

Muslim response to the crusades



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Why did it take so long to develop a concerted Muslim response to the Crusades?**TABLE OF CONTENTS (JUMP TO)**

Introduction

Islamic Expansion and Rule

Growing Discontent in the West

The Crusades

Conclusion

Bibliography

Introduction

In terms of history, the actual start and reasons for the Crusades varies slightly based upon the sources being accessed as well as the point of view from which this recalling of history is based. In understanding the Crusades it is necessary to be aware that the term is broad in that it encompasses pagan Slavs, Mongols, political enemies of the Pope, Cathars, Hussites, and other groups in addition to Muslims (Riley-Smith, 1999, pp. 231-232). For the purpose of the subject of this study, which asks the question as to “ Why did it take so long to develop a concerted Muslim response to the Crusades”, the Muslims will of course represent the focus.

In order to set as well as understand the context, the Muslim presence in the Holy Land started with the conquest of Palestine by the Arabs during the seventh century (Boas, 2001. p. 41). For clarity, the Holy Land is referred to

as a region in Palestine where the most significant Biblical events took place, with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ being the most noteworthy (Dubois and Brandt, 1956, p. 35). The Crusades are commonly thought of as a call to rescue Palestine from Moslem hands (Dubois and Brandt, 1956, p. 35), however this study will bring forth information that reveals that while the foregoing is true, it is not entirely accurate. The first effort by the West to accomplish the preceding did not occur until 1095, when Pope Urban 11 assembled a meeting of churchmen in Clermont, France as a response to messages from Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus for help (Somerville and Kuttner, 1996, p. 156);. The preceding indicates that three centuries passed before the Western world began the marshalling of a response to the Arab conquest of Palestine. The obvious question, and one that is the purpose of this study, is what transpired during three centuries that did not prompt a Crusade response?

This study shall seek to look at the events before that occupation to have a grasp of the situation in the region that preceded the Arab conquest, along with the political events for that time period as well as after. The foregoing shall be looked at to ascertain what transpired that could cause such a delay in responding to the Muslims.

In understanding the religious significance of Palestine one needs to be cognizant that it was the birth place of many important prophets, such as Abraham, Lot, Solomon, Moses, and Jesus Christ (Huntington, 1911, pp. 15 - 17). The first known, or recorded inhabitants of Palestine were known as Canaanites, who were believed to have occupied the region around 300 BC (Paton, 1901, p. 98). Egypt and its Pharaohs next controlled the area through

conquest for the next millennium, which successively changed to being controlled by the Hebrews from Mesopotamia, and then the Philistines, who called the country Philistia, from where it obtained its modern name (Paton, 1901, p. 189). The Philistines controlled the Canaanite town named Jerusalem and vast areas, but not the entire country, a feat they finally accomplished around 1050 BC when they defeated the Israelites (Paton, 1901, p. 201). The quest for control of the Holy Land was far from over as the Prophet Dawood, who was Israel's King, managed to defeat the Philistines in 995 BC, with the three different groups, the Canaanites, the Philistines, and the Israelites who all eventually assimilated over decades of living among each other (Morgan, 1958, p. 344).

The foregoing unity that was established by the Hebrew tribes that called themselves the Israelites enabled them to unify the land, and establish a capital at Jerusalem (Morgan, 1958, p. 356). The religious significance "...for the Jews, the Christians and the Moslems ..." marks the violent history of Palestine, which all these groups claimed as their Holy Land, thus setting the context for the Crusades (Popper, 1938, p. 7). Palestine continued to suffer a secession of conquests, first by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, then by the Romans who entered Jerusalem in 4 BC (Gabriel, 2003, pp. 24-36). The Roman emperor Constantine reversed the long standing persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire and legalized the religion in 313 AD thus making the Holy Land the center of pilgrimages (Pohlsander, 2004, pp. 27-35).

The Byzantine rule has harsh on Jews, who could not enter Jerusalem as well as persecuting Christians that did not follow their chosen sect (Vasiliev and

Ragozin, 1928, p. 271). Menashi (2004) tells us that when the Muslims conquered Palestine in the seventh century, with that event ending centuries of colonial rule by the Romans as well as religious persecution and instability. Muslim rule brought a period of safety, peace and security to a population that had suffered through many different persecutions (Menashi, 2004). Kedourie (1992, p. 12) in confirming the preceding states “ Arab Muslim rulers . . . transformed an unsophisticated tribal polity into one of the most sophisticated and durable kinds of rule, that of oriental despotism, the methods and traditions of which have survived in the Muslim world to the present day”. The Muslim conquest of Palestine started a 1300-year reign that continues to this day, with the exception of the period of the Crusades.

The preceding historical journey concerning the history of Palestine was conducted to provide an over view of the country and its series of conquests as well as the multi cultural religious connotations attached to Jerusalem to aid in the understanding of the region.

Islamic Expansion and Rule

To understand the Crusades, one must be aware of the history of Islamic rule and conquest that led to the occupation of Jerusalem. Islamic expansion started with the Prophet Mohammad that was viewed in the West as aggression, but in Islam the spread of the religion by means of war represented eliminating “...injustice and oppression of humanity” (understanding-islam. com, 2008). Kelsay and Johnson (1991, p. 37) tell us “ The Islamic conception of legitimate war (Jihad) once it is systematically developed, is specifically tied to the idea of the unity of the Islamic state against all other non-Islamic states and the legitimacy of the caliph or imam

as the single ruler of this Islamic state”. A Jihad represents an Islamic “... holy war or spiritual struggle against infidels” (answers. com, 2009) with infidels defined as “... an unbeliever with respect to a particular religion” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2009).

The unifying efforts of Islam represented its expansion to reclaim lands occupied by infidels, which the West saw as expansionism when in fact the Muslims were taking back territory lost to Greek and Roman conquests. The Islamic culture under and after the Prophet Mohammad quickly spread from what is now known as Saudi Arabia, which in 618 BC included the Jews as allies in taking back the Middle East Region from the Byzantine Empire (Diehl and Ives, 1925, p. 121). When the Arabs captured Jerusalem, the Holy Land, they slaughtered the Christians and allowed the Jews back in (Diehl and Ives, 1925, p. 123). However, this was an Islamic city, and although the Jews were allowed to live there, which was forbidden under Byzantine rule; they were still discriminated against severely as well as being highly regulated in property ownership, and worship (Diehl and Ives, 1925, p. 123). Christians under Muslim rule were treated as second-class citizens, and were required to worship in specific locations, and limited in areas they could travel (Diehl and Ives, 1925, p. 1293).

The Islamic Jihad, and the successes of the Muslim armies in winning back land came at the expense of the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine Empire. The foregoing irked the West, but it was the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009 by Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah that set events in motion for the beginning formation of the Crusades (Pohlsander, 2004, p. 54). The preceding was a slow building event as the church was rebuilt by his

successor, for which he was paid huge sums to enable this to be done. After the church was finished in 1043, pilgrimages were again allowed into the Holy Land, thus easing tensions, but with this came events whereby those coming to visit the new church were sometimes captured, along with members of the clergy at times being killed (Pohlsander, 2004, p. 65).

Economics resulted in sanity as the Muslims came to understand that a good percentage of the wealth pouring into Jerusalem came primarily from Christians making pilgrimages, thus prompting them to stop persecutions, however this proved to be too little too late as the reputation had spread (Pohlsander, 2004, p. 65). The Arab conquests in reclaiming land lost to the West continued throughout this period, causing the Byzantine Empire to shrink under the waves of attacks from Muslims (Baynes, 1926, pp. 33. 34). The Seljuk Turks inflicted most of the damage, and they had been recruited by the Arabs as mercenaries to strengthen the weakened power of the Caliph (Yale, 1958, p. 10). Their tactics closely resembled those as used by the Huns, however their methods were intensified as a result of their zeal for the Islamic religion (Yale, 1958, p. 10). The Seljuk Turks quickly become the masters of both Eastern as well as Central Asia Minor “...where they organized a Moslem Turkish state which marked the beginning of the extension of Islamic culture to the northern part of the Near East” (Yale, 1958, p. 12). “ Threatened by the expansion of Turkish Moslem power to the west, the Byzantine Emperor ... appealed to Pope Urban II in 1094 for military aid from the West against the ... Turks” (Yale, 1958, p. 12).

Growing Discontent in the West

The weaknesses in the Byzantine Empire, and among the Islamic Caliphs, saw the Seljuk Turks increase in strength as well as control and power, with their brutal tactics causing concern throughout the region (Yale, 1958, p. 12). During this time, conditions in Europe changed as bankers and merchants sought to expand their economic horizons to Asia Minor (Yale, 1958, p. 12). The preceding view was brought forth by the lessening monetary opportunities in Europe where the economic foundations remained as basically a feudal system (Yale, 1958, p. 12). The foundation of power and wealth meant that the agriculture production was very limited, falling short of what was needed to supply the increasingly larger cities and towns, whose industry as well as commerce were not developed to any degree (Yale, 1958, p. 12). The economics of the times fed political unrest, along with social discontent "...among the nobles, the peasants, and the townsmen" (Yale, 1958, p. 12). The combination of economic limitations and the growing political climate forged an atmosphere whereby the "...psychological forces, aroused by the rivalry between Mohammedanism and Christianity, supplied the emotional and ideological drive for the Crusades" (Yale, 1958, p. 12).

The message of Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus to Pope Urban 11 in 1095 asking for help for his crumbling empire in 1095 resulted in the start of the Crusades (Somerville and Kuttner, 1996, p. 156). The message of appeal was answered resoundingly, thus marking the beginning of the Crusades which was not a call to arms to regain the Holy Land from the Arabs, who had held it for three centuries with no armed response from the West, but rather as a defensive war to halt the incursions of the Arabs that were

crumbling the remains of the Byzantine Empire (Madden, 2002). The foundation for the preceding rested in the Arab mission (Jihad) to reclaim their lands, with the inner workings of their empire being peaceful, successful, and enlightened (Madden, 2002)

The brutal start of their Jihad softened internally, thus rule inside the recaptured territories was peaceful. But, as Madden (2002) advises, “ While Muslims can be peaceful, Islam was born in war and grew the same way”, with the Islamic expansion fueled by the sword. There is an interesting as well as important understanding concerning Islam that explains the foregoing seeming contrasts. “ Muslim thought divides the world into two spheres, the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War” (Madden, 2002). Thus, Jews and Christians “...can be tolerated within a Muslim state under Muslim rule”, however under traditional Islam “ Christian and Jewish states must be destroyed and their lands conquered” (Madden, 2002). Thus, the regaining of the Holy Land was not enough, and this fueled the response from to Pope Urban 11 in 1095.

The Crusades

The success of the Islamic conquests, as opposed to their capturing the Holy Lands, looms as the reason for Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus’ plea to Pope Urban 11. While the response to the call to arms was tremendous, the mounting of any actual response represented another matter. Conducting a crusade was not an inexpensive manner. It called for armor, swords, provisions, men, horses and leaders, commodities that could not be marshaled overnight. The idea of standing armies, which is a modern day concept, did not exist then. The feudal system that was in place at the time

consisted of the King, who owned all of the land and parceled out segments to his supporters who pledged their loyalty to him (Lamonte, 1949, p. 119). This left the nobles, barons as well as bishops who in return for their holdings provided the king with a determined number of knights and money, advice and locations to stay while traveling (Lamonte, 1949, p. 119). A further division in this system provided for the lords who in return for the king's favour provided a knight to the king, and were supplied manors to oversee their parcels of land that were divided among villeins who worked the land for the lord, as well as serfs who had no possessions and simply worked to survive (Lamonte, 1949, p. 119).

The preceding provides the basic structure of the feudal system that in essence rested on the villeins and serfs to derive wealth from the land to support the lord, and noblemen, who all in turn contributed to the king (Lamonte, 1949, p. 119). In order to raise an army, the nobles and lords had to marshal their own resources, along with the king, and contribute their own personal wealth to the venture, a sizeable undertaking. The Crusades were not a campaign whereby the Kings and nobles would receive wealth from participating, although there was wealth to be had, it represented a war to stem the tide of Islamic advance, with the Holy Lands as the eventual prize. Historically, the preceding holds up under scrutiny, as few kings and or nobles profited from the Crusades (Strayer, 1955, p. 160). Thus, after the decision came to the aid of Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus, the first Crusade began in 1095 (Chazan, 1996, p. 107). This first Crusade was ill fated as the Western army was not prepared and employed a poorly equipped, organised and led rabble of men that was headed by Peter the

Hermit and Walter the Penniless (Chazan, 1996, pp. 18-21). The second army was organised and successfully captured Jerusalem in 1099, with different armies departing from different locales, owing to the manner in which the indicated feudal system works, and the difficulties in massing a concerned army and staging points as is the case in modern warfare (Chazan, 1996, p. 67-69).

Conclusion

This study has set out to examine the various factors involved with the Crusades, delving deeper than traditional historical accounts to uncover the factors involved. In equating as to why the response to the Muslim takeover of the Holy Lands took so long, there are two parts to that query. One is represented by the three centuries from the Muslim conquest of the Holy Land in the 7th century, to Pope Urban II plea from the Byzantine Emperor, with the other represented by the time it took to marshal forces under the feudal system to mount campaigns.

The traditional view that most individuals have of the Crusades differs from the historical account shown herein, with the noteworthy fact that the Holy land represented and still does represent an important religious site for Arabs, Jews and Christians. The fact that the conquest of the Byzantine hold on the Holy Lands by the Muslims still permitted, although it was limited, pilgrimages by Jews and Christians, the West did not engage in retaking the land. This is important as the trumpeted call to recapture the Holy Lands in 1095 was in fact in response to a crumbling empire, as opposed to retaking the city itself, which however was held out as the torch to marshal the masses.

The second aspect of the Crusades, in terms of massing a response, had to do with the feudal system in place in Europe, and the complexities in organizing troops. The event was piecemeal at first, taking three years to bring together an effective force that eventually conquered the Holy land in 1099, fully five years after the Byzantine plea. Evidence of the futility of efforts is presented by the following account of the siege at Damascus in 1148 where Forey (1984) counters the claim that there was a payment made to end the siege, thus resulting in its failure. He states that military failure represented the cause (Forey, 1984). The importance of the preceding is that the siege at Damascus represented a significant event in that the massive collection of men, estimated as 50, 000, that participated in a four day siege in 1148 concluded in a decisive defeat that effectively ended the Second Crusade (Gabrieli, 1989, p. 56-59). Hillenbrand (1999, p. xlviii) tells us that the popular versions of the Crusades indicated Muslim victories occurred as a result of superior armies pitted against much smaller Crusader forces that had been further weakened by disease, or some other woe. He adds that almost all Muslim accomplishments are dismissed, demeaned, and or suppressed (Hillenbrand, 1999, p. xlviii). In providing evidence for his analysis, Hillenbrand (1999, p. xlviii) tells us about the 1260 Muslim victory at Ain Jalut 1999, p. xlviii), ‘ On 19 February 1258: the Mongols sacked Baghdad and killed the Abbasid Caliph, and on 3 September 1260, at the Battle of Ayn Jalut, the Mamluks defeated a depleted Mongol army.’ The point being raised is that in many instances, if not most, our vision and understanding of the Crusades have been distorted by what we have been taught as well as romantic accounts as brought forth in movies and other media.

The Arabs were a formidable foe, whose religion provided a basis for expanding their territory, and the recapture of land taken by the Greeks, and then the Romans. The limited wealth that the Holy Land generated did not make it a priority for Medieval Europe as it was for the Greeks and Romans, thus the Arab conquest in the seventh century was not viewed as a cause for a response. When the Byzantine Empire was under danger of collapse that represented a rallying point under religious reasons for the Crusades, which cannot be viewed as or called a triumph. The West's response was slow due to their economic system and diversity under the rule of Kings, whereas the Arab world was united under their religion. In hindsight, the later proved to be the more valuable foundation.

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