

The Kingdom of Heaven: Teaching the Crusades

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The attacks of September 11th, followed by U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have brought greater attention to the simmering conflict between Islam and the West—a conflict most brutally played out historically during the Crusades. The series of holy wars for control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land stretched over centuries—from 1096 to 1291 (with subsequent efforts as late as the mid-1400s). Recent statements from Islamic militants denouncing U.S.-led forces in Iraq as “crusaders” show that passions still are fired in the Muslim world by the memory of the Crusades.¹ Into this political environment, film studio Twentieth Century Fox recently released *The Kingdom of Heaven*, the first Hollywood movie to seriously address the Crusades and their present-day implications. The film, directed by Ridley Scott, is a timely commentary—that nearly a thousand years after the Crusades began, peace in the Holy Land remains elusive.

This present-day outlook makes *The Kingdom of Heaven* a useful educational tool to get students to talk about the ways in which people today make use of the past to explain or critique contemporary events. Even though the film is rated R (for graphic violence, not for profanity or sexual content), millions of teenagers either have seen it in theaters or will be seeing it, as it is expected to be released on home video/DVD in October. This article aims to provide educators with



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Balian (Orlando Bloom, center, with sword raised) and the Templar Grand Master (Velibor Topic, to Bloom's left) lead the charge into battle against the Muslim warriors.

supplementary background on the time period and to suggest ideas for using the film in the classroom.

History and *The Kingdom of Heaven*

The Kingdom of Heaven chronicles events surrounding the Crusades through the fictionalized story of Balian (played by Orlando Bloom), the illegitimate son of Godfrey of Ibelin (Liam Neeson), a crusader-lord from the Holy Land. Balian works as a blacksmith in France, but events compel him, as heir to Ibelin, to follow his newfound father to the Holy Land. Godfrey briefly trains Balian in swordsmanship and knighthood, but then Godfrey is mortally wounded in a skirmish and Balian must go on alone. Balian's ship is sunk and he washes up on the Syrian shore, where he befriends a Muslim named Nasir (Alexander Siddig) who takes him to Jerusalem. There, Balian is caught up in royal intrigues.

King Baldwin (Edward Norton) is a leper who knows he will die soon. Royal succession will pass through his sister Sybilla (Eva Green), who is unhappily married, to her husband, Godfrey's rival Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas). Sybilla and Balian become lovers. The Count of Tiberias (Jeremy Irons) backs King Baldwin. Renegade warlord Reynauld de Chatillon (Brendan Gleeson) and the Templars, a fanatical order of Christian knights, back Guy's faction. Under King Baldwin the kingdom has enjoyed peace with its Muslim neighbors. After his death, Guy is crowned king.

Guy and the warlord Reynauld provoke war with the Muslim ruler Saladin (Ghassan Massoud) by leading murderous raids on peaceful Muslim travelers. Count Tiberias and Balian refuse to join the war. Saladin defeats Guy's forces and then lays siege to Jerusalem; Balian takes command of the city's defense to protect the people.

The defenders wear down Saladin's assault, but Balian surrenders Jerusalem after Saladin agrees to provide safe passage for all Christians to Europe. Balian returns to France with Sybilla at his side. Later, when crusaders led by King Richard of England seek him out to join them, Balian responds that he is just a humble blacksmith.

Although there really was a Balian of Ibelin who commanded the defense of Jerusalem against Saladin, the film's protagonist is largely fictional. The House of Ibelin was not of high birth, nor was Balian an illegitimate blacksmith. His father was also named Balian (Godfrey is a made-up character), and he had an older brother named

Raymond of Tripoli and the Ibelins claimed that succession could not pass through Sybilla and should rightly pass through Baldwin's half-sister Isabella, the daughter of King Amalric's actual queen Maria Comnena. Isabella's young husband Humphrey of Toron panicked and fled to Sybilla and Guy, surrendering to their claim. Reynauld's

support convinced most other lords to recognize Guy as their new king.

Most of the central events and main characters in *The Kingdom of Heaven* are drawn from or at least based on the historical record. More generally, three features of the film's historical accuracy deserve attention:

1. Political scheming. The film captures the in-fighting that

existed among the Christian rulers of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Though many of the crusaders who temporarily fought in the Holy Land were motivated by religious passion, those who stayed to live there more typically were on the make, looking for rich lands to rule. As Godfrey tells Balian in the film, the Holy Land is where a man "can make himself the master of a city."

These factions schemed against one another for control of land and the throne. The factions depicted in the film—Tiberias, Ibelin, and the Hospitallers (the black-robed order of Christian knights) versus Reynauld, Guy, and the Templars—follow the historical record. The Knights-Hospitaller were closely aligned with Count Raymond and the Ibelins; this faction sought to come to an understanding with Saladin and opposed risky military adventures. The Knights-Templar allied with the Houses of Courtenay and Lusignan and Reynauld of Chatillon, who



Tiberias (Jeremy Irons) considers his next move to preserve a fragile peace.

Photo by David Appleby

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The Kingdom of Heaven focuses on one of the most complicated but fascinating episodes of the Crusades—the last few years of the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem leading up to the disastrous battle of Hattin in 1187 and the return of Jerusalem to Muslim control. The general flow of events from the surviving historical record is represented surprisingly well in the film. Most characters in the film are based on actual historical figures: the leper King Baldwin IV, his politically shrewd sister Sybilla, her second husband the ambitious Guy of Lusignan, the militant warlord Reynauld de Chatillon, the honorable Muslim ruler Salah ed-Din (Saladin). The Count of Tiberias appears to stand in for the real Count Raymond of Tripoli, who was the lord of Tiberias in Galilee through his wife. Raymond, just like Tiberias in the film, was Reynauld's rival and opposed his aggressive adventures against neighboring Muslims.

Baldwin. The Ibelin brothers became influential nobles in the kingdom. And Balian's brother Baldwin was for a time the lover of Princess Sybilla and hoped to marry her, but while he was briefly captured and held for ransom by Saladin, Sybilla transferred her affections to a newly arrived nobleman from France, Guy de Lusignan. Sybilla and her mother Agnes of Courtenay convinced the dying King Baldwin to let Sybilla marry the untested Guy. Balian was never involved with Sybilla, though he was married to Sybilla's stepmother Maria Comnena, a Byzantine princess whom the previous king, Amalric, had married after his barons compelled him to divorce his first wife Agnes.

The movie's Balian may also be a composite of another historical figure, Humphrey of Toron. In the film, Balian is offered Sybilla's hand (and thus the throne) if he will help supplant Reynauld, but Balian refuses. When the real Baldwin IV died,

shared their aggressive policies. Just as in the movie, Sybilla was central to the political scheming, but she was firmly on the side of Guy. Also as in the movie, Sybilla inherited the crown and with her own hands crowned King Guy. (In reality this occurred only after Sybilla's

young son from her first marriage had been crowned as King Baldwin V but died shortly thereafter from illness.)

2. Peace, prosperity, and war. In the film, the Kingdom of Jerusalem under Baldwin IV enjoyed several years of

peace with the Muslim ruler Saladin. The movie depicts trade caravans traveling between Christian and Muslim territories, generating mutual prosperity. Though the film may exaggerate the extent of peace—the crusader states and Muslim domains never forgot they were

Photo courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

Thousands of Muslim warriors lay siege to Jerusalem.



Teaching Activities

Too often history movies are shown in the classroom without any clear purpose, yet they can be used to support student learning. Here are a few ideas for discussions and activities that teachers can use with *The Kingdom of Heaven*:

- 1. Debate the movie's interpretation.** How much of *The Kingdom of Heaven* reflects attitudes that would have made sense in the Middle Ages, and how much of the film reflects our morals and attitudes today? How are present-day philosophies like multiculturalism and religious toleration apparent in the film? Debate how Saladin or the crusaders might react to the film's interpretation of events.
- 2. Re-write a scene.** After talking with students about the ways in which *The Kingdom of Heaven* simplifies, changes, or distorts the historical record, have them select one scene that they find particularly inaccurate or problematic. Either individually or in small groups, have the students re-write the screenplay for that scene so that it addresses the inaccuracies or historical problems. For extra inspiration, find a sample page of a screenplay on the internet for students to use as a guideline.
- 3. Summary for a Sequel or Prequel.** The Crusades didn't begin or end with the events in the film. Have students

(either individually or in small groups) research the First Crusade (1096-1099) and the Second Crusade (1147-1149) that came before the events in the film or the Third Crusade (1189-1192) that came after. Have them write up what they have learned as a one-page "treatment" (film summary) for either a prequel or sequel to *The Kingdom of Heaven*. If the students want to include fictional characters or elements, make sure that they identify them as such in the treatment.

- 4. Compare the film to other accounts.** Before or after watching the film, provide students with other accounts of the events depicted. Book V in Steven Runciman's *A History of the Crusades, Volume II*, recounts this period in detail. Teachers could provide students with primary documents from the era translated into English. The writings of Archbishop William of Tyre describe events up until his death around 1184. A later continuation of his work is known as *Estoire d'Eracles*. Other contemporary Western accounts come from Ernoul (squire to Balian of Ibelin) and the Englishmen William of Malmesbury and Benedict of Petersborough. Arabic chroniclers of this period are Imad ed-Din, Beha ed-Din, and most importantly Ibn al-Athir, who wrote the comprehensive *Kamil al-Tawarikh (Historical Compendium)*.² Teachers also could have students read Christian and Arabic accounts of the 1187 battle of Hattin and compare them to the movie.³

at war, and truces rarely lasted more than a couple of years—reasonable leaders on both sides perceived the advantages of peace and trade.

Many second and third generation Europeans in the Holy Land (like Raymond of Tripoli) learned to co-exist with Muslims, but new arrivals from Europe (like Guy de Lusignan) caused conflict. The militant Knights-Templar and aggressive warlords like Reynauld pillaged Muslim lands in spite of truces. Reynauld's outrages were even worse than shown in the movie. He began his pillaging career in the 1150s, and after being captured on a raid he was imprisoned in Muslim Aleppo for 16 years. After his release, he went back to raiding and in 1182 outfitted a squadron of pirates to raid the Arabian coast, killing many Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca. In 1186, after Guy had become king, Reynauld assaulted a particularly rich merchant caravan. In the movie, Saladin's sister is shown as one of his victims (a story told by one crusader historian), though Muslim records reveal this was not the case. In the film, Saladin sends an embassy to protest the attack, and King Guy himself murders the ambassador. In reality, King Guy saw the need to keep the peace at that time and ordered Reynauld to make restitution, but Guy also owed his throne to Reynauld's support and therefore did not force obedience.

3. Reasonable Muslims. The movie presents Muslims as reasonable, sympathetic figures. It properly depicts Islamic society in the Holy Land as cultured and refined. Saladin is portrayed as merciful and honorable and the historical record amply shows that he was. Particularly accurate is the depiction of his triumph at Jerusalem. When the crusaders stormed Jerusalem in 1099, they butchered thousands of its citizens—Jewish and Christian as well as Muslim. Yet when Saladin recaptured the city in 1187, his army did not loot or massacre. In the movie, Balian negotiates a humane surrender in which all

Christians will be safely taken to Europe. The actual events were nearly this humane. As conqueror, Saladin was entitled to take away the captives as slaves unless they paid a ransom. He offered generous terms that permitted most citizens to buy their freedom, and then set free many orphans, widows, and others who were too poor to pay. When Italian merchants at nearby ports tried to gouge the refugees with heavy fees, Saladin's Egyptian government forced the ships to take on board all the poor people for free.

Simplifying the Past

The film accurately portrays much of what we know about this period of the Crusades, but ultimately it has to change historical details or invent new elements for the sake of the plot. Five ways in which the film simplifies or distorts the past are worth exploring:

1. Muslim unity? At no point does the film make any specific mention of Arabs, Kurds, Persians, or Turks, yet these distinctions were crucial. In the eleventh century the Saljuq Turks conquered Iran and the Middle East, but by the time of the Crusades their vast empire was fragmented. The Saljuq Turks of Rum (in Asia Minor) did not recognize the authority of the Great Saljuqs of Baghdad. Other Turkish dynasties like the Ortoqids, Danishmends, and House of Zangi were wholly independent and frequently at war. Zangi and his son Nur de-Din tried and failed to unify the Muslim world against the crusaders. Saladin, a Kurd originally in service to Nur ed-Din, seized Egypt for his own control. The Ortoqids and Nur ed-Din's successors at times even allied with the crusader states against Saladin. Saladin was a Sunni Muslim but the Fatamid dynasty of Egypt that he had replaced was Shi'a, and Saladin faced numerous assassination plots from Shi'a conspirators. Most of Saladin's military efforts were directed against Muslim rivals rather than crusaders, and it was only after making himself overlord of most Muslim dominions

in the Middle East that he was able to conquer Jerusalem.

2. Missing empires. The film never makes any mention of the Byzantine Empire, which is ironic as it was the Byzantine Empire that made the Crusades possible in the first place when Emperor Alexius Comnenus invited the Pope to send an army to help him in the East. The populace of the empire consisted largely of Greeks and Armenians and was mostly Orthodox Christian, separate from Roman Catholicism since the schism of 1054. Cooperation between the Greek Orthodox Byzantines and the Latin Catholic crusaders from the West was always tenuous, but the Kingdom of Jerusalem relied on Byzantine support and its lords intermarried with the Byzantine royal line. The Byzantine Empire suffered a disastrous defeat against the Saljuq Turks in 1176 and no longer could provide much support to the crusader states, leaving them vulnerable to Muslim counterattack. In many ways the Crusades were a three-way power struggle between the Orthodox Byzantine Empire, the Muslim Turkish (or Kurdish, in the case of Saladin) dynasties, and the Catholic Western (mostly French) invaders.

3. Military distortions. In the film, Balian takes quickly to his new role as a knight. In reality, becoming a knight required years of training in sword-fighting and mounted combat. In the film's climactic battle Balian makes every man in Jerusalem a knight, inspiring the men to fight better. The real Balian knighted every boy over the age of 16 born of a noble family as well as 30 freeborn townsmen, creating a makeshift officer corps to convey his orders. Making an untrained man a knight made no more sense in the Middle Ages than making an untrained volunteer a jet-fighter pilot does today. The film also exaggerates military technology, showing the armies' siege machines (called mangonels) hurling enormous fiery projectiles that

explode like bombs. The Byzantines and Muslims did possess a combustible substance (called “Greek fire”), but it required water and was normally used in sea battles. During land sieges, the real work of reducing a fortress was performed by sappers (soldiers who dug beneath a wall to “undermine” it). Saladin’s victory at Jerusalem was ensured when his sappers collapsed the city’s north wall. The greatest military distortion in the movie is the battle of Hattin (1187), in which the crusader army was annihilated and King Guy and many Christian lords captured. The film glosses over this critical battle and instead focuses on the siege of Jerusalem—which lasted barely 10 days and was almost a foregone conclusion for Saladin.

4. Bad guys/good guys. The movie is clear about who the good guys and bad guys are supposed to be. The bad guys are intolerant, militant crusaders like Reynauld, Guy, and the Templars. The good guys are King Baldwin, Tiberias, Ibelin, Saladin, and Nasir—reasonable, tolerant men for whom religion is a small matter of personal conscience. Godfrey even describes Jerusalem as a “kingdom of conscience” where Christians and Muslims live in peace. Later, one of Godfrey’s old friends (a Knight-Hospitaller) tells Balian, “I put no stock in religion.” During the climatic battle, Balian unites the people of Jerusalem by denying that any religion has claim to the city because all have equal claim. While this secular, multicultural vision may warm our hearts today, it would have made little sense to medieval peoples. Saladin respected the crusaders, but he was a devout Muslim sworn to retake the Holy Land from Christian control. Count Raymond and the Ibelin brothers sought to co-exist with their Muslim neighbors, but when forced to take sides they readily supported their fellow Christians.

In the movie, two Templars who attacked Muslims are hanged in punishment. Reality proved quite

different. In 1187, the Grand Master of the Templars goaded the Knights-Hospitaller into joining an attack on a powerful Muslim cavalcade passing by under truce, and the Christians were slaughtered almost to the last man (the Grand Master escaped). The Templars and Hospitallers might have deserved their fate, but Raymond felt he had to end his truce with Saladin and join the crusader army that marched from Jerusalem to avenge them. King Guy may have been foolish, Reynauld greedy and murderous, and the Templars wildly aggressive, but this did not stop the supposed “good guys” from closing ranks with them against a serious Muslim threat. Furthermore, Saladin’s famed mercy did not spare the Templars and Hospitallers captured at Hattin, who were beheaded by radical Sufi warriors. For both medieval Muslims and Christians, religion was a fundamental component of identity.

5. Hollywood ending. *The Kingdom of Heaven* provides a “Hollywood ending” even when this departs from the historical record. Reynauld’s death by Saladin’s own hand is very accurately dramatized in the film. Less accurate is the fate of the other main characters. King Guy is last seen in the movie being paraded in front of the walls of Jerusalem on a donkey. In reality, Guy was set free some months after the battle (Saladin rightly guessed he would sow dissent among the Christians). King Richard of England installed Guy as the ruler of Cyprus until Guy’s natural death in 1194. In the movie, Tiberias retires to Cyprus; his historical counterpart, Count Raymond, was disgraced after the defeat at Hattin and died a few months later. At the end of the film, Sybilla gives up being a queen and joins Balian in France. The real Balian stayed in the Holy Land. The real Sybilla was permitted by Saladin to join her husband King Guy during his captivity, and she followed him after his release. Tragically, she perished from an illness in 1190, just a few days after the illness had claimed the

lives of the two little daughters she had with King Guy. History rarely provides a Hollywood ending.

Upon leaving the theater after seeing *The Kingdom of Heaven*, I overheard one teenager say to his friends, “So the Crusades were caused by one crazy king.” This over-simplification probably isn’t the message that the filmmakers intended viewers to take away, nor is it the lesson that teachers would want their students to learn. By exploring the historical background of this film, world history teachers can help students think more critically about the Crusades. 🌐

Notes

1. For just two of many such examples, see MSN MSNBC News, “Alleged al-Zarqawi Tape Berates Muslim Clerics” (November 24, 2004), msnbc.msn.com/id/6403689/ and Thomas Wagner, “Insurgents Again Target Iraqi Security Forces,” *The Detroit News*, (May 5, 2005), www.detroitnews.com/2005/nation/0505/05/01-172635.htm.
2. Text of William of Tyre and many other Crusade chroniclers can be found online. See Fordham University, Internet Medieval Sourcebook, “Select Sources: The Crusades,” www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1k.html. Some Arabic sources also are online. See Fordham University, Internet Islamic History Sourcebook, “Interaction with the West: The Crusades,” www.fordham.edu/halsall/islam/islamsbook.html (especially useful is www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/salahdin.html).
3. For accounts available online, see De Re Militari: The Society for Medieval Military History, “Kingdom of Heaven,” www.deremilitari.org/kingdomofheaven.htm. The Primary Sources section contains several accounts of the battle of Hattin.

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