

## AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR DAVID COOK ON ISLAMIC STUDIES

Prof. David Cook ile İslami Çalışmalar Üzerine Bir Söyleşi

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## An Interview with Professor David Cook on Islamic Studies

### Abstract

David Cook is a Professor of religion in the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University, specializing in Islam. He completed his undergraduate degree at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1994. He later received his M.A. degree in 1998 and his Ph.D. degree with the study titled "The Beginnings of Islam in Syria during the Umayyad Period", which he prepared under the supervision of Fred Donner, Walter Kaegi, and Patricia Crone from the University of Chicago (Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures) in March 2002. He received most of his training in Arabic and Islamic studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Then he took training in other languages and the research methodology of Islamic studies at the University of Chicago. His areas of specialization include early Islamic history and development, Muslim apocalyptic literature and movements (classical and contemporary), radical Islam, jihad, jihadist movements in Islam such as Salafism, historical astronomy, Judeo-Arabic literature, and West African Islam. This study was prepared as part of an interview with Prof. Cook in July 2022 at Rice University. It covers a number of subjects, including Cook's educational background, his research into Islamic topics, his methodology, and his opinions on Western Islamic literature.

**Keywords:** David Cook, Islamic Studies, Apocalyptic Literature.

## Prof. David Cook ile İslami Çalışmalar Üzerine Bir Söyleşi

### Öz

David Cook, Rice Üniversitesi Din Araştırmaları Bölümü'nde İslam konusunda uzmanlaşmış din profesörüdür. Lisans eğitimini 1994 yılında Kudüs İbrani Üniversitesi'nde tamamladı. Yüksek Lisans derecesini 1998 yılında, Doktora derecesini ise "Emeviler Döneminde Suriye'de İslam'ın Başlangıcı" başlıklı çalışmasıyla, Mart 2002'de Chicago Üniversitesi'nde (Yakın Doğu Dilleri ve Kültürleri Bölümü) Fred Donner, Walter Kaegi ve Patricia Crone'nin danışmanlığında almıştır. Eğitiminin çoğunu Kudüs İbrani Üniversitesi'nde Arapça ve İslam çalışmaları alanında tamamlamıştır. Daha sonra Chicago Üniversitesi'nde diğer diller ve İslami araştırmalar araştırma metodolojisi konusunda dersler almıştır. Uzmanlık alanları arasında erken İslam tarihi ve gelişimi, Müslüman apokaliptik edebiyatı ve hareketleri (klasik ve çağdaş), radikal İslam, cihat, Selefilik gibi İslam'daki cihatçı hareketler, tarihi astronomi, Yahudi-Arap edebiyatı ve Batı Afrika İslamı yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, Prof. Cook ile Temmuz 2022'de Rice Üniversitesi'nde yapılan bir röportajın parçası olarak hazırlanmıştır. Röportaj, Cook'un eğitim geçmişi, İslamî konulardaki araştırmaları, metodolojisi ve Batı İslamî literatürü hakkındaki görüşleri dahil olmak üzere bir dizi konuyu kapsamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** David Cook, İslamî Çalışmalar, Apokaliptik Literatür.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Firstly, could you tell us a little about yourself? What would you say about the education you received and the environment you grew up in? Who is Professor David Cook?

**David Cook:** Well, I suppose it is in the environment that I grew up in that was pretty religious. I mean my father was a professor of theology for a conservative Christian group and that's the way that I grew up. I think that probably most people from my background don't really understand why the nor /north I came to the study of Islam. But other than you know there's not much that's really unusual about my upbringing I suppose this was the determining factor in my life was that in 1975 when I was 8, my dad and my entire family went on a sabbatical first of all to Israel but then afterward to Africa and three months of Europe a total of about 12 months. And so, it gave me kind of an international perspective that I don't think there very many children had, and it gave me a perspective you are kind of at the right time of my life.

**Muhammed Oruc:** What was your master's thesis about? And more importantly, what did you study for your Ph.D. thesis? Do you have any special reason for choosing the subject?

**David Cook:** I started off at the Hebrew University in the study of archaeology actually. I suppose that again is kind of related to the religious upbringing that I had you know like I was really interested in. But you know that really only lasted about a year-and-a-half I was pretty grossly immature, and I left it, and then I didn't really know what to study. I was taking Arabic at the time and so all of a sudden Arabic became very important to me. So, I didn't really visualize it as leading to the study of Islam though I visualized it more in terms of maybe like international relations and so it wasn't for a number of years. You know until I actually came up with you know like studying Arabic for the purposes of Islam. My Ph.D. dissertation is on the beginning of Islam in Syria.<sup>1</sup> I have always been fascinated with Syria you know kind of what we can call greater Syria in other words you know not just the present-day country of Syria. But you know the larger ones like Syria, Lebanon, Israel Palestine, Jordan, and stuff. And so, I think the Ph.D. dissertation reflects that interest and interest continue. You know that my work on Ibn 'Asākir is essentially a reflection of it.

**Muhammed Oruc:** But you never published. Is there any reason for this?

**David Cook:** Well, the reason why I didn't publish my Ph.D. dissertation. It passed fine but there were some methodological issues that I was not

<sup>1</sup> David Cook, *The Beginning of Islam in Syria During the Umayyad Period* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago, 2002, Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation).

satisfied with and since then I have not been satisfied. And so I would like to come back to it you know maybe later in life. Because I believe that it's important thing to study what was the central question that I was asking for my Ph.D. dissertation is what the Umayyad actually believed. Because Islam as we see, it today it's kind of a product of the 'Abbāsīd period. And that's the period we have the documentation for and you know it's pretty natural that the 'Abbāsīds really hate the Umayyads and even called them sometimes non-Muslims. But they can't have been true. Because of the coins, we have that we have you know, there are very determinately monotheistic. You know large community say "*La ilaha illallah.*" So, there is the reason for ideology right there but the question is whether it can be reconstructed or not, and yeah from the methodological point of view I wasn't satisfied with my dissertation to be upset blind.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Another point, I noticed that you thank Prof. Yohanan Friedman in some of your studies. And when I saw the name Prof. Friedman, it was familiar to me. I have used some of his work<sup>2</sup> in my thesis before. He recently published a new book on Mahdism.<sup>3</sup>

**David Cook:** Professor Yohanan Friedman was really one of the formative influences on my life at Hebrew University. I have dedicated my work, Ibn 'Asākir, to him. You know he is quite elderly now. But his education is extremely broad. He was educated partially at Aligarh University in India and did some education also at McGill University. Four years taught at Princeton University. So, he is a man that I respect immensely because his integrity and the breadth of his knowledge are really amazing.

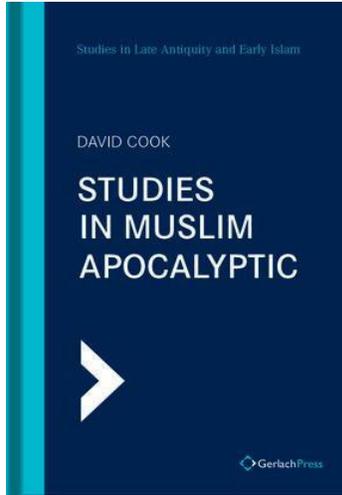
**Muhammed Oruc:** How did you decide to study on Islamic issues? Have you been impressed by him at the Hebrew University?

**David Cook:** Well, that was pretty much under Friedman's influence. I ran out of money at a certain time, while I was at the Hebrew University. Because I am not Jewish not Israeli or anything like that. I had to go back to the United States and work for a number of years. And I had not completed my BA and so actually came back in and finish my BA late in my twenties. And I still didn't really know what I was going to do with it. I knew I was getting quite good at Arabic. But I did not visualize you know kind of like

<sup>2</sup> Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi an Outline Of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies, 1966). Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous- Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Yohanan Friedman, *Messianic Ideas and Movements in Sunnī Islam* (Oneworld Academic, 2022).

where it was can only lead. But Friedman definitely directed me more to the classical study of Islam and especially after I read Nu'aym b. Ḥammād.<sup>4</sup>



You know, growing up as an Evangelical Christian, I was very much familiar with a lot of different terminology that you could see in Muslim apocalyptic literature. And I was excited when I read it for the first time. You know to realize that there was so much material that it was very stringent similar between the Christian tradition and the Muslim tradition. That was where I first read Nu'aym and that was when I wrote my MA on the Muslim apocalyptic materials. That is I started Islamic subjects when I first read Nu'aym and I wrote my MA on the Muslim apocalyptic materials.

**Muhammed Oruc:** When I look at your academic studies, I see that you have a very wide field of study and research such as jihad and martyrdom in Islam. I would like to dwell on the reasons that lead you to these studies apart from apocalyptic. Where did your interest in Islamic studies come from and how did it develop? Is it just a personal desire and curiosity to work? Or were the political and religious developments in Islamic geography effective?

**David Cook:** Well, that issues of Jihad had been touched upon inside my dissertation and I was encouraged to write more on the subject after September 11<sup>th</sup>. And then after that, I got into martyrdom a little bit, I found that a lot of people weren't actually writing on martyrdom operations as a scientific thing. They were writing very emotionally and so that annoyed me.

<sup>4</sup> Nu'aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī, Kitāb al-Fitan.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Some of the concepts you use in your studies caught my attention. For example, in your article titled “Early Islamic and Classical Sunnī and Shī’ite Apocalyptic Movements”, you used the term “Proto-Shī’a”. What do you want to express with this concept? By proto-Shī’a do you mean Gulat Shī’a, Imamiyya or Zaydiyya?

**David Cook:** Okay, the thing is that there’s a lot of question inside the scholarly circles about when precisely you can actually use the term Shī’a for that group that saw Ali bin Abi Talib as being the primary focus on political legitimacy.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Not like a fully formed sect.

**David Cook:** Yes, we can say that as a political-religious ideology. But the thing is that there’s a wide field of Sunnīsm within Islam. No Sunnī hates Ali. I mean that’s not possible. And so there are a great many people who never became Shī’ites who actually are quite influential inside Shī’itism. Probably the best example of that is *Abu’l-faraj al-Iṣfahānī*. The figure you know you cannot actually study a Shī’ism or understand its emotional appeal without reading something like *Maqati’l al-Talibiyyin*. Yes, he never became a Shī’ite and so there’s a whole range of people that were influenced emotionally, religiously, and sometimes even politically. They didn’t really become actual Shī’ites. You know those are the people that we can call *Alids* or *Pro-Alids*. Now those people that are going to be developing into actual hardcore Shī’ites like *Imami Shī’ites* or *Ishna Asharia*. That is a group that also develops over the period of the first 200 years of Islam. You can’t really say for example that those people that are supporting Ali or actually Shī’ites. Many of them just view him as being the legitimate ruler. They don’t care about a new ideological aspect of it. And some of them when you read their poetry, they’re not actually that much different from the like the Jahiliya guys. Some of the Mutazilites were sympathetic to Ali as the legitimate caliph. But were definitely not actually the Shī’ites all. Some of those people interacted with Shī’ism and sometimes that interaction was extremely fruitful. You know like the *Ḳādī ‘Abd al-Dj abbār*. I mean his influence over *Shaykh al-Mufīd*, does immensely. Shaykh al-Mufīd, he was a hardcore Shī’ite. And Hamadani was Mu’tazilite. There’s a very strong interaction there. But you know, when you read *Ḳādī ‘Abd al-Dj abbār*, I mean he is very sympathetic to Shī’ism. So, as far as Sunnīsm also. I mean you can’t really speak about the development of Sunnīsm into you get it at least to the period of a *Shafi’i*. Because it is really with the *Shafi’i* and then the ideological growth of this is an issue with the *Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* and so forth. Another different key figure that is when you can actually start to speak about that group known as *Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Camaa*. But before then you can speak about people that are going to become

important to Sunnism. That is the *Proto-Sunnīs*. But, again pinning those people down it's not an easy task. You know like major figures in early Islam, for example, let's say *Ḥasan al-Baṣrī*. You can not very easily categorize what exactly *Ḥasan al-Baṣrī* was. He can be cited by *Sunnīs*, can be cited by *Siites*, and can be cited by *Sufis*. Who exactly was he. You know that's one of the problems when you have, when you look at like early Sunnīs who are actually understood what the core of *Sunnism* was. That is, they find it difficult to trace their genealogy their intellectual genealogy all the way back to the time of the Prophet. That is a problem for them. Because many of those early guys like the generations that follow the prophet it is very hard to pin down what exactly they believe. That also fascinated me with regard to the Umayyads. You know like what the ideology behind Abd al-Malik did actually was. What did he believe, who is the core of his belief. I mean I was constantly asking myself? Of all the invasions of the *Roman Empire* or the *ex-Roman Empire* in that case the *Byzantine* empire. The Arabs are the only ones that didn't convert to Christianity. The vandals Visigoths all these different guys in the invaders, they, become Christians. The Umayyads in the Arabs by extension don't become Christians. In other words, they have an ideology that is sufficiently strong that it resists conversion to Christianity and eventually actually comes to dominate. Although it isn't you know immediate impact it's an essential fact. And so why did it, why didn't 'Abd al-Malik become a Christian. What was the core of his belief system that was basically saying I am not going to become a Christian?

**David Cook:** That's a huge question. So, it will have to be extremely brief. I think that it's with that Mahdism is important to both Sunnīs and *Ṣhī'ites*. But it is important in different ways. So, for *Ṣhī'ism*, it's a core belief without which the belief system of *Shī'ism* couldn't exist. With regard to Sunnism, it's a persistent belief. There is a motivating factor, but it exists a kind of on the margins. In other words, it isn't well just like you noted in your question, it isn't well attested inside what we can call the core of the Sunnah. The Sunnī can believe in Islam and never care about the Mahdi. A *Shī'a* can not do that. that is necessary for a *Ṣhī'ite* actually expect that *intizar* the coming of the Mahdi. So, what *Mahdism* is you know, it's a peripheral belief inside *Sunnism* it's an extremely persistent and occasionally very powerful one. And that is the reason why that's the case I think it is because the population demands it. And the ruling groups from various different places and stuff have consistently cared for that belief. In other words, they recognized its power and they've sought to use it for their own benefit. And so that's a feedback loop, you keep on injecting new, "I am the Mahdi", "I'm about ready to bring it in" and people keep on thinking. But I have with regard to Sunnism. Okay well, *Ibn Ṭāwūs* is definitely *Shī'ite*. He is a lineal descendant of the intellectual way

of *Shaykh Mufid*. But his material *Kitab al-malahim wa al-fitan* is not categorized as Shī'ite necessarily. That's something that we oftentimes see with regard to Shī'ite collections. In other words, Shī'ites quote much more freely from Sunnī material than the reverse. Okay and so somebody like *Ibn Tāwūs* does a substantial section of his work basically just citations from *Nu'aym*. It's also he also preserves a number of different citations from other key books too so lightly. He used two or three different books exactly. So, that's very common among Shī'ites. I mean when you look at their work and so forth, there's oftentimes recourse. Because I've oftentimes said this in classes and stuff Sunnism is a majoritarian belief system. And Sunnīs don't really care about Shī'ites. Because you know they're in the majority and just like you can live your life as a Sunnī and not really have to interact with the claims of Shī'ism. But Shī'ites are the reverse. They absolutely have to consistently and continually interact with Sunnīs. But it is not even ideological necessarily. It's also on a personal level. You know because all around them are Sunnīs. They pray in Sunnī mosques. And the Sunnīs right next to them don't know that those people are Shī'ites. You know they use *Taqiyya* and so forth. And so, is a minority belief system. It's very conscious of the fact that it's a minority and continually has to defend itself against the majority was the majority is oblivious. If you can afford to be oblivious. It just literally doesn't care. That's the difference between those two aspects in my opinion.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Apart from the apocalyptic and messianic literature, it is known that you have many studies on jihad and martyrdom in Islam. In this context, I noticed that you are focusing on some Muslim radical groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Tehrik-i Ja'fari in one of your articles. And in your article titled "*Paradigmatic Jihadi Movements*", you mentioned some movements such as "*The Experience of the Harakat Al-Shabiba in Morocco*", "*The Harakat Al-Dawla Al-Islamiyya in Algeria*", "*A'isha Al-Lubnani*" and "*The (Islamic) Army Of Aden Abyan*." What can we say about the jihad understanding of these organizations? You know that there is a concept called the great jihad, which means struggling with oneself. How do you view the concept of "great jihad"?

**David Cook:** I mean here needless to say I do gravitate towards those groups that are militant. Or at least you know like during the years that I studied that was compelled upon me. I mean people would send me materials on and I would work with them and so forth. I mean from a personal point of view I have to say it was fascinating to watch how exactly these various different groups utilize the classical materials and to what extent were they aware of them. How did they cite them, and how important was Quranic citation or Ḥadīth citation to a given group? Some groups were very

shockingly un-Islamic like you could read through their materials and stuff from virtually not get any. You know and then you get a group like ISIS or you can't actually deal with one of their paragraphs without today seeing a citation. It was very important for them to have every single little thing nailed down. Now whether their citations were fair the total is not her question because obviously many of their different things were taken. We like taking something that was very unusual inside the classical materials and all of a sudden censoring it and saying this is Islam. So I obviously had but I mean you know as a non-Muslim I can look at it more just passionately. I mean I think that probably one of the reasons they drew me into it was the fact that I do know Arabic and I do know the resources. There are a lot of Muslims that are hesitant to go into that material. Because when they are confronted with how these guys use, but say like Quranic or ḥadīth materials and stuff sometimes the feelings can be very defensive. Because for them it's a lot more personal. That's only happened to me on a couple of different occasions you know like when ISIS first appeared there were a couple of students, Muslim students, who came and talked to me. And we talked over the claims of ISIS and stuff. One of them told me, he was really fascinated with the idea of living in a purely Islamic state. And so, I told them like let's examine them carefully and see what it is with the reality. I mean I think that he managed to pass through that issue but it's pretty easy to see when I was talking with them.

**Muhammed Oruc:** How do you evaluate the current studies on Muslim radical groups? How is the literature on this subject? Do you think that academic studies on Radical Islamic communities have increased in recent years, based on some political and military developments in both the Middle East and Africa?

**David Cook:** I can't deny you know being convicts of the primacy of religious claims. You know I do tend to see the religious aspect of things. Now when I deal with larger scholarly stuff, most of the people that are analyzing things tend to avoid those aspects. It's uncomfortable for government staff to deal with, and intelligence guys don't understand it you know or sometimes they even will reject that it actually has any influence. Because here in the contemporary west is basically, I mean it comes from a Christian background but it's mostly secular at least in its higher levels of government. And you know when you deal with the people that are there in those areas they really don't want to touch religion at all. And so, it's very convenient for them to say that something isn't really religious or that this is an. This is really coming from but of course, they don't actually know anything about Islam. I mean usually in the past, especially during the past 10 years one of going

to conferences or you know been invited at I usually mean there's some sort of a conflict between me presenting something as being important from a religious point of view. And others trying to say that it's not religious. I also feel like in some ways I'm presenting that point of view and I don't want to get driven into it too much. Just because I think that a point of view needs to be expressed doesn't mean that I believe necessarily in its 100 percent. You know like I feel that it's necessary to take Muslim religiosity seriously.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Okay, we can talk about some of your published works. I frequently saw references to your books or articles in some scientific studies conducted in Turkey. And your book "Martyrdom in Islam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007)" has been translated into Turkish and published by a reputable publishing house. In addition, your article "*Hadith, Authority and the End of the World: Traditions in Modern Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*" has been translated into Turkish and published in a journal. Would you like to say something about this situation?

**David Cook:** What do you want me to say? I don't know what would have to say about it. I have to say honestly that it's a bitter disappointment for me. During my last two years at the University of Chicago, I actually did have an opportunity to learn Ottoman Turkish. And I didn't take it. They have an excellent Turkish program at the University of Chicago. Muhammed this might be rather painful for you to hear and I don't really feel this way today. But coming from the study of the Middle East, especially from Arabic, there is kind of this prejudice that I gained, and I've spent now 20 years trying to get rid of it that Arabic is really the center of Islam. And that other traditions really aren't worth anything. And I know that this is painful to say especially to somebody like yourself but it is something that you know at the time in like 1997-98 and stuff. I still felt it very strongly. I remember thinking things like what the point of learning Turkish is there won't be anything new in it that won't have already been said in Arabic. You know today I regret that. But I am 55 it's not likely that I'm learning Turkish. But at that time, I didn't view Turkish or Urdu. And so, I can't deny that when you study, when you kind of like imbibe that totality of like middle eastern Arabic focus the way that the Arabs presented. I will give you an example here. I managed to do almost everything that I did talk to my doctorate and continue my doctorate without ever reading anything from *Rumi (Jalal al-din)*. I knew him as a name mainly for *Ibn Taymiyya*. You know or other different things like that like I never really thought about these people as being important inside Islam as a totality. It wasn't until I got here and I was really required to teach Islam as a total that I began to think. You know that attitude is wrong. I was guilty of it. I was extremely self-centered. This story I mean I still do most of my work with

Arabic, but I regret that I didn't learn at least one or two. If it's any consolation for you, the last year that I was at the University of Chicago I took Uzbek Turkish. I took from a fanatical Turkish nationalist; he despised the Arabs in a way that. Obviously there's elements of it that are comprehensible especially when you're talking about let's say like Ottoman Turkish. I've obtained documents in Ottoman Turkish but actually, I don't find them just terribly difficult to read. Because there's a large percentage of Arabic and Farsi in it. I don't understand the Turkish verbs I can pretty much guess what that is.

**Muhammed Oruc:** It may be a private question, but I want to ask it. Besides Hebrew, I know you have very good Arabic. We are wondering how and where you learned Arabic. Did you have a hard time learning? Would you like to say something about the advantages of knowing different languages in the academic field? Because you said you know several languages in our previous conversations.

**David Cook:** I failed my first Arabic exam. And you know that was kind of a defining moment in my class. I never failed at anything before. Yes, so that made me value Arabic much more than anything else. There is definitely a period of like 3 years or I was just focused on Arabic at Hebrew University. Even though I had to learn it through Hebrew, I didn't actually value Hebrew as much as I did Arabic. I was in the Hebrew for the Arabic. And so that's kind of I'm sure that is that for most people that's kind of a different way of approaching it. It also made me see the connections between the various Semitic languages. Because Hebrew and Arabic are connected.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Did you know Hebrew before you went to Israel?

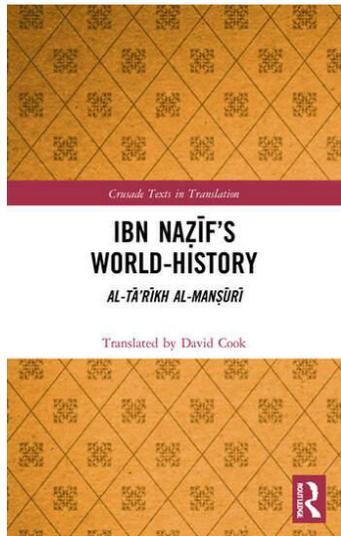
**David Cook:** No, I didn't know it. I take German when I was in high school, and my German wasn't bad after I've been able to travel like Europe and Germany. But I didn't know Hebrew. So, I had to learn Hebrew, and then I learned Arabic for Hebrew. But then after that, you know after the Israel experience and answers winning time in the Arab world and you know I mean that obviously made my Arabic much better. And it also enabled me to see some of the local prejudices that I'd been taught via Israelis. I also spent nearly a year and Palestinian villages.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Well now, which languages do you know besides Arabic and Hebrew?

**David Cook:** The truth is that those are my bread and butter. I know Farsi for seeing well enough to be able to actually read the classical materials. German and French, I know from classical materials and stuff. I can handle Syriac when I need to it. Greek, well you know depends on what. You know maybe it'd be better not to talk about Greek. I mean you know I've learned

Greek a couple of times reading the Bible in stuff. I mean like the New Testament.

**Muhammed Oruç:** Based on some of your translation books from Arabic to English, it is understood that you are also interested in the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods. You have done some translation works from Mamlūk and Ayyūbid periods such as *“Ibn Nazif’s World History: AL-Tarikh al-Mansuri”*,<sup>5</sup> *“Baybar’s Successors”*.<sup>6</sup> Is there anything you would like to say about it? Are you going to your translation studies to continue like this, which is important in terms of Islamic history?



**Muhammed Oruç:** Do you use manuscripts while translating?

**David Cook:** Yes. Russians put out a photostat of the manuscript, but I also managed to get another copy of it to his only one surviving manuscript of Ibn Nazif. It's in Saint Petersburg. Russian collection of stuff is quite good. But also, both of those things are touching upon Syria and Syrian history as well. So, in some ways, I'm kind of going backward you know like starting with Qalawun and going to Ibn Nazif, then going to Ibn 'Asākir.

**Muhammed Oruç:** Okay. It seems that you use the advantages of knowing different languages in addition to both Arabic and English. And we knew

<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ḥamawī, *Ibn Nazif's world-history: Al-Tārīkh al-Mansūrī*, translated by David Cook (New York : Routledge, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥīm Ibn al-Furat, *Baybar's successors: Ibn al-Furat on Qalāwūn and al-Ashraf*, translated by David Cook ((New York : Routledge, 2020).

that you have various book translations in your field of interest. Within this scope, you have been working for a long time on translating Ibn 'Asākir's very voluminous work *Tārīkh Dimashq* (approximately 80 volumes) into English. Could you give some information about the importance of this work in terms of Islamic History and Muslim apocalyptic thought and the reason that pushed you to translate this work?

**David Cook:** So, touching upon your question about Ibn 'Asākir to say you know because Ibn 'Asākir is like an onion. I keep on peeling away and I keep on thinking. It's going to end yeah maybe it never will end. Maybe it will just be the end of me. I've read through it now; I'm just now finishing off with the third reading of it. And that's what I've been able to do since the beginning of Covid-19 so that's two and half years. But I'm going to have to make a decision soon, you know like what I want to do with it. Because there's part of me that really feels like maybe I need to do forty reading. It's got so many different secrets that are hidden inside of it. But then there's part of me this like if you go down that route you're never getting end. And do I want this works to actually spend out for a long time. When I didn't actually see I mean of course I didn't know the Coronavirus was going to happen. But I knew that the Ibn 'Asākir project would be a large one. And I believe that at the time there would probably last for about 7 to maybe 8 years. But I managed to get most of the work done now in 2.5 years. So, I do have to ask myself you know like what particular point does it become do I need to let go of this project. Right now, my text is 2400 pages and I still have a number of different small things to write.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Which volume are you currently writing?

**David Cook:** I'm just taking selections. I mean the focus of it is once again upon that section of Syrian history that has been touched. So, I'm not doing anything with regard to the Umayyad period. Most scholarly studies on Ibn 'Asākir have focused on the *Umayyad* or only the *Rāshidūn* period. Some of the material is also on the *Qasas ul-Anbiya* be out period. But I'm only focusing on the stuff that is after 747, in other words, the 'Abbāsids' conquest. So that's 420 some years between that period and then Ibn 'Asākir's own death. That's the period where Syrian history is the least documented because of the Umayyad period which I mean it has its own problems and issues and so forth. But it is *Pan-Islamic*. In other words, Muslims were actually somebody like *al-Ṭabarī*, for example, is actually writing about that. When you look at Ibn 'Asākir basically he is just sitting with a lot of different standard Muslim historians such as like *al-Ṭabarī* or *Khalīfa b. Khayyāt* or *al-Balādhurī*. I'm looking at the section where the historians are actually Syrians and their material isn't appearing in pan-Islamic.

**Muhammed Oruc:** What do you want to express with the concept of pan-Islamic?

**David Cook:** Well, do you understand the importance of *Ṭabarī*? From this point of view, *Ṭabarī* is a Sunnī historian. I honestly think you know like I know many one noticeably agree with me on this. But I would say that there are four founders of the Sunna. *Shāfiʿī Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Bukhārī* and *Ṭabarī*. Because *Ṭabarī* really lays down the historical concept that is important for the Sunna. How on earth did the Sunna exist. And of course, he does the tafsir too. So without those two things actually the Sunna couldn't really exist. *Ṭabarī* is one who brings it together. But I also workshop *Ṭabarī*. Well, *Ṭabarī* tafsir and history, it's not completely only according to a Sunnī perspective but it definitely prioritizes. I can get quite a good deal of material for about Ṣhīʿite interpretations from *Ṭabarī* but it is mostly peripheral and it's never going to be like the really hard-core stuff. You can actually find in Shīʿite commentators you know where place Ali at the front of everything.

**Muhammed Oruc:** In Ibn 'Asākir's translation, do you focus only on Apocalyptic issues after the 'Abbāsids?

**David Cook:** No, in general. I am taking anything that I can find historical, and religious. He does have apocalypse inside, but I don't think that he himself was actually very apocalyptic or that he prioritized apocalyptic material. And I have a serious problem with the way that he deals with Nu'aym, for example. He doesn't say hardly any apocalyptic material from Nu'aym. And so, I think honestly that he did not know about Nu'aym which is a problem. You know like before you joined the apocalyptic studies group, we had a section on Nu'aym. I theorized because Ibn 'Asākir's close friend *'Abd al-Karīm al-Sam'ānī* actually did know about Nu'aym. Nu'aym appears to have circulated in the eastern sections of the Muslim world.

**Muhammed Oruc:** I think this important work in terms of apocalyptic studies has not been translated into Turkish yet. Likewise, Ibn 'Asākir's work was not translated, perhaps because it was too broad?

**David Cook:** I'm also confirming the question about like what is Ibn 'Asākir's attitude towards Turks. You know which is in my opinion quite an interesting thing. I think that he was actually fairly pro-Turkish and he does not deliberately does not cite the traditions that you can find in the material which he must have known about that are anti-Turkish. I mean we can't say like pro-Turkish, at least friendly towards Turks. There's a particular place where he talks about this figure called Yağmur Turk he was apparently the most enthusiastic guy that Ibn 'Asākir knew. And Ibn 'Asākir I think had personally good relations with Turks. I think he suppressed the inside

Turkish materials that you can find in traditional literature. Because he didn't want to bring them out and make them part of history. There are a lot of Turks and I mean most of them rulers put towards the period of Ibn 'Asākir on life. There come to be a number of figures who are identified as ethnically Turks. If it's any consolation for you, Ibn 'Asākir's maternal grandfather who is chief justice is the Qadi Dimashq who was actually an ethnic Turk.

**Muhammed Oruc:** You mentioned before that you visited many different countries. Can you tell us something about the contribution of these travels to your academic life? And I know that you have plans to go to Turkey and Oman next month (in August 2022).

**David Cook:** I visited Oman in December 2019 just before corona. I wouldn't go to Oman because it is so incredibly hot. I mean I feel good to be hot actually in December. It is still hot.

**Muhammed Oruc:** You have the plan to go to the Suleymaniye Library. It may sound weird, but I want to ask. When did your interest in Manuscripts first begin?

**David Cook:** With Eyup.<sup>7</sup> Look, over the years you know I came to believe as you can see from this library and stuff basically the stuff that is probably the most interesting in Islam and as long as pretty much already been published. It wasn't until Eyup pretty much allowed me to see that was not the case. Then I started thinking quite the detailed month script you know reading or. Eyup knows manuscripts. Yeah, he is a manuscript homed and he changed me. You know like I really honestly up until he came, and we talked to that over and stuff I didn't really because you know working with manuscripts a lot of work. I really kind of felt like you have to put in so much work. For nothing I mean for maybe minimal something that way there were you would find. I can understand it. But comparing the reading of the public even though this publication of Ibn 'Asākir got so many errors. But even so, it's still better than reading the manuscript. And I could easily catch the errors because now I can backtrack them now that I have most of the most important things on my computer. for example, where the editor makes errors with regard to names now, I can just correct it right off the bat. Could I do that if Ibn 'Asākir was still in the manuscript? I don't think that there's any way that I could do this Ibn 'Asākir project.

<sup>7</sup> Eyüp Öztürk, an assist professor in Faculty of Divinity in Trabzon University, has studied in Rice University with Professor David Cook within the scope of TUBİTAK "2219-International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program" for one year in 2019. <https://ilahiyat.trabzon.edu.tr/Personel/6373>

**Muhammed Oruc:** Have you been to the Suleymaniye Manuscript library before?

**David Cook:** I have been to Turkey but I have never been to the Suleymaniye. Well you know, Mohammed, that is also kind of a problem. When you're faced with such an enormous amount of knowledge, it is kind of like there's too much. Do you know what the word inebriated means? Inebriated is the feeling that you get when you're drunk. I'm not a drinker but I can feel that when you are in the face of so many things you can just be like I don't know what to do. I recognize that because when I issue something I like to make sure that it's very well documented. Because I don't want for within my lifetime at least for somebody to be able to say: Hey you know look at that source or you know this source totally invalidates this entire argument that you would. And I don't want that. I want my staff to be as solid as possible, but you know when you're in the face of something like the Suleymaniye, you are kind of like could I do.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Would you like to talk a little about your Arabic collection? Did you buy it from online websites or from some Arab countries you visited?

**David Cook:** Both. I mean for years; I would give every time I go to a country. I would try and visit the big bookstores and stuff and just a clean amount. But now I have two major book buyers that one in Beirut and one in Cairo.



**Muhammed Oruc:** Which Arab countries have you visited before?

**David Cook:** I've been to most. I have never been to Libya or Algeria. I have never been to Saudi Arabia or Iraq. So, I've been to all the other Arab countries. I have been to Iran, Kuwait et al. Qatar is very easy to go to. I have been to all African countries other than five. So again Algeria, Libya, Somalia, C. A. R. (Central African Republic), and Angola. Libya obviously is chaotic and Somalia and C. A. R. are not far behind. It is very difficult for people to

give visas to get into Algeria. Still sometimes going through its civil war even the civil war kind of end of life 20 years ago.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Did you visit for academic purposes?

**David Cook:** Some of my visits were for academic purposes, some of my just visited you know just because I wanted to visit. I've done a number of different trips. And, I mean I also teach Africa, it's important to actually have personal encounters with them. In 2008 and 2009, I did a southern African trip that covered like 13 countries. And then in 2009, I did an Africa overland trip which was for 8 months. I just traveled with my friend. She spoke French, and I spoke Arabic too. Arabic is quite useful on African trips. My French isn't that great but the girl that I was traveling with knew French very well. And so between the two of us, we were able linguistically to handle Africa.

**Muhammed Oruc:** What would you say about academic studies on apocalyptic? How do you consider the studies about Muslim Apocalyptic in the academia of the West?

**David Cook:** I mean the study of apocalypse overall in my opinion is quite flourishing, but the study of Muslim Apocalypses is not. You know, it's my life goal I hope to encourage the study of the apocalypse. Here that's one of the reasons why I work with the apocalyptic circle that you know that I've invited you. Because I want Muslims to work with this material. I want to encourage Muslims to work with it. Beyond that, I even want to make sure that Muslims are ashamed of it. Because that's what I sense from talking with Muslims, especially "ulama". Is that they really wish that this material would just go away. You know like they didn't have to hear questions about the Mahdi, the Dajjal, or anything like that. But in my opinion, there's nothing to be ashamed of. You know it's just perfectly good material that should be looked out from a scientific and Muslim point of view. Most Jewish and Christian scholars of the apocalypse don't really take Islamic apocalypses seriously. And that angers me because I feel like it is ignoring a really very interesting and very well-developed tradition without giving it a chance. And so, as I said openly to the group and stuff I'd like eventually for us to present to the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic world and stuff. There are apocalypses from all over. Some of them, they grant me. Let's say like a special dispensation. Because I've written so much stuff and so they've been forced to say okay well David you know. But I want them to see that it isn't just me. Actually there's a lot of stuff that is African or Turkish or south Indian or all sorts of different. That isn't just me that's doing this. There is plenty of material for everybody to work on, I want people to be attracted to it. I want Muslims to feel free to work on it. But I also want non-Muslims to feel free to go to work on it as well.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Do you recommend your Ph.D. students such as Sabariah, Abdulbasit to study Muslim apocalyptic subjects?

**David Cook:** Sabariah,<sup>8</sup> yes, is studying the Apocalyptic of Southeast Asian Muslims. But Abdulbasit<sup>9</sup> is not stating apocalypse. He is studying other stuff but it's more historical and religious stuff that's not connected to the apocalypse. I mean Abdulbasit knows that I'm very interested in the apocalypse and very interested in Africans. But I wanted to make sure that I didn't force him to study on that. And he didn't want to. I hadn't really intended when I accepted both Walid and Sabariah that they would end up studying apocalypse. Of course, I'm glad that they did. I mean I can't deny that now I'm starting to think more and more about grad students in terms of their apocalyptic interests. But before both Walid and Sabariah kind of make that decision, I haven't really thought along those lines for apocalyptic. I mean for grad students. You know like Reyhan certainly didn't write about that.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Yes, I saw that you have two Turkish graduates on Rice University Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Reyhan<sup>10</sup> and Fatma<sup>11</sup>. But they both worked on different issues apart from your area of expertise.

**David Cook:** I have to admit I'm probably going to be a bit more cautious about accepting Turkish students in the future because of that. In both cases, they both assured me that they wouldn't write about Turkish subjects. And it ended up in both cases that I couldn't really very adequately assess their materials. And you know because I don't know Turkish, and I don't know the Turkish scholarly world at all. And so that has made me a bit more cautious. They were both Turkish students whose husbands were here as studying also put in the hard sciences. And so when they came to me they were both it wasn't really that important to them. I had good times with both. I don't have any regrets really. But now I'm very a lot more cautious because I just do not know Turkish and stuff like that, I feel really that was a bad idea for me too.

**Muhammed Oruc:** What would your approach be if there are students who want to work with you now?

<sup>8</sup> Sabariah Mohamed Hussin is a Ph.D. student of Department of Religion in Rice University. <https://profiles.rice.edu/student/sabariah-mohamed-hussin>

<sup>9</sup> Abdulbasit Kassim, is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Religion Rice University. <https://profiles.rice.edu/student/abdulbasit-kassim>

<sup>10</sup> Reyhan Erdogdu Basaran, "Why Label Alevi Islam as Shi'ite?: A Comparative Inquiry into Alevi Identity Outside of the Sunnī-Shi'ite Framework" (2018) Diss., Rice University. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/105643>.

<sup>11</sup> Fatma Yavuz, "The Making of a Sufi Order Between Heresy and Legitimacy: Bayrami-Malāmis in the Ottoman Empire." (2013) Diss., Rice University. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/72067>.

**David Cook:** Well yeah I mean they have to have like some sort of a project in mind. But the fact that is like Abdulbasid. Actually, Abdulbasit, Walid, and Sabariah all moved away considerably from their initial projects. Walid was really gonna work on Salafism. And Sabariah was really also interested in Salafism but in terms of rehabilitation of Salafists, especially radicals which is what you worked on and so in. Abdulbasid moved for more to classical things and stuff. So, I mean to me that's perfectly healthy. You know like people have to develop especially in the doctoral process all sorts of different intellectual interests. You know that can find somebody to a specific box yeah that's too much I can't allow that yeah.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Finally, What advice would you give to students who want to study the Muslim apocalypse? Have you noticed a gap in time or geography in apocalyptic studies?

**David Cook:** I mean that question really depends upon somebody's linguistic abilities. There are a lot of different gaps. I mean I'm hoping to fill the gap, for example, of the crusader period that's one of the reasons why want to take a look at the Suleymaniye and stuff to see whether we can find some manuscripts about that. I mean, for example, the Turkish gap that I would really love to see which I've tried to float with Eyup is what I would love to see. What are the local apocalypses that are being put out by the Ottomans, as they are conquering southeastern Europe, and what are the current counter-apocalypses that are probably being produced by local Christians as they are being conquered by the Ottomans? You know especially during that period of 14-15, maybe even into the 16 hundreds. Because I'm convinced that there must have been a lot of different apocalyptic exchanges at that time. And Eyup can also feel it too but he's never worked with that material and he doesn't really want to move away from the area that he feels the most comfortable with is really that late Ottoman period like Abd al-Hamid and so forth. I feel like there's an opening. There could be an opening for like some sort of an apocalyptic encounter there because there's a strong, I mean there must have been. And I would love to see the apocalyptic interaction right there. What was the discourse in Bulgarian Romanian as the Ottomans conquest. You know like what the discourse among the Serbs as the Ottomans' conquest was. Look there are a lot of gaps. Those are gaps but also there are a ton of gaps in Arabic.

**Muhammed Oruc:** Thank you very much for accepting my request for an interview and for sparing your precious time. By the way, you are going to Turkey for ten days on 1 August. I hope you have a productive and pleasant time.