

Book Review – God’s Battalions, The Case for the Crusades (Rodney Stark)

At the National Prayer Breakfast in February 2015, President Barack Obama used his bully pulpit to equate violence in modern Muslim terrorism with violence in the Christian Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries. It is a common comparison, often intended to show how Islam and Christianity are equally bad, or at least that the Man from Mecca was no worse than the Man from Galilee. It is an odd comparison, though, because Obama never mentioned Yarmuk, Qadisiyyah, Alexandria, Nahavand, or Constantinople; essentially unprovoked Muslim Arab attacks on the Byzantines and Persians that utterly destroyed the latter. He omitted Guadalete and Aquitaine, part of the Muslim Arab and Berber invasions of Spain and France. Obama skipped the Muslim invasions of Sicily, Sardinia, and Southern Italy. The President never noted that for almost five centuries Muslims attacked Christian lands before the counteroffensive known as the Crusades.

In *God’s Battalions* Rodney Stark, Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University, tries to balance Obama’s liberal, relativist perspective. He begins by describing the view that Obama mentioned, and then revealing the extent of Islamist belligerence in the first four centuries. After the disaster at the Battle of Manzikert (1071) with Muslim Seljuk Turks threatening Constantinople, Byzantine Emperor Alexis Comnenus wrote Pope Urban II asking his co-religionists for help. Urban’s plea at Clermont (1096), the victorious First Crusade, and everything that followed was a direct result. This reality doesn’t fit well with the modern narrative, that the Crusades were proto-imperialist and unprovoked attacks on peaceful Muslims, dripping with blood and villainy.

Stark then recounts some of the Christian victories, such as Tours and Constantinople, which probably prevented Europe, and America, from being Muslim today. He takes aim at the notion of the greatness of Muslim culture compared to the ignorance of Christian Europe, arguing that many of the advances in Islamdom were wrought by dhimmis; Christians, Jews and others who lived in lands conquered by Muslims but who never accepted Islam. He suggests that Islam inhibits innovation rather than advancing it. This is a debatable assertion, and certainly in the realm of philosophy Muslim thinkers made valuable contributions. But Stark's willingness to suggest that the Islamic "golden age" was less than perfect is a relief from the Islamo-fawning found in so many modern accounts.

One of the arguments that Pope Urban used to justify the Crusades was that Muslims in the Holy Land were mistreating Christian pilgrims. Pilgrimage was common; "by the end of the fifth century there were more than three hundred hostels and monasteries offering lodging to pilgrims in the city of Jerusalem alone."¹ After the Muslim conquest (634), persecution of Christians and Jews began. Troubles waxed and waned until the Fatimid ruler Tariqu al-Hakim (996-1021) had all of the churches in Palestine destroyed, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.² This outraged Christians throughout Byzantine and Western Europe and further set the stage for the First Crusade less than a century later.

The author then discusses the practicalities of enlisting warriors for the Crusades. Lacking modern transportation and supply systems, moving an army 4700 kilometers (2900 miles) was a daunting and dangerous task. Soldiers were recruited by monks and friars traveling throughout Europe preaching the message that Urban had begun. Often families would respond

¹ Rodney Stark, *God's Battalions: the Case for the Crusades*, Reprint ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 82.

² *Ibid.*, 91.

to the call, with fathers, sons, brothers, uncles and cousins going as a group. Knights had to equip and supply themselves as well as their men at arms, and many a petty noble or other landlord had to borrow against his property to finance the campaign. The cost is estimated at four or five years' income for each warrior.³

Not willing to paint an unfairly rosy picture, Stark recounts the disaster of the People's Crusade and the killing of Jews across Europe, though he reveals that the many bishops tried to stop the attacks, even at the risk of death. The Princes' Crusade, the main body capable of actually wresting the Holy Land from Muslim control, arrived in Constantinople from November 1096 to April 1097. Stark also makes the point that the Byzantine Emperor Alexis never expected so many nobles of Europe to show up for war. The Byzantines used mercenaries, and he probably thought that the Western Church would send no more than a few thousand.

The First Crusade was a desperate cause and the issue was very much in doubt. Starvation and disease were constant Crusader companions and the Muslim Turks, mostly light cavalry archers, constantly harassed the army. The population was hostile and information scarce. The Crusader army besieged and conquered Antioch (1098) and then marched on Jerusalem, taking it in July 1099. Stark does not deny the massacre of the denizens of Jerusalem that followed the Crusader victory, but puts it into the context of medieval war. The contemporary custom dictated that cities taken by siege were offered generous terms, but those who fell by assault were looted and destroyed. The Jews had helped the Muslims, not the Christians, throughout the campaign. Finally, the Muslims did at Antioch and elsewhere at least as much as the Crusaders at Jerusalem. None of this excuses such cruelty, but it does help the reader to understand a little better why this travesty occurred. Stark concludes his book with a description of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem and the subsequent crusades.

³ *ibid.*, 112.

Since the Enlightenment, men and women like Voltaire, Gibbon and Rousseau have done all they could to discredit the Church, irrespective of historical truth. President Barack Obama's comments are another example. Like all of life, the Crusades were human events, carrying with them all of the courage and cruelty, faithfulness and folly, heroism and hubris, vanity and vengeance, of every human event in every culture in history. Fundamentally they were a counterattack in a long and bitter war. In *God's Battalions*, Rodney Stark has written a useful corrective to the biased image of the crusades so common in the modern world.