, he raised a knife to his forehead and with a quick twist of his wrist proudly and unflinchingly cut away a tiny piece of his flesh. Blood welled up and ran down his face. His friends wrapped a cloth around his forehead and patted him on the shoulder. Throughout the milling, happy throng, men were shouting and striking themselves on the back with bladelike sticks and whips. A blind albino sat on the hood of a car, surrounded by children: people came over to touch him, perhaps for luck. Although there was no sense of immediate danger, the festive air carried

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something slightly crazed in it, as if at any moment the celebration could take a decidedly bad turn. Yet there was little of that silent hostility Westerners might encounter in, for instance, some of the radical cities of the West Bank. These people were interested in enjoying themselves and getting their pictures taken. We obliged, although the atmosphere in the bus was far from relaxed. Ahead, one of the soldiers in the jeep was nervously tapping his mounted machine gun and smiling tightly at the crowd.

"The PLO is gone," our guide said, after descending to the street and obtaining some information. "For the first time in many years people here can celebrate their Ashura. It is a holiday of their martyr. A holiday of the Shia." A boy, perhaps nine years old, raised a knife to his forehead. The wailing crested. Nabiteyeh fell away behind us. After the singing and the beating and the bleeding, the eyes of the flagellants shone with a placid madness. The only comparable gaze I have ever seen is the pre-dawn look in a person's eyes after a long night in the grip of a powerful hallucinogenic drug.

Ashura, I later learned, is the sole property of the Shiites. It marks the death in battle of a direct descendant of the Prophet, the Imam Hussein, on the plains of Kerbala, in southern Iraq; the violent display of self-flagellation we had stumbled across in Nabiteyeh was a public display of grief, part of the passion play that annually revives the tribulations of the Imam. (To the Sunni, the term imam means prayer leader; to the Shiite, the imamate is the repository of Divine Truth, and the term can be bestowed on a religious or political leader

of great influence, such as the Imam Khomeini.) A power struggle ripped apart the young Islamic faith soon after the death of the Prophet, and the events at Kerbala in A.D. 671 sealed the Shia sense of separateness; the cries of passion surrounding Kerbala can still be heard echoing in Islam today.

As Johns Hopkins University scholar Fouad Ajami notes in his excellent new book, *The Vanished Imam*,<sup>1</sup> the early division in Islam was "a struggle between two ideas of succession: a religious one, claiming rule through descent from the Prophet, and a worldly one resting on the wealth and power

of the expanding Moslem state and its formidable troops in the province of Syria." From Damascus came an order to the Imam Hussein: pledge allegiance to our rule; from Iraq came the call of the faithful: travel here and be our guide and teacher. Hussein left the Hijaz birthplace of Islam, in western Saudi Arabia, and with a small band of followers he started for Iraq. This was an affront Damascus could not tolerate. Outside of Kerbala 5,000 troops surrounded Hussein's camp and, on the tenth day of the Moslem month of Muharram, the day of Ashura, the Imam was killed by repeated blows of lance and sword, his body was trampled beneath the hooves of many horses, and his head was carried to Damascus.

Ajami writes: "The late seventh-century event marked with its themes of righteous defeat an entire branch of Islam. Kerbala, as it were, insisted on permanent relevance. 'Every day is Ashura, and every place is Kerbala,' Shia history taught." In this the Shiites were not unlike the Jews. Tragedy and disaster followed them for centuries. The Imams, from the first to the twelfth, came to tragic ends at the hands of the enemies of Shia Islam. With the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, a child who vanished from an Iraqi mosque and was probably murdered by agents of the ruling dynasty, Shiism entered a long period of darkness and messianic yearning. A final tenet was welded to the faith: the

<sup>1</sup>Cornell University Press, \$17.95. The reader looking for insight into the confusing Lebanese scene would do well to consult Ajami's book. The revised edition of Itamar Rabinovich's *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985* (Cornell, \$9.95 paper) complements the Ajami book by examining all the factions in Lebanon's struggle.

twelfth Imam was believed to be hidden in a state of occultation, or non-corporeal existence. "History became usurpation," Ajami writes. "The deeds of men faltered, men awaited the return of the Hidden Imam. In this messianic view, which shares its essential salvationism with Jewish and Christian eschatology, the Hidden Imam returns as a great avenger, a *mahdi*, a savior."

It is not difficult to see why many Shiites today think of themselves as living in a messianic era. In Iran, Khomeini rose and destroyed the Pahlavi dynasty. And in Lebanon too (and this is really the subject of Fouad Ajami's fascinating book) a would-be messiah came from Iran in 1959 and brought the Lebanese Shiites up from their submissive sleep. His name was Musa al Sadr and his fate was at once peculiarly Shiite and absolutely Lebanese. It was his picture that was plastered all over Nabiteyeh, all over Shia Lebanon. It was there because Musa al Sadr had fulfilled his Shia fate by showing his people the way to power, by being betrayed by obscure and evil forces, and vanishing.

Coming from a prestigious Iranian clerical family with roots in Lebanon, Sadr was a tireless organizer and speaker. For years he traveled the country—and often beyond Lebanon's borders—binding together the disparate Shia community. Religion and politics were one for him. He was the guiding force behind the creation of the Higher Shia Council, which put forward the long-ignored Shia claims for roads, schools, medical clinics, for more power and political patronage. After only a decade in the country, the title Imam came to him. Later, when all Lebanon was sliding into civil war, he founded Amal as a defense militia; as Lebanon disintegrated, the charismatic cleric grew increasingly powerful: his followers multiplied, and so did his enemies. He tried to balance all sides in disputes—Sadr was a talented diplomat, not a fanatic—but frequently he found himself at odds with the Palestinians and the Christians. Establishment Moslems were also unhappy with this "foreigner" who stirred up the poor. The left despised him. He was an enigmatic figure and rumors swirled around him. Who did he really work for? The Shah? The Americans? What was the meaning of his alliance with Assad of Syria? "Among the Palestinians and the parties of Sunni West Beirut," Ajami comments, "Musa al Sadr was seen as the enemy of everything 'progressive.' He had not shared in the exuberance of the left; he could no longer tolerate Palestinian control in southern Lebanon or pass over it in silence."



Violent death became the Lebanese way of life. The PLO buildup in the south continued. Rival forces fell to feuding. The Syrians invaded in the summer of 1976, ostensibly to put an end to the fighting. Things began to slip away from Musa al Sadr's control. In March 1977, the powerful Druse chief Kamal Jumblatt was assassinated. His playboy son, Walid, would soon replace him. The civil war had been in full swing for nearly two years. In March 1978 the Israelis swept into—and then out of—southern Lebanon in the anti-PLO Operation Litani. But the PLO simply retreated with the civilian population and returned when Israel departed. The Shiites had taken the brunt of the Israeli strike, and now the PLO was back to continue tormenting them while building their “mini-state” in the south. Seeking funds and political support, Sadr embarked on a tour of Arab capitals. In Algeria, it was suggested to Sadr that he go see Libya's Muammar Qaddafi. A few days later Musa al Sadr was in Libya. No one has seen him since.

Reading Ajami's book, one has the sense of a man suddenly dwarfed by events, of a confident man controlling

his destiny until one unnoticed day his country's destiny was controlling him. That, of course, is the Lebanese story. It is the story of Kamal Jumblatt and Bashir Gemayel and Yassir Arafat. In an only slightly different way it is the story of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, and possibly of Hafez Assad. The story of Musa al Sadr differs only in its Shia aura, its messianic patina. Soon after Musa al Sadr disappears—it is all but certain that Qaddafi killed Sadr as a favor to his good friend Arafat—the Shah is toppled. Soon after that, the Imam Khomeini begins a holy war against Iraq—there are Shiites there too, after all, and Shia holy places, such as Kerbala. When Israel finally moves in 1982 to end the PLO's terrorizing of its border region, a rumor flies through the Shia slums of Beirut: Musa al Sadr has been found! He was held captive in the south all the time. The rumor, like all the previous rumors, was not true. But the rumors and the stories will continue, because the truth of Musa al Sadr's life has merged into the legend of the Hidden Imam and the longing of the Shiites for power and vindication.

A year after I was in Nabiteyeh, another Israeli convoy tried to pass through the streets on Ashura. This time events took a more tragic turn. It was 1983 and the occupation had gone far too long. It was the worst possible day for a show of arms—and that is what I meant about the arrogance of power, about learning nothing of the customs and complexities of a place and a people. The crowd turned ugly at the sight of their oppressors—on this day of all days the memories of the persecutions of the Imam Hussein gave extra passion to their lives—the soldiers had to shoot their way out of the enraged town. Two citizens died. It was a bad sign, and Israel would have to live through almost two more years of bad times, including the nightmare of Shia fanaticism and the suicide car-bombers, until it could finally extricate itself from the cursed country.

Now it appears that Lebanon is turning on itself again. The Western targets are mostly gone. The killings have been “localized.” The security zone concept is working for Israel in the south and will probably remain there for a long time. Although Damascus is creeping

its artillery and support lines down toward Israel, the Syrians appear to have their hands full with their own Lebanese problems, the failing Syrian economy, and the uncertain health of Hafez Assad.

It's possible that Lebanon may simply exhaust itself, that there is some finite point the carnage cannot continue past. Or perhaps a new power-sharing arrangement will be negotiated and will hold. But don't bet on it. Too many groups smell victory in the air. And the hardest, most uncompromising force in hard, uncompromising Lebanon (so different from the Lebanon of old!) appears to be the force of radical Shia Islam. Will the radicals triumph over Berri's Amal? They have won some significant battles, and they have the backing of Khomeini's Iran; they have the old legends of martyrdom and oppression, and they have yesterday's news of victory—both can be used to stir their followers; and they believe God is on their side and a Messiah is waiting in the wings. It happened in Iran and it almost happened in Lebanon with Musa al Sadr. It could happen again. □



## BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS

Holiday gift suggestions from some of our favorite readers and writers.



### MORTIMER J. ADLER

I have two sets of recommendations of books for people to use and read.

The first set consists of guidebooks to reading itself. Here there are three items: (1) *The Harvard Guide to Influential Books*, just published by Harper & Row; (2) Charles Van Doren's *The Joy of Reading*, published last year by Crown Publishers; and (3) my own book, *A Guidebook to Learning*, published last year by Macmillan.

The second set consists of books that everyone should read during the bicentennial year of 1987. Here again are three books: (1) Carl Van Doren's *The Great Rehearsal*, which is coming back into print; (2) Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia*, also being brought back into print; and (3) my book about the Constitution, under

the title *We Hold These Truths*, to be published by Macmillan in the early spring of 1987.

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### JACQUES BARZUN

For a steady view of the contemporary scene there is nothing like reading history, not because history repeats but because it *degeneralizes*. The “wonderful Renaissance,” the “liberating Reformation.” Read about them in Hugh Trevor-Roper's *Renaissance Essays* (Chicago, 1985), and you see how many more disparate adjectives and ideas you have to use. The saintly Thomas More, the villainous Paracelsus, and others become different people—not just complex, but intelligible, and none of

them perversely wrong. As for Trevor-Roper, he writes like an angel and judges like a Solomon, even though he did err at first about Hitler's diaries.

Dr. Paul Dudley White, the cardiologist, became a national figure when he was called in to treat President Eisenhower, after some bumbling efforts by the White House Physician General Snyder. But Dr. White deserves his fame for a greater reason—his revision of accepted rules about the heart patient's proper way of life, now common knowledge. And he did many other things, including research on whales (Moby Dick's heartbeat), to earn him an international reputation. His life (*Take Heart*, by Paul Oglesby, M.D., Harvard Press, 1986), ably written by a student and colleague of his, takes one to far places in the

company of a picturesque character.

*The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* by Trevor H. Hall (Duckworth, 1980) is a superb piece of retrospective detection about the death of a most attractive late Victorian: Gurney was a man of letters, philosopher, musicologist, and co-founder of the English Society for Psychical Research. He died solitary and under a false name in a Brighton hotel room in 1888. Mr. Hall has used uncontested evidence to show how and why, and as he proceeds he gives splendid portraits of a notable group of thinkers. (Incidentally, Gurney's *Power of Sound* should be known and read by all music critics.)

Though Rayner Heppenstall gave the British public some of its best high-brow entertainment through the BBC, where he wrote and produced for over