
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Kingdom of Heaven

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The current debate is about the roots of such willingness, about the mindset of Jews before upheaval and catastrophe. It asks how one ought to evaluate the impact of such reactions on the subsequent shaping of Jewish consciousness and memory, as well as that of Christians. Finally, it is an ongoing methodological debate on the nature of and proper approaches to outstanding Hebrew sources of Jewish history.

Jeremy Cohen has been involved in these discussions almost from the beginning, and in this book he adds a further dimension. Cohen sets out to demonstrate that “the ideology—and graphic tales—of sanctifying God’s name that the chronicles relate about the martyrs of 1096 tell us more about the twelfth-century Jewish communities which survived the persecutions than about the martyrs who did not. As historical sources, these chronicles pertain most directly to the context of their composition” (p. 9).

In part one of the book, Cohen provides a coherent rereading of the main conceptual issues: the idea of ritual suicide, *Kiddush ha-Shem*, “Sanctifying the Name of God”; the approaches of modern historians, an issue fraught with relevance because of contemporary implications of Jewish martyrdom; and methodological “points of departure.” Along with other historians, Cohen argues that “the new style and stories of Ashkenazic martyrdom reveal . . . Jews expressing themselves in the idiom of Christian culture” (p. 41). Following modern investigations of textual criticism, he then proposes that “we reread with greater openness to multiple, alternative interpretations of a text that need not be mutually exclusive” (p. 53). Such multiple layers of meaning, including irony and parody, can indeed function—according to Cohen, the first to pay mind to it—as therapy for traumatized communities plagued by guilt over the very fact and the means [baptism] of their survival” (p. 69).

In part two of the book, the author’s methodological agenda is applied with great skill to five central episodes narrated in the sources, each illustrating through Cohen’s “thick reading” different patterns of understanding and telling employed by the descendants of the martyrs. The first episode, “Last Supper at Xanten,” is read by Cohen as, among other things, a Jewish reworking of the sanctification of God’s name in the garb of a Christian Mass, thus “appropriating from Christianity and its idea of holy war themes and symbols that served the purposes of the Jewish storyteller” (p. 87). The story of “Master Isaac the Warden” serves to lay bare another literary device: parody and the sense of the ridiculous. “Mistress Rachel of Mainz,” who killed her four children, is at once biblical Rachel and the Virgin Mary and Holy Mother Church, “claiming the blood of genuine martyrdom and the salvation that the blood shed by her will yield” (p. 128). “Kalonimos in Limbo” is an exercise in doubt, showing Jews participating in what has lately been established as an important twelfth-century culture of doubt, dissent, and disbelief along with contemporary Christian thinkers. Finally, “The Rape of Sarit” is a tour de

force of sustained interpretation, projecting into the martyrs’ tale a Jewish antihero, a perverted image of the heroes of Biblical past. Thus, “the narrative also served to express the utter horror with which survivors of 1096 remembered what they had experienced, from the violent assault of the crusaders to the violence that Jews inflicted upon themselves” (p. 158).

This is an important book, beautifully written and cogently argued. Some of Cohen’s readings are daring indeed and will surely arouse dissent. Long live debate!

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KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. Directed and produced by Ridley Scott; written by William Monahan. United States. 2005; color; 145 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth-Century Fox (Scott Free Productions).

The opening title card of *Kingdom of Heaven*, Ridley Scott’s film about the events immediately preceding the Third Crusade (1187–1192), informs us that medieval crusaders, lord and peasant alike, sought both material gain and spiritual redemption in the Holy Land. While the old saw of crusading fortune hunters has for some time been thoroughly out of fashion in crusade scholarship (the journey required enormous financial sacrifices and most returned home after fulfilling their vow), Jerusalem in medieval Christian ideology was, as one character in the film puts it, “the very center of the world for asking forgiveness.” But an even more insistent theme of the film is that Christian crusaders (or at least the more tolerant among them) held Jerusalem as “a place of prayer for all faiths” in a cosmopolitan atmosphere of peace, justice, and harmony. No doubt this would have come as a great shock to the actual medieval crusaders who contended with their religious rivals (mainly Muslims) for control over Christianity’s holiest city. Certainly, Jerusalem was also sacred to Judaism and Islam, but for quite different historical and ideological reasons. This is by no means the first crusade film to push this particular agenda, in part because it plays so safely into the modern politics of the Middle East. In the context of recent events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Iraq war, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jerusalem as a neutral meeting ground of the world’s religions—the “kingdom of heaven” imagined by the film—allows Scott to make a movie about a potentially incendiary topic, holy war between Christianity and Islam, that is utterly devoid of religious meaning. It is probably no accident that films about the Middle Ages often reference modern events no less than medieval ones, since the fact that this era of history may seem remote and unfamiliar to most audiences makes it a particularly challenging subject for filmmakers.

Perhaps no film could do justice to the maddeningly complex politics of the kingdom of Jerusalem on the eve of the Third Crusade, but *Kingdom of Heaven*

wants it far too simple to accommodate its unnecessarily convoluted plot innovations. For example, the good guys of the film are supposed to be the native Latins, led by Balian of Ibelin, Count Raymond III of Tripoli (called in the film "Tiberias," which was his wife's title), and the leper King Baldwin IV, who supposedly hold Jerusalem in trust so that all religions can be practiced freely. The main character of the film is Balian (played by Orlando Bloom), who was indeed one of the most important barons of Outremer and played a central role in the defense of Jerusalem before Saladin's forces in late September 1187. But the film gives him an entirely fictional backstory as a poor blacksmith from France, which makes nonsense of why he should be such a prominent figure in Jerusalem's politics or wish to defend the city to the death. The bad guys of the film are the "fanatics newly arrived from Europe" who, allied with the equally fanatical Knights Templar, shout "God wills it!" at every opportunity and strike with blind and futile fury at their Muslim foes. They are led by Guy of Lusignan (played by Marton Csokas) and Reynald of Châtillon, who is undoubtedly the most bizarre character of the film, played by Brendan Gleeson as a half-mad, prancing warmonger for the power-hungry Guy. In reality, Reynald was a seasoned campaigner of thirty-four years in Palestine (fifteen of them spent in a Muslim prison in Aleppo) who plundered Muslim caravans for profit, not out of religious fervor, and who, as prince of Oultrejordain, was very much his own man. It was Reynald's attack of 1186–1187 that led to the breaking of the truce with Saladin and eventually to the disastrous defeat for the Latins at Hattin in July. But far from encouraging this raid, Guy, acting at the request of Saladin, ordered Reynald to return his prisoners and booty; instead, Reynald, not for the first time, openly defied him, famously replying that he was master of his own lands just as the king was master of his.

By contrast, *Kingdom of Heaven* treads warily around the character of Saladin (played by Ghassan Massoud), and for good reason. His legacy is a contested one, with some scholars claiming that Saladin was merely out for his own personal aggrandizement, shown by his willingness, until at least 1183, to make truces with his Christian opponents in Palestine in order to make war upon fellow Muslims and so consolidate his power base. Others, following the lead of Saladin's medieval biographers, Baha al-Din, his army judge, and Imad al-Din, his private secretary, argue that his entire career culminated in his triumphant conquest and entry into Jerusalem, Islam's third most holy city, on October 2, 1187, thereby setting the seal upon his reputation as a supreme *mujahid*, or jihad fighter. *Kingdom of Heaven* prefers to portray Saladin as a cunning but gracious warrior whose religious motivations are almost entirely absent. This same line was taken by the last film to depict the events of the Third Crusade, an Egyptian production directed by Youssef Chahine called *Saladin*, which came out in

1963. Although some may wonder why an Arabic film should peddle an essentially non-Islamic hero, this was not surprising in the context of Egypt's rule under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who during the 1950s and 1960s was trying to forge a secular state unified by pan-Arab nationalism rather than religious ideology. (Saladin's conquest and defense of Jerusalem was intended as a parallel to Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal during the crisis of 1956.) Since then, however, the political dynamics in the Arab world have shifted toward Islamic fundamentalism, and it is Saladin as a wager of implacable jihad, not as a figure of chivalry, that resonates most strongly with terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network. Both *Saladin* and *Kingdom of Heaven* are woefully out of step with how many modern Muslims view and value Saladin—and they are, after all, only following the propaganda image that Saladin himself and his biographers wished to project during his lifetime.

In one scene Scott seems very much in tune, if not with the historicity of the Middle Ages, then with the prevailing historical winds of his own time. Guy instructs Reynald to "give me a war," which reminded me of nothing so much as George W. Bush asking Donald Rumsfeld to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. *Kingdom of Heaven* seems to be warning here that a fragile peace can be all too easily torn asunder by crusaders blinded by ideology and zealotry. Given the ongoing and unmitigated string of catastrophes coming out of the United States' current intervention in the Middle East, this may be the most prescient and coherent message of this film.

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KEVIN L. SHIRLEY. *The Secular Jurisdiction of Monasteries in Anglo-Norman and Angevin England*. (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, number 21.) Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press. 2004. Pp. xi, 184. \$90.00.

Kevin L. Shirley examines the litigation of English monasteries in secular courts in the period 1066–1272, although the long concluding reign of Henry III (1216–1272) is rather cursorily treated. The book is not concerned with monasteries as religious bodies, subject to canon law and involved with the papal, archiepiscopal, and episcopal courts, but as landowners and lords of men, both military and agricultural, thus a kind of religious baron. Like other barons, royal tenants-in-chief, owing military and other services to the king, abbots were involved in three types of secular court: their own manorial and honorial courts for their tenants and military vassals, the "national" county courts, and the king's court.

The *Curia Regis* is considered in part two of Shirley's book, the others in part one. Inevitably abbots and priors found this secular jurisdiction difficult and, often, uncongenial. It was a distraction from their