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Muslim Jerusalem, the Crusades, and the Career of Saladin

THE HOLY CITY



4.29a) Franciscans of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre With Organist and Two Guests Jerusalem, 2015 Photograph

The Franciscans are one of the six communities in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which watch over the sacred site, each in its own clearly defined area. Since the fourteenth century, the Franciscan Order has been present in the Holy Land without interruption. After the founding father Francis visited the city in 1219, interest in Jerusalem remained constant within the order. Franciscans eventually settled in the Holy Land. They were the first representatives of the Latin Church after the expulsion of the Crusaders and the Latin Patriarchate by Saladin. Over the centuries, they took over the exclusive care of the pilgrims, established medical service with a well-known pharmacy, and defined the path of the Stations of the Cross, which, as the Via Dolorosa, has since become a firmly embedded component of the topography of Jerusalem.

To medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, the Holy Land was a deeply symbolic and sacred entity, not just a geographical area of the Middle East. For all three Abrahamic faiths, the focus was above all on Jerusalem. For Muslims, Jerusalem, with the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, was considered to be the third most holy site worldwide, after Mecca and Medina, and for them it was a magnet of pious visitation. Moreover, Islam has further direct links with the Holy Land; Jerusalem was the first Islamic direction of prayer, and Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was carried up from Jerusalem on his Night Journey (*mi'raj*) into Heaven. For them, it is in Jerusalem that the Day of Judgement will take place.

Muslim Attitudes to Jerusalem Under Crusader Rule

The Crusades, as viewed by Western Christendom, were a series of at least eight military campaigns against the Muslims of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Their initial impetus was to protect the holy places of the Christian Near East, but especially Jerusalem. The Crusader presence in the Middle East lasted from 1098 to 1291. The onslaught of the First Crusade came like a bolt from the blue. It was quite unprecedented. When the Crusaders approached Jerusalem for the first time in 1099, they were imbued with religious zeal, and the words of Pope Urban II, who had called them to arms, resonated in their ears: »May you deem it a beautiful thing to die for Christ in that city in which he died for us.«

The Levantine Muslims were deeply shocked by the brutality inflicted by the Crusaders when they captured Jerusalem. They had little idea of who their attackers were or why they had come. Even allowing for the rhetoric and exaggeration aroused by feelings of grief and humiliation, the Muslim accounts of the fall of Jerusalem bear witness to terrible destruction and bloodshed. The Muslim chronicler Ibn Muyassar (d. 1278) records laconically that the Crusaders destroyed shrines, killed nearly all the city's inhabitants, burned copies of the Qur'an, and stole gold and silver candelabra from the Dome of the Rock. Indeed, all Muslim accounts express shock, horror, and bewilderment at the wholesale massacre of Muslims and Jews at the hands of the victorious Crusaders. Contemporary poets wrote moving lines about the fall of Jerusalem, their voices »choked with tears« and their hearts »torn with affliction and love.« The brutal conduct of the invading Franks, as the Muslims called the Crusaders, is described with the symbolism of filth and desecration. They were viewed as polluters and invaders, jeopardizing the sanctity of Islamic religious sacred space.

Jerusalem became a Christian city and for the first time since the reign of King Herod it was a capital city. The conquering Crusaders transformed it into the center of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. For eighty-eight years the gilded top of the

Dome of the Rock, the most visible monument in Jerusalem, was surmounted by a cross. In the twelfth century, Jerusalem, transformed beyond all recognition by scores of brand-new Christian monuments, boasted perhaps the most intensively sacralized square mile in the medieval Christian world. Now lost to the Muslims, it became the focus of overwhelming longing to them. As the century progressed, the shame of Jerusalem being occupied by the Franks must have become increasingly difficult to endure. Like the Children of Israel by the waters of Babylon, the Muslims of Syria and Palestine grieved for the sites of the Holy City. It simply had to be retaken, and the hitherto dormant spirit of *jihad*, revived through an alliance between the ruling Turkish and Kurdish warlords and the religious classes of Syria, was focused, not on the borders of Islam, but right within the Islamic world, on the city of Jerusalem itself. In the twelfth century the Muslim concept of *jihad* was given an unprecedentedly tangible focus. To recapture Jerusalem was a task tailor-made for *jihad* and the pursuit of this goal gave the Muslims an undoubted ideological edge over their opponents in the years leading up to the re-conquest of the Holy City in 1187. This program of *jihad* propaganda, focused on Jerusalem, sponsoring new religious colleges (*madrasas*) and writing *jihad* sermons, letters, and poetry, proved to be a model for the dissemination of *jihad* which has probably never been matched.

The Merits of Jerusalem Literature

During the first and major period of Crusader occupation of Jerusalem (1099–1187), a genre of religious writing, the *Fada'il al-Quds* (*Merits of Jerusalem*) books, already some two centuries old, flourished mightily. This literature is little known in the West. The earliest complete surviving *Fada'il* treatise is that of al-Wasiti (dated 1020) but as the genre burgeoned dramatically it became a powerful tool in the spiritual and military *jihad* ideology aimed increasingly at the re-conquest of Jerusalem. Almost all the compilers of such works came from the Holy Land and Syria. Muslim reverence for Jerusalem was linked to Muhammad. These books contain little or no comment by the compiler. They consist of quotations from Muhammad's canonical sayings (*hadith*) or those attributed to his companions, other early Muslim saintly figures, or pre-Islamic prophets. These sources emphasize the superiority of prayer and pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the special value for a Muslim to die in Jerusalem, and the connection of the city with the Day of Judgement. The format of these books changed very little over four centuries. Despite their inherent conservatism, however, these works were also influenced by Judaeo-Christian themes. One such book includes traditions about Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, whilst the work of al-Wasiti alludes to Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Temple.

During the career of Saladin's famous predecessor, Nur al-Din (d. 1174), the Muslim campaign to liberate Jerusalem used the *Merits of Jerusalem* works as a weapon. They were read out publicly to large audiences from 1160 onwards and helped to build up the expectation that the Holy City would be recaptured. Significantly, the work of al-Wasiti was read out in 1187 in the mosque at Acre shortly before Saladin entered the Holy City in triumph.

The Muslim Re-conquest of Jerusalem and the Role of Saladin

The yearning to repossess Jerusalem was made concrete by two charismatic non-Arab Muslim military leaders in Syria: Nur al-Din, a Turk, and Saladin, a Kurd. Both placed the re-conquest of Jerusalem at the heart of their ambitions. Family dynasties such as those of these two twelfth-century warlords felt the need to justify the power they had usurped; for this they required the support of the religious

classes, as well as public ratification of their military activities by the caliph. In this context Saladin seems to have followed very closely the example of Nur al-Din. Saladin could build on the basis of religious unity which this illustrious predecessor had established and so present himself as the defender of Sunni Islam and the promoter of *jihad* against the Crusaders. In the 1160s a letter from Nur al-Din urges his military commanders to »purify Jerusalem from the pollution of the cross« and he commissioned a beautiful pulpit to be placed in the Aqsa Mosque to commemorate his hoped-for re-conquest of the Holy City. However, Nur al-Din died in 1174 and it was Saladin who, in 1187, eventually brought his pulpit to Jerusalem.

The sources point clearly to the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin as the pinnacle of his career and the realization of a burning personal ambition on his part. After taking Jerusalem, Saladin retrospectively described all his actions leading up to the event as having been entirely directed towards that end. It would appear, too, that public feelings about *jihad* had been so successfully mobilized by this point that only the capture of Jerusalem would furnish the ultimate proof of both his success and his sincerity. As with Nur al-Din, Jerusalem became the focus of Saladin's *jihad* campaign: it simply had to be taken. A tone of emotional intensity and longing for Jerusalem was exploited to the full by Saladin's court and army, as well as by the religious classes in Syria, who soon gave him their wholehearted support. With Saladin's capture of the city in 1187, the theme of Jerusalem reached its peak. Sixty-six letters, twelve poems, and two sermons were dedicated to this triumphal moment. The deep impact of the recapture of Jerusalem on the Muslim population of the Levant was recorded joyfully by contemporary chroniclers. Muslims gathered to witness Saladin's entry into Jerusalem and to participate in the festivities. Maximum propaganda benefit was derived from the chosen moment of entry into the city. Always aware of the profound impact which his victorious entry into Jerusalem would make, Saladin waited to take possession of the city until Friday 27 Rajab / 2 October 1187, the anniversary of Muhammad's *miraj*.

On arrival in the Holy City Saladin's soldiers pulled down the gold cross that the Crusaders had placed at the top of the Dome of the Rock, and the building was purified with rosewater. Saladin's biographers show him resisting the initial temptation to inflict a bloody massacre on the city to avenge what had happened when the Crusaders came in 1099. The role of Jerusalem in the Muslim Counter-Crusade is clearly shown in the sermon delivered by Ibn al-Zaki, a preacher from Damascus, on the occasion of Saladin's entry into Jerusalem; he calls Saladin »the champion and protector of Your (God's) Holy Land.« The re-conquest of Jerusalem was the climax of Saladin's career. At long last the paramount aim of his *jihad* had been achieved. One of Saladin's contemporary biographers, 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, described the recovery of Jerusalem in the hyperbolic statement that Islam had been reborn in the Holy Land.

The Afterlife of Saladin in Europe

The evolution of the Saladin legend in Europe is a remarkable and unexpected story. His glowing reputation there is all the more noteworthy since he was certainly the most feared opponent of the Crusaders. Even in his own lifetime, Saladin received praise from Crusader chroniclers, and above all from Archbishop William of Tyre, who was Chancellor of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem from 1170 to 1184. Commenting on Saladin's accession to power, William describes him as »a man of sharp mind, active in war, and generous beyond proper measure.« One of the continuators of William's history, Ernoul, praises Saladin's behavior in Jerusalem after the conquest in 1187, stressing his kindness towards its defeated Christian inhabitants. This most favorable view of Saladin spread to medieval Europe, where it flourished for many centuries afterwards.

Already Dante (d. 1321) placed Saladin on the highest level of the *Inferno*; he is alone, but positioned near the heroes of classical Greece and Rome. During the European Enlightenment, literary interest was again shown in Saladin. The German playwright Lessing (d. 1781) chose Saladin to represent Islam in his play, *Nathan the Wise*, completed in 1779, and was at pains to describe Saladin in a most sympathetic light, portraying him as generous-hearted and open-minded. In his novel about the Crusades *The Talisman*, Sir Walter Scott (d. 1832) creates an imaginary meeting between Saladin and Richard the Lionheart in which he emphasizes Saladin's greater finesse and subtlety and calls him »the fountain of generosity.« These books are only two in the long tradition of the romance of Saladin in Europe. The idea that only an exceptional human being could have wrested Jerusalem from the Christians so passionately dedicated to the city may have played a part in the heroization of Saladin in Europe.

The Myth of Saladin in the Middle East

In the Middle East, the myth of Saladin served other purposes and, as the nineteenth century progressed, parallels between European policies past and present gradually crystallized in the Muslim consciousness. These parallels appeared increasingly apt as the wave of European imperialism swept through the Middle East. Nineteenth-century travelers from the West, such as Mark Twain, fascinated by the Crusading heritage, made their way to the Holy Land, and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany visited Saladin's tomb in Damascus, on which he laid a beautiful bronze wreath, adorned with carefully chosen Arabic inscriptions. It is dated 1315/1898.

In the twentieth century the Arab world »rediscovered« the Crusades, viewing them as metaphors for current political problems. Some saw the medieval Crusading states as »proto-colonies,« the precursors of Napoleon in Egypt, the British Mandate in Palestine, and the state of Israel. The Crusades were thus seen as the initial phase of Western imperialism in the region. Arab nationalist leaders reminded their people of the glorious Muslim victories over the Crusaders, and although the most famous Muslim generals were not ethnically Arab, the rhetoric used in political speeches by twentieth-century Middle Eastern leaders allowed modern Arabs to claim the medieval military triumphs of these famous warlords as their own.

Several Muslim heads of state aspired to become »the second Saladin,« the charismatic figure who would one day reunite the Middle East. The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatallah Khomeini, called the last Friday of Ramadan »Jerusalem Day,« and a very famous Iranian stamp (dated 1980) bears an inscription »Let us liberate Jerusalem« in Arabic, Persian, and English. Jerusalem Day is now celebrated across the Muslim world and reflected by other postage stamps that depict the quintessential icon of the Holy City, the Dome of the Rock, or show Saladin on horseback, returning to recapture Jerusalem. In Iraq, Saddam Husayn, despite his obvious lack of religious credentials, called on occasion for *jihad* against the West. This self-styled *jihad* fighter, who ordered the killing of thousands of Muslim Kurds, modeled himself on Saladin the Kurd. A commemorative stamp, juxtaposing Saladin and Saddam Husayn, with the Dome of the Rock looming in the background, proclaims its own political message:

»From the Deliverer Salah al-Din to the One given victory by God, Saddam Husayn. Jerusalem will remain Arab.«

President Hafez Asad of Syria also remembered Saladin. In 1992 he erected an imposing bronze monument within a stone's throw of his palace, in the center of Damascus: Saladin, in coat of mail, is mounted on a horse and surrounded by his officers. Behind him, under the tails of the horses, two Crusader leaders, the

»arch-villain,« Reynald of Chatillon, and the King of Jerusalem, Guy de Lusignan, gaze gloomily at the ground. The reason for the juxtaposition of this statue and the presidential palace is not hard to interpret.

Concluding Remarks

Although it is clear that Jerusalem had acquired a position of great religious sanctity for Muslims before the coming of the Crusaders, the loss of the Holy City in 1099 added a new dimension to its significance for Muslims in the Levant. Indeed, it could be argued that Jerusalem's spiritual importance was fully realized by Muslims only when they had lost the city. And despite the pragmatic and disrespectful way in which Saladin's descendants, the Ayyubids, treated Jerusalem in the years 1193–1250, Jerusalem would remain after 1250 in the safe and respectful hands of the Mamluk Turks of Egypt, who erected many religious buildings there, and thereafter the Ottomans in Istanbul, who embellished the Holy City still further and ruled it until the early twentieth century. The legend of Saladin has remained untarnished in East and West alike. And, above all, Jerusalem has played an endlessly significant spiritual role over many centuries. Indeed, it is a sacred construct, seamlessly integrating seminal events with a universal salvation history cherished by all three of the Abrahamic faiths.

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