

Kingdom of Heaven: What Parts Are Real?

by Timothy R. Furnish

23-29 minutes



Fact & Fiction

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My expectations upon entering the theater for *Kingdom of Heaven* were legion. As a movie buff, I had high hopes for another Ridley Scott film. As a historian of the Islamic world, I couldn't wait to see the portrayal of the great Salah al-Din. As a history professor who likes to send his students to write papers on such historical movies, the chariot wreck that Oliver Stone had managed to make out of *Alexander* was still fresh in my mind. And as a Christian (albeit of the non-Catholic variety), I fully expected yet another two-dimensional bashing of my medieval co-religionists (may my Lutheran credentials not be revoked for saying that).

Well, Scott made a better movie than Stone, but in doing so sacrificed a great deal of historical accuracy and believability on the altar of wishful thinking.

The first level on which the film has problems is that of cinematographical reality. After being shipwrecked on the coast of Israel, Balian of Ibelin (Orlando Bloom)—who had left his job as a blacksmith in France after a visit from his previously-unknown Crusader nobleman father and set out for Outremer (as the French called their overseas dominions in the Middle East)—walks through Sahara-like sand dunes en route to the holy city. While Morocco, where Scott filmed, contains such landscapes the coast of Israel or Lebanon does not. And what, other than Peter Jackson envy, could have prompted Scott to come up with a Jerusalem topography that seems to be trying to rival Minas Tirith in *Lord of the Rings*? Anyone who's ever been to Jerusalem knows that it is slightly hilly at most, not mountainous.

At the next level, that of historical dependability, this film also leaves much to be desired. Knowing full well that a historically accurate movie can be bad—can anyone say *Alexander* again?—why was it necessary to alter events and characters to such a huge degree? The most prominent example is Bloom's character Balian. A nobleman by such a name was a Crusader, and indeed led the defense of Jerusalem in the face of Salah al-Din's army's besiegement. But there are no indications that he had to be persuaded to come to the Holy Land by his long-lost Crusader father, or that he was ever shipwrecked in the process of doing so. In fact, his family seems to have come to the Holy Land with the First Crusade in 1099.

[Balian](#) was married to one Maria Comnena, the widow of Amalric I, and never involved with Sibylla (sister of Baldwin IV, the leper king of Jerusalem)—as the film would have us believe. Wasn't the real (or at least the recorded) story of Balian compelling enough?

And what about the plight, and role, of the Orthodox Christians in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem? History records that the Patriarch Heraclius was at Balian's side, organizing the city's defenses. We get no indication in the movie that there are any [Christians except colonizing Catholics](#) from western Europe. I am going to give Scott a pass on most of his plot holes, but I will mention the ones large enough to ride a Percheron through. Balian, after one sword-fighting lesson from dad and his knights,

is transformed into such a swordsman that he kills the first “Saracen” that he encounters (at an oasis in one of those aforementioned sand dunes). Not only that, but Balian also knows how to lead a cavalry charge of armored knights and how to map out fields of fire in preparation for defending Jerusalem. Who knew blacksmith training was so eclectic? And of course when he takes up residence at his father’s estate on the edge of the desert, he instructs his workers to actually dig for water—which of course they find. Amazing how no one had thought of that for 80 years or so.

But to paraphrase Dirty Harry from *Sudden Impact*: “no, it’s not the wrong geography or the fictional characters or the plot foibles that get to me....what really, really makes me sick is that nobody, and I mean NOBODY, in the 12th century was giving speeches about religious tolerance.” Which is what Balian does when Salah al-Din shows up “with 200,000 men” (actually it was maybe 40,000, but who’s counting?). Of course, he was one of the few knights left after the crushing of the Kingdom’s army by Salah al-Din at Hattin in 1187, which in turn had been prompted by the brutality of Reynald de Chatillion—a bit that Scott got right—and the military hubris of the Templars and their leader Guy de Lusignan (ostensibly King, by virtue of being married to Sibylla). Salah al-Din, the great Kurdish Sunni leader, had taken over both Egypt and Syria and so his realm surrounded that of the Crusaders. For many years he tolerated their existence, however (perhaps not least because he had his own inter-Muslim problems, such as the attempts by the “Assassins”—who were radical Shi’ites—to kill him). But when Reynald attacked a caravan and killed his sister, Salah al-Din moved. After wiping out the Kingdom of Jerusalem’s forces at Hattin, Salah al-Din besieged the city. Balian, both in reality and the movie, led the heroic defense until finally surrendering the city to the Muslim forces. But does anyone really believe that Balian rallied the Christians by giving a 21st-century-style exhortation about the equal religious value of the Dome of the Rock, Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Temple of Solomon? He also sermonized that it was the people, not the holy sites, that really mattered. If that were the case, tens of thousands of western European Catholics would never have traveled thousands of miles

to take Jerusalem in the first place. As much as Ridley Scott—or we—would like Muslims and Christians (and Jews) in the Holy Land to “just get along” today, what purpose does it serve to retroject this kinder and gentler monotheism 800 years into the past and pretend it motivated folks then?

That said, there are some very good aspects to this movie: the depictions of how “orientalized” the Crusaders had become; the battles (which I think compare favorably to *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in that they look more real); the return of Alexander Siddig (Dr. Bashir of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*) as Nasir, one of the Muslim commanders; and perhaps most impressive, Salah al-Din’s portrayal by Ghassan Massoud. Would that a Muslim leader of his stature were around today, instead of epigones like Bin Ladin and al-Zarqawi. *Kingdom of Heaven* seems to be saying that the clash of civilizations between the West and Islam will only begin to end when a new Balian and a new Salah al-Din emerge. But it is the Islamic world, not Western Christendom, that riots at perceived (now indeed known to be false) slights to its holy book today. One might observe that the Muslim world is much more in need of a Salah al-Din than the West is of a Balian.

More Comments:

Philip Alexander Tackett - 6/16/2010

If I remember correctly many moved back to Europe after the fall of Jerusalem, and many also moved to other crusader cities such as Acre, Antioch, Tyre, etc. until they fell as well.

omar ibrahim baker - 10/19/2007

Dr Furnish

You have made some interesting comments mainly about the topography of Jerusalem and the absence of any reference to non Catholic Christians.

Scott failed in a very simple and very inexpensive to remedy major scene: the way Moslems pray together .

Moslems ,when praying together, do so in straight lines and, if their number warrants it, in straight columns behind an IMAM .

Neither in Messina nor at the siege of Jerusalem were they depicted doing that; forgivable for Scott not to know but curiously unnoted by a presumed authority on the subject!

However what really surprised me is for a Professor of history to write:

"The first level on which the film has problems is that of cinematographical reality. After being shipwrecked on the coast of Israel, Balian of Ibelin"

Was there an "Israel" at the time of the Crusades?

Was Palestine reffered to as Israel in the chronicles of the Crusaders? Was it noted by such a name in their maps?

Is it ignorance Professor!

Or is that part of a brainwashing campaign to delude your innocent students into believing that Israel has been there ever since?

Coming from an AIPAC hired public relations consultant it would be understandable....but from a professor of Islamic history ??

I find it neither innocent nor excusable!

omar ibrahim baker - 10/19/2007

Moshe

You always manage to find an excuse , to justify ,to sound cool and reasonable; you might be all that and utterly naive or a great impersonator!

Coming from a Professor of Islamic History no less in a scholarly journal, not a rag sheet, you find that natural?

omar ibrahim baker - 10/19/2007

Moshe

All the main articles in HNN are by University Professors or equivalent; is that not scholarly enough for you?

You must a very difficult man to please!

I know only too well that you are not naive and that you know that "a political statement " can take many forms including that of a film review; so by stating : "Second, the purpose of this piece was a review of a film, not a political statement on current events. " you impersonate the naive which is my evidence you asked for!

Still you have not answered my question:

"Coming from a Professor of Islamic History no less in a scholarly journal, not a rag sheet, you find that natural?"

Will you answer it ?

omar ibrahim baker - 10/19/2007

What else can you say Professor ?

You are lucky to have a clever man like Moshe covering you...PROFESSOR

Garrett Spencer Perkins - 7/12/2007

I was surprised at the viciousness of the attack of this gentleman's review by "Omar".

As a former writer for NBC and a current historian and someone who has spent considerable time in the middle east and near east, let me say this; Dude, lighten up, have a beer and chill the hell out. It's not even acceptable to attack anyone else's opinion over a movie; its a movie for God's sake. This is like being pissed off over Mr. Douglas on Green Acres farming in his business suit....

If one wants to be personal as several did, this attack shows in great detail how those fanatic fundamentalists are too wound up, refuse to accept any even slightly possible difference of opinion and become overzealous to the point of becoming mentally unstable.

No where did anything political come up and modern points of geographical and topographical reference were used to illustrate, not make absolute. Common place in film since its inception is to use alternative locations to dramatize the event for viewing purposes. Of course, I can easily see where one would prefer to film in Morocco vs the actual location given the state of insanity underway in the middle east at that time and currently. Who would want to film a movie in a war zone with zealot murderers blowing themselves up in the name of any God? (Come get some of this, Omar...)

It's a movie, not a documentary. There is a HUGE difference. The reality is of course that most of mainstream society of every culture are too lazy to search out truth and fact and enjoy being handed bs and gladly accept it.

Omar, I'm calling you out to get a life, drink a beer, smoke a blunt, and chill the hell out. Leave the religious fanaticism to those who have no souls, the politicians.

RAYMOND B. COOK - 6/14/2005

I have not seen this movie yet but I must surely do so. If for nothing else to see all these points of inaccuracy that everyone is talking about.

I think that one question that comes to mind is that, although I and perhaps most people who enter this web site are familiar with the events of the Crusades, a vast majority of the people who view this movie are not. There for after viewing this movie, or for that matter any movie that proposes to be a history of an actual event in time, John Q Public through no fault of their own might be inclined to accept it as fact.

This is where a question of ethics must be brought into play. Is it allowable to alter or omit historical fact to satisfy artistic license in the creation of a media piece. And, if so should it purported to be a history of the events or era concerned or rather a piece of fiction based on history which perhaps this movie is. As I've said I haven't seen it yet. So, I'll withhold any definitive judgements till then.

Ray C.

RAYMOND B. COOK - 6/14/2005

far to many what ifs in this string of thought. But, I can see your point, to use the old quote " absolute power corrupts absolutely". Even as virtuos as Salah al-Din was there are at times when even he was tempted by the power he weilded.

Diana Moon - 5/22/2005

I'm interested in the issue of Frankish settlers and the society they created, esp. the phenomenon of "Orientalized Franks." Can you recommend anything that's been written on the subject? What happened to them? Did they stay on and become Arabized?

James Spence - 5/22/2005

Mr. Furnish,

I am nothing close to an historian thus maybe what I know of his reputation seems an exaggeration but I do know that he was a Kurdish military general who fought Crusaders and Muslims and was generally considered as a chivalrous knight among the Europeans. That he had a knack of organising dynasties. Actually, it was to this talent I was referring to, his talent to lead people, lead a cause or a holy war, and if someone like him were around today maybe his viewpoint toward the Western Christian world be somewhat altered so I'm not sure how merciful he would be towards today's crusaders. Not in these times.

Tim R. Furnish - 5/22/2005

Ah, but Mr. Spence, if you think that I'm not sure you understand how Salah al-Din was different from UBL and his ilk....

James Spence - 5/22/2005

"Would that a Muslim leader of his stature were around today..." If such a person were around today I would be very afraid. Such a person would be a greater threat than bin Laden, he would organized the Muslim world, get the technology required, and slaughter us in the most horrific ways for the sins of the Western world.

Tim R. Furnish - 5/21/2005

Yes, and it also would have been good to have seen the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim's army killing Christians and despoiling the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009. But somehow film makers, journalists and most Middle East historians always seem to miss that.

Diana Moon - 5/21/2005

I went to see KINGDOM OF HEAVEN because I was interested in the depiction of "Orientalized Franks" alluded to in Timothy Furnish's review. I didn't really see this, except in Sybilla's costumes and a few times where she sounded as if she were speaking Arabic, or a Semitic language. That's one of the fascinating aspects of Crusader rule. Other than Sybilla's costumes, where was this Orientalization process shown?

I thought that the depiction of Sybilla -- who was a pretty shrewd politician, apparently -- as a slinking sex kitten was preposterous. Also, the final siege scenes were dumb as a box of rocks and ripped off directly from Lord of the Rings. Prof. Furnish is correct in pointing out that actual Jerusalem isn't as hilly as Scott depicted. But it is 800 meters above sea level and surrounded by deep gorges. Yet it is depicted as being situated on a flat plain. This was done strictly because you couldn't have positioned those LoTR-type siege machines on anything else.

Finally, it would have been nice to see two things: one, the extreme cruelty of the Crusaders towards the Jewish communities of Europe as they made

their merry way to the Holy Land, and two, a scene between Saladin and his doctor, Maimonides, in which the latter urges the former to get a little more rest and drink a little chicken soup before he finally throws those Christian b***** out of Jerusalem. :) OK, it never happened, but neither did most of the rest of this film.

Dylan Sherlock - 5/19/2005

"Palestine" is often called Israel in pre-1949 histories, as a synonym with the "Holy Land" etc... Keep in mind that European Christians would not be thinking of Palestine in terms of Muslim Arabs, but in terms of the biblical stories of Israeli Jewry they were raised on, even though those stories were written 1000 years before that time.

So obviously an Arab might refer to it as Palestine, but in the context of European history, you're the one bringing ideology into neutral ground.

Therefore in the context of western medieval history: Israel. In the context of today: Israel. This is a losing argument for you.

bill farrell - 5/18/2005

I thought that Salah al-Din's sister was kidnapped when the caravan was attacked (and perhaps later raped). I was unaware that she was murdered.

Tim R. Furnish - 5/17/2005

Mr. Baker's comments remind me of a radical feminist friend I had in grad school at Ohio State, who upon reading C.S. Lewis "Mere Christianity" returned it to me with EVERY SINGLE MALE PRONOUN underlined. She had not even noted the religious and philosophical issues in the book, focused as she was on such a minor and irrelevant issue.

You listening, Mr. Baker?

Tim R. Furnish - 5/17/2005

Mr. Moshe,

You're quite welcome. Thanks for "covering" me....although of course you're just contributing to Mr. Baker's paranoia, I suspect.....(which I must confess my last comment directed at him was referring to).

Marc "Adam Moshe" Bacharach - 5/17/2005

Omar,

1) "All the main articles in HNN are by University Professors or equivalent; is that not scholarly enough for you?"

No, it is not. Peer reviewed journals such as the American Political Science Review, the American Historical Review, and so forth, apply strict standards to ensure that the articles adequately reflect the quality and professionalism applied to those disciplines.

The History News Network is simply an on-line forum and although I respect the authors who publish here, and enjoy many of the articles thoroughly, they are not bound by scholarly constraints, such as appropriate citation, attempted objectivity, footnotes, endnotes, or bibliographical information.

2) "a political statement " can take many forms including that of a film review"

This is very true, but as Sigmund Freud once said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Just because political statements can be anywhere does not mean that they are everywhere. Have you never read a movie review, saw a television commercial, or watched a sitcom that did not contain any discernible political statement?

3) "Still you have not answered my question:

"Coming from a Professor of Islamic History no less in a scholarly journal, not a rag sheet, you find that natural?" Will you answer it ?"

I thought I did... twice in fact. Allow me to re-post what I wrote to answer your question: "The phraseology utilized may have meant to give modern readers a point of reference by citing the contemporary name of the territory."

In other words, given the nature of HNN and the fact that it is a movie review, I find it quite natural that the author would use contemporary language to explain events in the film. Just out of curiosity, I started googling some other movie reviews about historical films and found that almost all of them used contemporary land names. Reviews for the film "Gladiator," for example, constantly reference "Germany" when that word is not what the ancient Romans called it.

Professor Furnish,

I always appreciate when an author is willing to respond to his critics and answer questions on his work. Thank you, and personally, I very much enjoyed the review and echoes what I have heard elsewhere.

Tim R. Furnish - 5/17/2005

Yes, Mr. Baker, I would be cowering in fear if not for all my "Zionist buddies"--right?!?! Sorry, I used to be in the 101st Airborne, so I usually can cover myself.

Tim R. Furnish - 5/17/2005

Mr. Baker,

For your information--and no doubt to your great consternation--Mr. Moshe is exactly right: I simply said "Israel" because the vast majority of the American movie-going public thinks of that geographical region thusly. No "brainwashing" was intended. To quote Sergeant Hulk in "Stripes:" "Lighten up, Francis!"

Marc "Adam Moshe" Bacharach - 5/17/2005

First, HNN is NOT a scholarly journal. Second, the purpose of this piece was a review of a film, not a political statement on current events. Third, I have already suggested alternative explanations for the phraseology that have nothing to do with politics.

Finally, I am glad that I sound cool and reasonable, since there is no reason why emotion should play into this discussion. I did not “excuse” or “justify” the phrase, I merely suggested the possibility that the author did not intend malicious or nefarious purposes, as you assume. As for being “utterly naive or a great impersonator,” I will accept that as a possibility, though you are going to have to provide some evidence of where I sound like either.

Marc "Adam Moshe" Bacharach - 5/17/2005

Omar,

I am truly astounded at your ideological tirade against the article and the author, leveling all sorts of baseless accusations. A “brainwashing campaign”? Honestly Omar, I wonder sometimes whether you are truly serious about what you right. Do you honestly believe that that one word was meant to imply that the current country of Israel has existed since the Medieval times?

The phraseology utilized may have meant to give modern readers a point of reference by citing the contemporary name of the territory. Or, it may have been a typo. However, I would seriously doubt that this review of a movie about the crusades was ANY attempt to make some kind of statement about the current conflict in the region. Not everyone is so single-mindedly ideological.

In point of fact, many crusaders referred to the land as “the Kingdom of Jerusalem” or simply as “the Holy Land.”