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Hanna Emmanuel Kassis **5 April 1932 – 3 April 2018**

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Hanna Emmanuel Kassis died on 3 April 2018, just a couple of days shy of his 86th birthday. Modest in manner, blessed with a foxy smile belying a gentle (though it could also be sharp) sense of humour, he saw his scholarship, like his life, not simply as adding a brick to the wall of learning but also as serving a greater need, that of knocking down walls between faiths and people. Of a Palestinian family, he was born in Gaza in 1932, when the country was still united under the British Mandate, and before it experienced the human and political consequences of the war of 1948 and after.

Kassis's experience as a member of a small, and declining, minority in the Holy Land marked him for life. Gaza's Christian population today is only some 1,000-3,000, not very different from when he was a boy.¹ But in the 1930s and 1940s, the total population of the Gaza area numbered only some 85,000, a tiny fraction of the 1.85 million they are today. He noted more than once that he was nursed by a Muslim woman and spoke of his 'milk-sister', another Muslim, to stress his consciousness not only of his difference but of how difference did not always imply or compel barriers. After his death, one of the many tributes that were paid to him noted that in his teaching of Islam it was a surprise for his students to discover that he was not a Muslim himself.

¹ See, e.g., Sabella, "Palestinian Christians".

Following the war of 1948 Kassis left for study in Beirut and from there went on to graduate work in the USA. His interest at that time was in the ancient Levant, and he earned his doctorate at Harvard in 1964, with a dissertation on *The Ceramic Chronology of the Late Bronze Age in Palestine, Phase I: 1525-1450 B.C.*² The concern with the material, whether pottery or metal, stayed with him, and though he moved on from that field soon afterwards, and the dissertation itself was not published (it is available like other north American dissertations from ProQuest), he never lost his interest in the topic and wrote at least two articles on related subjects later.³

More significantly, and in an early sign of a rare scholarly selflessness, he edited and prepared for publication the uncompleted work of the Australian archaeologist James R. Stewart on the finds in the excavation of Tell el-‘Ajjul, near Gaza.⁴ Stewart had died in 1962, leaving the work unfinished, scarcely even in publishable form. Although he plays down the amount and the character of the work he did on the manuscript, it is plain that Kassis invested much time and effort in bringing Stewart’s book to the public arena. Kassis had used Stewart’s work, as he tells us in his preface to the publication, in the preparation of his own doctoral dissertation, and wished that his “colleagues in the field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology should equally benefit from Stewart’s work”. This appeared in 1974.⁵

Although Kassis spent his entire career on the west coast of Canada, about as far away as it is possible to get from the heart of the Middle East where he was born, he never lost sight of his home. Working and writing principally on the ancient and the medieval periods, he still remained keenly aware of the political travails through which the region passed in his lifetime, and he contributed one article to discussion of Middle Eastern politics. Perhaps in a conscious act of avoidance, it was

² An abstract of the dissertation is available at *Harvard Theological Review*, 58 (1965), pp. 455-456.

³ See List of Publications (below), Nos. 1, 2.

⁴ For Stewart, see Merrillees, “Stewart, James Rivers Barrington (1913–1962)”. For the current state of the excavations, begun by Sir Flinders Petrie in the 1930s, see the descriptions and reports of Peter Fischer, at http://www.fischerarchaeology.se/?page_id=15. Tell el-‘Ajjul lies inside the present-day Gaza Strip.

⁵ List of Publications, No. 3.

devoted not to the politics of Jew and Arab, but to the contemporary communitarian violence of Lebanon in the 1980s.⁶

Kassis was an old-fashioned scholar in the sense that he had wide interests and did not give in to the modern insistence on specialization in one area to the exclusion of others. Nevertheless, he had two central areas of scholarly concern, and though they appear very distant from each other, his personality shows the likely link between them. The first was the Islamic west, north Africa and al-Andalus, where his contributions touched a variety of topics, but concentrated above all on the Christians under Islamic rule, surely reflecting his own background in a Christian community in the world of Islam. And the other is his work on the Qurʾān.

Decades ago, early in his career, he became interested in coins, and many of his articles look at the numismatic evidence for western Islam.⁷ An article on the Midrarids, on whom I also wrote long ago, was one of the writings by Kassis that first introduced me to his work. That and others led him to a broader interest in the very beautiful coinage of the Almoravids, and for many years he was engaged in the study of their coins. He made numerous trips to the region to look at Almoravid coins in public and private collections, assembled a mass of material and began compiling what would have been a corpus. Belatedly he discovered that another scholar was engaged in a similar task and with typical generosity left his own unpublished. It is unclear what will happen to his notes.

He also wrote on Christians in al-Andalus and on their religious, legal and linguistic absorption into the Islamic world around them.⁸ Towards the end of his life he began work on two other major projects in this field. The first was an edition of the Munich manuscript of the gospels in an Andalusī Arabic version.⁹ This appeared in 2016. The second was a huge project that, like his work on Christians in al-Andalus, and on the edition of the gospel translation, seemed to reflect or to derive from his own background as a Christian from the Islamic

⁶ List of Publications, No. 8.

⁷ List of Publications, Nos. 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 20.

⁸ List of Publications, Nos. 15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26.

⁹ List of Publications, No. 27.

world. His work on this, the huge eleventh-century Christian-Arabic translation of the church canons, remains unpublished.

Kassis's other main field of interest was religion, reflecting the faith that animated much in his life. It took form especially in his largest and in one sense most significant work, his *Concordance to the Quran* (1982). The work was criticized by some professional scholars of Islam when it appeared for being based entirely on an English version of the text and suffering on that account from the variations between the semantic spans of Arabic words and those of the equivalents found in the translation used by Kassis. One reviewer complained that 'if one looks up "revelation", one finds *āyah* and *kalimah* but not *wahy*; if one looks up "prophet," one finds *nabīy*, but not *rasūl* [sic]'.¹⁰ But such colleagues missed the point. The concordance was not intended to replace that of Fluegel or those produced in the twentieth century by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, all reflecting the contents of the original Arabic text. Kassis's work was aimed at an audience of people who did not know Arabic, whether Muslim or, the majority, non-Muslim, but above all those without Arabic. His intention was to make available to such readers and users of the holy book of Islam a key that would open that book up to those who were unacquainted with the first language of Islam and, in all probability, with the religion itself. In the introduction to that work he laid out his argument and his aims very plainly:

"The great degree to which the Qur'an shapes and governs the lives of millions of Muslims around the world is becoming increasingly evident. It is my conviction that in order to understand Islam and the Muslims, one should endeavour first to comprehend the "Word" that gave the faith its birth and continues to give the community of Islam its nourishment and sustenance. ...it would be quite wrong... to limit the study of the Qur'an to those who have a command of Arabic... This work, then, is a concordance of the Arabic vocabulary of the Qur'an for the use of the non-Arabist.... This may be sufficient to impress on the student of the Qur'an that a knowledge of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, albeit a cursory one, is a necessity. If the Qur'an is the lifeline of Muslim life, thought and institutions, the Arabic language, in which it was revealed, is the fibre of that lifeline."

The work has served such audiences over many years, and one measure of its success is the fact that it is now part of the Oxford

¹⁰ See the review by Böwering, pp. 106-107.

Islamic Studies Online database. Kassis brought to that work both a desire to spread his ideals of inter-faith understanding and the experience of many years of devoted and inspiring teaching at the University of British Columbia, where he spent his entire career, and raised generations of students who recalled his teaching with respect and even love. Islam was not his religion, but he admired it and saw it not only as offering a moral and spiritual path but also as the vehicle of a great civilization.

All of Kassis's writing is characterized by scrupulous attention to detail, exact knowledge of the sources, clarity of exposition, care for the uninformed among his scholarly audience (as much in his numismatic work, aimed at specialists, as in his expository work on the Qur'ān, aimed at a wider audience). That helps to explain his preference for the article as his main form of scholarly expression. The books he published were the concordance to the Qur'ān and an edition of a medieval text; and the book he left unfinished at his death, on the coinage of the Almoravids, was similarly a catalogue. The extensive scope and great over-arching thesis with its necessary smoothing out of inconvenient detail did not appeal. The narrower specificity of a smaller problem permitted him the neat, *pointu* approach that could find a solution or an interpretation that was at once persuasive and credible. That may be as much as we should wish for.

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3. James R. Stewart, *Tell el 'Ajjūl The Middle Bronze Age Remains*, edited and prepared for publication by Hanna E. Kassis, with appendices by W.F. Albright, K.M. Kenyon and R.S. Merrilees, Göteborg (Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology, XXXVIII), 1974.
4. 'Some unpublished Almoravid dinars in Madrid and Badajoz', *Al-Qantara*, 3 (1980), pp. 457-465.
5. *A Concordance of the Quran*, foreword by Fazlur Rahman, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

6. 'Qadi 'Iyad's rebellion against the Almoravids in Sabtah (A.H. 542-543/A.D. 1147-1148): new numismatic evidence', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 103/3 (1983), pp. 504-514.
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