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Last night's viewing - Islam: the Untold Story, Channel 4; Accused, BBC1

TOM SUTCLIFFE | WEDNESDAY 29 AUGUST 2012

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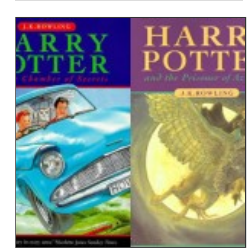


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"History is like a labyrinth," said Tom Holland at the beginning of **Islam: the Untold Story**, "who knows where it may lead?" In the case of Islam, he'd suggested just a little earlier, it had led him into a "black hole", a vacant space where he'd expected to find a profusion of evidence. He didn't say that it might also lead to trouble, but one of his contributors did it for him and there can't have been many viewers who weren't thinking it as he set about questioning the origin myths of Islam. You sure you want to go into that black hole, you found yourself thinking. You might get badly hurt in there.

As a kind of intellectual-collision-damage waiver, Holland explicitly asked what appeared to be his only Muslim contributor, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whether he was entitled to bring Western techniques of historiography to bear on this sacred narrative. "Yes" was the answer, with the implied proviso that it wasn't going to make much difference anyway. It sat alongside another answer from the same scholar. Could Holland, as a non-believer, ever hope to fathom the truth of the origins of Islam? "No," replied Professor Nasr flatly.

That, essentially, was the head-on impact here. As a historian, Holland was troubled by a gap in the record, and by inconsistencies between the scriptural account and hard evidence on the ground. But the absence of evidence only matters to those for whom evidence is a sort of god. Those who have a God already, capitalised and unquestionable, don't really care either way. Professor Nasr must have said something (after that unadorned "No", but from his other comments it would have been something about the inadequacy of Western logic when confronted with transcendental verities.

For those of us who don't take the Koran as the word of God the evidence was rather interesting, if by necessity inconclusive. The early history of the Arab empire – which appeared as if out of nowhere and spread with a rapidity that seemed to beg for supernatural explanation – is very light indeed on direct references to the Prophet. What's more, the Koran itself offers a number of puzzles. Why does it address itself to an agrarian people when it seems clear that sixth-century Mecca wasn't a farming community? Why does it say its readers pass by the ancient site of Sodom "day and night" when Sodom is hundreds of miles north of Mecca?

The explanation, tactfully put, was that the Koranic story was a religious post-rationalisation of a political fait accompli, a way of giving sacred endorsement to existing power relationships. And the identification of Mecca as the origin of this new religion offered Muslims a place where they "could put their Prophet beyond the reach of history". By this argument, the allusions to pre-existing biblical traditions in the Koran aren't there because its author was cut-and-

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location I last saw on screen when Ann Widdecombe was waxing wroth about the suggestion that Moses' meeting with Jehovah might not have happened exactly as described.

Interpretive clashes were also at the heart of **Accused** this week. Stephen thinks that his father's new girlfriend, a terminal-care nurse, is a manipulative bitch who's out to poison him. Stephen's father – and the Crown Prosecution Service – think Stephen is mad, a diagnosis reinforced when he stabs Sheridan Smith's interloper. We think both. On the one hand, Alastair Campbell does talk to Stephen from the telly. On the other hand, the drama has an ominously suggestive ending. One for the exegetes.

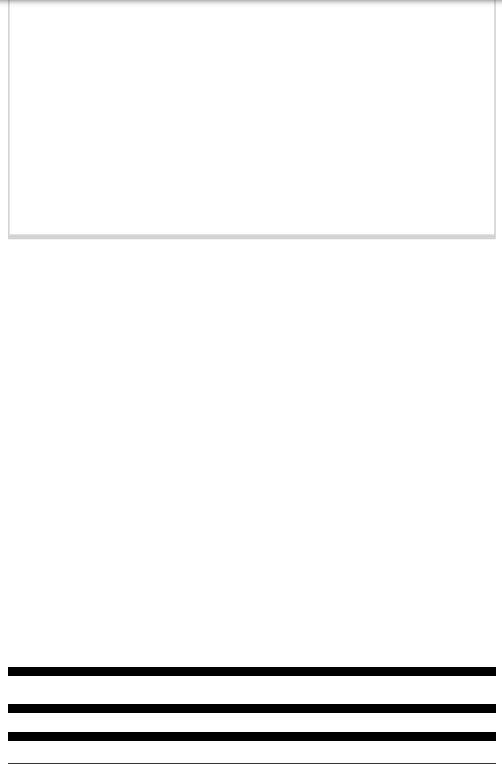
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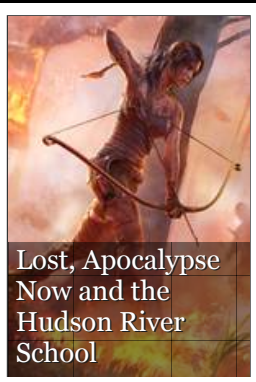
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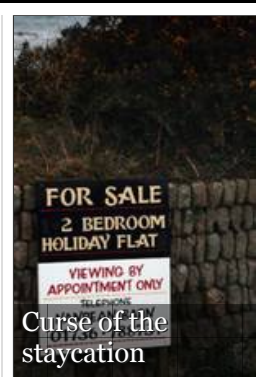
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