Chapter 11

THE CRUSADES: MYTH AND REALITY

It is often said: “The Crusaders marched across Europe to the Middle East. Once there, they pillaged and murdered Muslim and Jewish men, women, and children indiscriminately, and forced the survivors to convert to Christianity. Awash in pools of blood, they established European proto-colonies in the Levant, inspiring and setting a pattern for legions of later colonialists. They were the setting for the world’s first mass killings, and are a blot on the history of the Catholic Church, Europe, and Western civilization. So horrifying were they that Pope John Paul II ultimately apologized to the Islamic world for the Crusades.”

Any truth?

No. Virtually every assertion in this paraphrase, though routinely made by numerous “experts,” is wrong.

\textit{PC Myth: The Crusaders established European colonies in the Middle East}

As the Crusaders made their way east in response to Pope Urban’s call, their principal leaders met with Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus. He prevailed upon them to agree individually, in accord with Urban’s wishes, that any lands they conquered would revert to the Byzantine Empire. The Crusaders changed their minds about this after the siege of Antioch in 1098. As the siege dragged on through the winter and Muslim

\textit{Guess what?}

- The Crusades were not early manifestations of European colonialism in the Middle East.
- The Crusader massacre of Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem in 1099 was a terrible atrocity, but it was nothing unusual according to the rules of warfare of the time.
- The Crusades were not called in order to target Jews as well as Muslims.
armies advanced north from Jerusalem, the Crusaders waited for the Byzantine emperor to arrive with troops. But the emperor had received a report that the Crusaders’ situation in Antioch was hopeless and turned back his forces. The Crusaders felt betrayed and became enraged. After they overcame immense odds and took Antioch, they renounced their agreements with Alexius and began to establish their own governments.

These were not, however, colonial arrangements. The Crusader states simply would not have been recognizable as colonies to someone familiar with Virginia, Australia, or the Dutch East Indies in later centuries. Broadly, a colony is a land that is ruled by a far-off power. But the Crusader states were not ruled from Western Europe; the governments they established did not answer to any Western power. Nor did the Crusader rulers siphon off the wealth of their lands and send it back to Europe. They had no economic arrangements with any European country. The Crusaders established their states in order to provide permanent protection for Christians in the Holy Land.

In fact, many Crusaders ceased to think of themselves as Europeans. The chronicler Fulcher of Chartres wrote:

Consider, I pray, and reflect how in our time God has transferred the West into the East. For we who were Occidentals now have been made Orientals. He who was a Roman or a Frank is now a Galilaean, or an inhabitant of Palestine. One who was a citizen of Rheims or of Chartres now has been made a citizen of Tyre or of Antioch. We have already forgotten the places of our birth; already they have become unknown to many of us, or, at least, are unmentioned. Some already possess here homes and servants which they have received through inheritance. Some have taken wives not merely of their own people, but Syrians, or Armenians, or even Saracens who have received the grace of baptism. Some have with them father-in-law, or daughter-in-law, or son-in-law, or stepson, or step-father.
There are here, too, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One cultivates vines, another the fields. The one and the other use mutually the speech and the idioms of the different languages. Different languages, now made common, become known to both races, and faith unites those whose forefathers were strangers. As it is written, “The lion and the ox shall eat straw together.” Those who were strangers are now natives; and he who was a sojourner now has become a resident.¹

At the same time, another feature of colonialism, large-scale emigration from the home country, did not materialize. No streams of settlers came from Europe to settle in the Crusader states.

**PC Myth: The capture of Jerusalem**

was unique in medieval history and caused Muslim mistrust of the West

After a five-week siege, the Crusaders entered Jerusalem on July 15, 1099. An anonymous contemporary account by a Christian has seared what happened next into the memory of the world:

One of our knights, Letholdus by name, climbed on to the wall of the city. When he reached the top, all the defenders of the city quickly fled along the walls and through the city. Our men followed and pursued them, killing and hacking, as far as the temple of Solomon, and there there was such a slaughter that our men were up to their ankles in the enemy’s blood.

The emir who commanded the tower of David surrendered to the Count [of St. Gilles] and opened the gate where pilgrims used to pay tribute. Entering the city, our pilgrims pursued and killed the Saracens up to the temple of Solomon. There the Saracens assembled and resisted fiercely all day, so that the whole temple flowed with their blood. At last the pagans
were overcome and our men seized many men and women in the temple, killing them or keeping them alive as they saw fit. On the roof of the temple there was a great crowd of pagans of both sexes, to whom Tancred and Gaston de Beert gave their banners [to provide them with protection]. Then the crusaders scattered throughout the city, seizing gold and silver, horses and mules, and houses full of all sorts of goods. Afterwards our men went rejoicing and weeping for joy to adore the sepulchre of our Saviour Jesus and there discharged their debt to Him.²

It is jarring to our modern sensibilities to read a positive account of such a wanton massacre; such is the difference between the attitudes and assumptions of those days and our own. Similarly, three principal Crusade leaders, Archbishop Daimbert; Godfrey, Duke of Bouillon; and Raymond, Count of Toulouse; boasted to Pope Paschal II in September 1099 about the Crusaders’ Jerusalem exploits: “And if you desire to know what was done with the enemy who were found there, know that in Solomon’s porch and in his temple our men rode in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses.”³ Significantly, Godfrey himself, one of the most respected Crusade leaders, did not participate in the slaughter; perhaps he was more aware than the rank-and-file soldiers of what a betrayal this behavior represented to the Crusaders’ principles.

Balderic, a bishop and author of an early twelfth-century history of Jerusalem, reports that the Crusaders killed between twenty and thirty thousand people in the city.⁴ That is likely exaggerated, but Muslim sources put the number even higher. Although the earliest Muslim sources do not specify a death count, Ibn al-Jawzi, writing about a hundred years after the event, says that the Crusaders “killed more than seventy thousand Muslims” in Jerusalem. Ibn al-Athir, a contemporary of Saladin, the Muslim leader who gained impressive victories over the Cru-
saders late in the twelfth century, offers the same number. The fifteenth-century historian Ibn Taghribirdi records one hundred thousand. So the story of this massacre has grown over the centuries, to the point where a former president of the United States, Bill Clinton, recounted at a leading Catholic university, Georgetown, in November 2001, that the Crusaders murdered not just every Muslim warrior or even every Muslim male, but “every woman and child who was Muslim on the Temple mound” until the blood was running not just up to their ankles, as the Christian chronicler had it, but as Daimbert, Godfrey, and Raymond have boasted: “up to their knees.”

This atrocity, this outrage, was—we have been told time and again—the “starting point of a millennia1 hostility between Islam and the West.” It might be more accurate to say that it was the start of a millennium of anti-Western grievance mongering and propaganda. The Crusaders’ sack of Jerusalem was a heinous crime—particularly in light of the religious and moral principles they professed to uphold. However, by the military standards of the day, it was not out of the ordinary. In those days, it was a generally accepted principle of warfare that if a city under siege resisted capture, it could be sacked, and if it did not resist, mercy would be shown. Some accounts say that the Crusaders promised the inhabitants of Jerusalem that they would be spared, but reneged on this promise. Others tell us that they did allow many Jews and Muslims to leave the city in safety. Count Raymond gave a personal guarantee of safety to the Fatimid governor of Jerusalem, Iftikar al-Daulah. In the mind of a Crusader, when such guarantees were issued, those who remained in the city would have been more likely to be identified with the resistance—and their lives forfeited.

And what about those ankle- or knee-deep rivers of blood? This was a rhetorical flourish. When the Christian chronicler and Crusade leaders boasted of this, everyone would have considered it an embellishment. In fact, such rivers were not even remotely possible. There weren’t enough
people in Jerusalem to bleed that much, even if its population had swelled with refugees from the surrounding regions. The fact that the sack of Jerusalem was not out of the ordinary probably accounts for the laconic nature of the earliest Muslim accounts of the incident. Around 1160, two Syrian chroniclers, al-'Azimi and Ibn al-Qalanisi, wrote separately of the sack. Neither one offered an estimate of the numbers killed. Al-'Azimi said only that the Crusaders “turned to Jerusalem and conquered it from the hands of the Egyptians. Godfrey took it. They burned the Church of the Jews.” Ibn al-Qalanisi added a bit more detail: “The Franks stormed the town and gained possession of it. A number of the townsfolk fled to the sanctuary and a great host were killed. The Jews assembled in the synagogue, and the Franks burned it over their heads. The sanctuary was surrendered to them on guarantee of safety on 22 Sha’ban [July 14] of this year, and they destroyed the shrines and the tomb of Abraham.”10 It wasn’t until later that Muslim writers realized the propaganda value of stressing (and inflating) the death totals.

In any event, it is a matter of record that Muslim armies frequently behaved in exactly the same way when entering a conquered city. This is not to excuse the Crusaders’ conduct by pointing to similar incidents and suggesting that “everybody does it,” as Islamic apologists frequently do today when confronted with the realities of modern jihad terrorism. One atrocity does not excuse another. But it does illustrate that the Crusaders’ behavior in Jerusalem was consistent with that of other armies of the period—since all states subscribed to the same notions of siege and resistance.

Indeed, in 1148, Muslim commander Nur ed-Din did not hesitate to order the killing of every Christian in Aleppo. In 1268, when the jihad forces of the Mamluk sultan Baybars took Antioch from the Crusaders, Baybars was annoyed to find that the Crusader ruler, Count Bohemond VI, had already left the city. He wrote to Bohemond to make sure he knew what his men had done in Antioch:
You would have seen your knights prostrate beneath the horses’ hooves, your houses stormed by pillagers and ransacked by looters, your wealth weighed by the quintal, your women sold four at a time and bought for a dinar of your own money! You would have seen the crosses in your churches smashed, the pages of the false Testaments scattered, the Patriarchs’ tombs overturned. You would have seen your Muslim enemy trampling on the place where you celebrate the Mass, cutting the throats of monks, priests and deacons upon the altars, bringing sudden death to the Patriarchs and slavery to the royal princes. You would have seen fire running through your palaces, your dead burned in this world before going down to the fires of the next, your palace lying unrecognizable, the Church of St. Paul and that of the Cathedral of St. Peter pulled down and destroyed; then you would have said, “Would that I were dust, and that no letter had ever brought me such tidings!”

Most notorious of all may be the jihadists’ entry into Constantinople on May 29, 1453, when they—like the Crusaders in Jerusalem in 1099—finally broke through a prolonged resistance to their siege. Here the rivers of blood ran again, as historian Steven Runciman notes. The Muslim soldiers “slew everyone that they met in the streets, men, women, and children without discrimination. The blood ran in rivers down the steep streets from the heights of Petra toward the Golden Horn. But soon the lust for slaughter was assuaged. The soldiers realized that captives and precious objects would bring them greater profit.”

Like Crusaders, who violated the sanctuary of both synagogue and mosque, Muslims raided monasteries and convents, emptying them of their inhabitants, and plundered private houses. They entered the Hagia Sophia, which for nearly a thousand years had been the grandest church in Christendom. The faithful had gathered within its hallowed walls to
pray during the city’s last agony. The Muslims halted the celebration of Orthros (morning prayer), while the priests, according to legend, took the sacred vessels and disappeared into the cathedral’s eastern wall, through which they shall return to complete the divine service one day. Muslim men then killed the elderly and weak and led the rest off into slavery.

When the slaughter and pillaging was finished, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II ordered an Islamic scholar to mount the high pulpit of the Hagia Sophia and declare that there was no God but Allah, and Muhammad was his prophet. The magnificent old church was turned into a mosque; hundreds of other churches in Constantinople and elsewhere suffered the same fate. Millions of Christians joined the wretched ranks of the dhimmis; others were enslaved and many martyred.

**PC Myth: The Muslim leader Saladin was more merciful and magnanimous than the Crusaders**

One of the most famous figures of the Crusades is the Muslim warrior Saladin, who reunited much of the Islamic world and inflicted great damage on the Crusaders. In our age, Saladin has become the prototype of the tolerant, magnanimous Muslim warrior, historical “proof” of the nobility of Islam and even of its superiority to wicked, Western, colonialist Christianity. In *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, Amin Maalouf portrays the Crusaders as little more than savages, even gorging themselves on the flesh of those they have murdered. But Saladin! “He was always affable with visitors, insisting that they stay to eat, treating them with full honours, even if they were infidels, and satisfying all their requests. He could not bear to let someone who had come to him depart disappointed, and there were those who did not hesitate to take advantage of this quality. One day, during a truce with the Franks, the ‘Brins,’ lord of Antioch, arrived unexpectedly at Saladin’s tent and asked him to return a district that the sultan had taken four years earlier. And he agreed!” The lovable lug! If asked, he might have given away the entire Holy Land!
In one sense it's true: Saladin set out to conquer Jerusalem in 1187 because Crusaders under the command of Reynald of Chatillon were taking a page from the Prophet Muhammad's book and raiding caravans, in this case, Muslim caravans. The Christian rulers of Jerusalem ordered Reynald to stop because they knew that his actions endangered the very survival of their kingdom. Yet he persisted; finally, Saladin, who had

**Just Like Today: The moral double standard**

Bill Clinton suggested that the sack of Jerusalem in 1099 was the ultimate cause of the September 11 attacks. Yet the Muslims' sack of Constantinople in 1453 does not burn in anyone's memory. No president has pointed to it as the root cause of any modern-day terrorist acts. Indeed, it is less well known today than another sack of Constantinople: the one perpetrated by misguided Crusaders in 1204.

This is one illustration of the strange, unacknowledged moral double standard that PC types use when evaluating behavior by Westerners and non-Westerners: Any number of massacres and atrocities can be forgiven non-Western, non-white, non-Christian people, but misdeeds by Christian (or even post-Christian) Westerners remain seared in the world's collective memory. The Abu Ghraib prison scandals received horrified attention worldwide in 2004 and 2005, often from the same people who glossed over or ignored worse evils of Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and Hamas. It's a tacit admission of a fact that the PC establishment stoutly denies in every other case: Christianity does teach a higher moral standard than Islam, and more is expected not only of observant Christians, but of those who have imbibed these high principles by living in the societies molded by them.
been looking for a reason to go to war with the Christians, found one in Reynald’s raids.¹⁴

A lot is made of the fact that when Saladin recaptured Jerusalem for the Muslims in October 1187, he treated the Christians with magnanimity—in sharp contrast to the behavior of the Crusaders in 1099. However, the real Saladin was not the proto-multiculturalist, early version of Nelson Mandela that he is made out to be today. When his forces decisively defeated the Crusaders at Hattin on July 4, 1187, he ordered the mass execution of his Christian opponents. According to his secretary, Imad ed-Din, Saladin “ordered that they should be beheaded [in accordance with Qur’an 47:4, “When you meet the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike their necks”], choosing to have them dead rather than in prison. With him was a whole band of scholars and Sufis and a certain number of devout men and ascetics; each begged to be allowed to kill one of them, and drew his sword and rolled back his sleeve. Saladin, his face joyful, was sitting on his dais; the unbelievers showed black despair.”¹⁵

Also, when Saladin and his men entered Jerusalem later that year, their magnanimity was actually pragmatism. He had initially planned to put all the Christians in the city to death. However, when the Christian commander inside Jerusalem, Balian of Ibelin, threatened in turn to destroy the city and kill all the Muslims there before Saladin could get inside, Saladin relented—although once inside the city, he did enslave many of the Christians who could not afford to buy their way out.¹⁶

**PC Myth: Crusades were called against Jews in addition to Muslims**

It is unfortunately true that Crusaders targeted Jews on several occasions. Some groups of Crusaders allowed themselves to be diverted from the mission Pope Urban had given them. Stirred up by anti-Semitic preachers, one contingent of men who were making their way east for the First Crusade instead turned to terrorize Jews in Europe, massacring many. Count
Emicho of Leiningen and his followers advanced through the Rhineland, killing and plundering Jews in five German cities: Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Trier, and Cologne. Some of the bishops in those areas tried to prevent these massacres, and eventually Count Emicho and his followers met their end when he tried to extend his pogrom into Hungary. However, the damage was done; news of his exploits spread to the Middle East and led many Jews to ally with the Muslims and fight against the Crusaders when they arrived. Fifty years later, another group in the Rhineland, bound for the Second Crusade, began massacring Jews again.

All this was inexcusable, as well as being an incalculable error of judgment. The Crusaders would have been much wiser to see the Jews, fellow dhimmis, as their natural allies in the resistance to the Islamic jihad. The Muslims treated Jews and Christians more or less the same way: badly. It is unfortunate that neither group ever saw the other as a companion in the sufferings of dhimmitude and a fellow fighter against its oppressions. However, even today, eight centuries after the last Crusade, that kind of thinking is rare, so it is perhaps unfair to expect it of the Crusaders.

In any case, was the mistreatment of Jews a fundamental feature of the Crusades in general? Not according to the historical record. Pope Urban’s call for the First Crusade at the Council of Claremont says nothing about Jews, and churchmen were Emicho’s most formidable opponents. In fact, Urban himself condemned Emicho’s attacks. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the chief organizers of the Second Crusade, went to the Rhineland and

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**Muhammad vs. Jesus**

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy…. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?”

*Jesus (Matthew 5:7, 46–7)*

“Muhammad is Allah’s Apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another.”

*Qur’an 48:29*
I personally stopped the persecution of the Jews, declaring: “Ask anyone who knows the Sacred Scriptures what he finds foretold of the Jews in the Psalm. ‘Not for their destruction do I pray,’ it says.”17 Popes and bishops repeatedly called for the mistreatment of the Jews to end.

Yet even after the sack of Jerusalem and massacre of the Jews, during the Crusader period Jews in the Middle East generally preferred to live in areas controlled by the Franks, despite the undeniable hostility the Christians from Europe had for them.18 They knew all too well that what was in store for them in Muslim lands was even worse.

**PC Myth: The Crusades were bloodier than the Islamic jihads**

The Crusaders massacred in Jerusalem; Saladin and his Muslim troops didn’t. This has become emblematic of conventional wisdom regarding the Crusades: Yes, the Muslims conquered, but the inhabitants of the lands they seized welcomed their conquest. They were just and magnanimous toward religious minorities in those lands. The Crusaders, by contrast, were bloody, rapacious, and merciless.

We have shown this conventional wisdom to be completely false. Saladin only refrained from massacring the inhabitants of Jerusalem for pragmatic reasons, and Muslim conquerors easily matched and exceeded the cruelty of the Crusaders in Jerusalem on many occasions. The Muslim
conquerors were not welcomed, but were tenaciously resisted and met resistance with extreme brutality. Once in power, they instituted severe repressive measures against religious minorities.

**Did the pope apologize for the Crusades?**

“Alright,” you may say, “but despite everything you’re saying, the Crusades are still a blot on the record of Western civilization. After all, even Pope John Paul II apologized for them. Why would he have done that if they weren’t regarded negatively today?”

There is no doubt that the belief that Pope John Paul II apologized for the Crusades is widespread. When he died, the *Washington Post* reminded its readers “during his long reign, Pope John Paul II apologized to Muslims for the Crusades, to Jews for anti-Semitism, to Orthodox Christians for the sacking of Constantinople, to Italians for the Vatican’s associations with the Mafia and to scientists for the persecution of Galileo.”

A broad list, but John Paul II never apologized for the Crusades. The closest he came was on March 12, 2000, the “Day of Pardon.” During his homily, he said, “We cannot fail to recognize the infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren, especially during the second millennium. Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions.” This is hardly a clear apology for the Crusades. Anyway, given the true history of the Crusades, such an apology would not have been warranted.

The Crusaders do not deserve the opprobrium of the world, but—as we shall see—the world’s gratitude.
“May Allah rip out his spine from his back and split his brains in two, and then put them both back, and then do it over and over again. Amen.”
—“praise” for the author on RevivingIslam.com

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