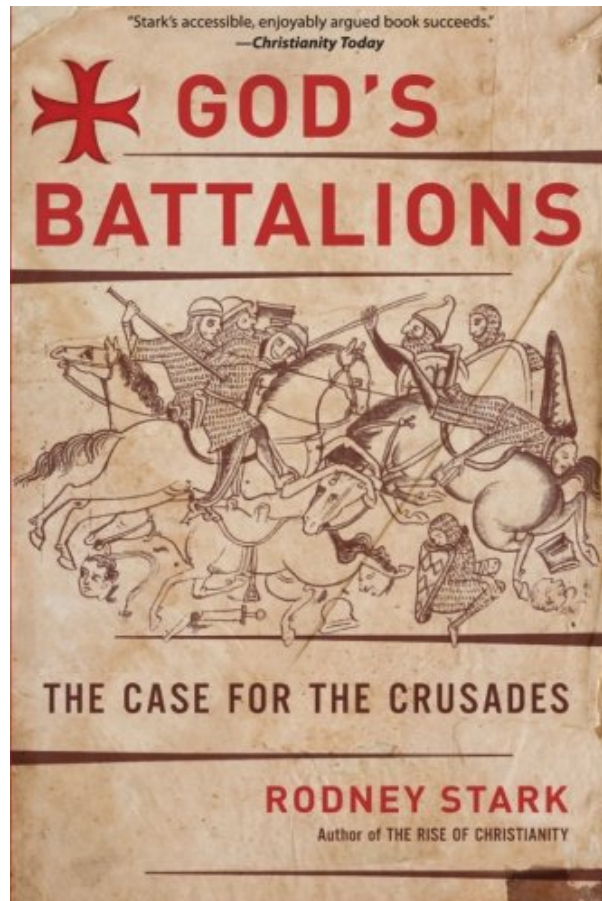


# GOD'S BATTALIONS: THE CASE FOR THE CRUSADES BY RODNEY STARK



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"Stark's accessible, enjoyably argued book succeeds."  
—*Christianity Today*

# **GOD'S BATTALIONS**



**THE CASE FOR THE CRUSADES**

**RODNEY STARK**

Author of *THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY*

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The truth about the Christian Crusades and Muslim Jihad.

- Sales Rank: #17893 in Books
- Brand: Stark, Rodney
- Published on: 2010-11-09
- Released on: 2010-11-09
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .65" w x 5.31" l, .49 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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A brilliant work by a noted historian of religion

By Bill Muehlenberg

Very few people have much good to say about the Crusades nowadays. Most think it was a terrible blight on Christian history, and cannot be condoned or justified in any way. Certainly during the past few centuries, Christianity has been attacked, and people have sought to discredit the faith, partly on the basis of the Crusades.

In such an atmosphere, this new book by Rodney Stark is as about as revolutionary as they come. He takes head on myth after myth surrounding the Crusades, and makes the case that the Crusades not only had a place, but were in fact in many ways justifiable. He clearly demonstrates that modern histories about the Crusades are among the great hatchet jobs of recent times.

Dispelling the many myths about the Crusades takes guts, and someone with the right intellectual and academic qualifications. Stark is certainly the man for the job: he has become one of our finest writers on the sociology and history of religion, and is unafraid to go against the tide.

In this important volume he debunks the historical revisionism (which is often coupled with anti-Christian bigotry) about the Crusades to offer us a more sober and clear picture of what in fact took place. He notes that it was especially during the time of the Enlightenment and onwards that critics claimed that the Crusaders were mainly Western imperialists, those who set out after land and loot.

Moreover, the contrast is often made between the bloodthirsty barbaric Christians, and the peace-loving Muslims. But as Stark persuasively documents, none of this is close to the truth. The real story is this: the Crusades were certainly provoked, and the Crusaders were mainly concerned to free the Holy Lands from Muslim oppression and to protect religious pilgrims who travelled there.

Indeed, to properly understand the Crusades, a lot of background information needs to be considered. That is why Stark spends the first hundred pages of his book looking at the 600-year period of Muslim conquests and dhimmitude.

The story of course begins in the seventh century when Muslim armies swept over the Middle East, North Africa, and southern Europe. One Christian land after another was attacked and conquered by advancing Muslim armies.

Stark reminds us that Muhammad told his followers, "I was ordered to fight all men until they say `There is no god but Allah.'" Therefore a century after his death vast swathes of territory hung under the bloody sword

of Islam.

And what of the conquered Christians living under Islamic rule? They, along with Jews, were known as dhimmis. While revisionist historians and Muslim apologists speak of Muslim tolerance here, the "truth about life under Muslim rule is quite different".

Indeed, the subject peoples had few options: death, enslavement or conversion were the only avenues open to them. Dhimmitude was no picnic. Death was the fate of anyone who dared to convert out of Islam. No churches or synagogues could be built. There was to be no public praying or reading of Scripture. They were at best treated as second-class citizens, and at worst, punished and killed.

And massacres of Jews and Christians were quite common in the centuries leading up to the Crusades. In 1032-1033 in Morocco alone, there were over six thousand Jews murdered. Jerusalem fell to the Muslims in 638. The Dome of the Rock was built from 685 to 691, and churches and synagogues were levelled in the ensuing centuries.

The condition of Christians in Jerusalem was pretty appalling during this period, as was the plight of penitent pilgrims seeking to enter Jerusalem. They suffered much persecution, and risked their lives simply to travel to the holy city. The destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - along with thousands of other Christian churches - under the bloody reign of Tariqu al-Hakim at the end of the first millennium simply served as the climax to all this misery and outrage.

It is in this light of six centuries of Islamic conquest, bloodshed and tyranny that the Crusades must be viewed. They were not always pretty, but life in general back then was not pretty. If Crusader excesses took place, this was just par for the course, as excesses by Muslims and others were more than commonplace.

As Stark reminds us, "Granted, it was a cruel and bloody age, but nothing is to be gained either in terms of moral insights or historical comprehension by anachronistically imposing the Geneva Convention on these times."

He looks at the various Crusades, dealing with the host of mythologies that have grown up around them. One is the fanciful depiction of Saladin as some gallant, humane Muslim resisting those bloodthirsty Christians. For example, when he re-conquered Jerusalem in 1187, the city was spared a massacre.

But the rules of warfare back then stipulated that cities would be spared if they were not forced to be taken by storm. So while bloodshed was limited, "half the city's Latin Christian residents were marched away to the slave markets".

And as Stark reminds us, Jerusalem was the exception to Saladin's normal style. Savage butchery of his enemies was his usual habit. Indeed, he had been looking forward to massacring the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but a compromise was struck which prevented this. But he had plenty of other opportunities to let the blood flow freely, often at his own hand.

Then there is the myth that the Crusades have been a longstanding grievance amongst Muslims. Not so argues Stark: "Muslim antagonism about the Crusades did not appear until about 1900, in reaction against the decline of the Ottoman Empire".

Christians today can well argue whether the Crusades were in fact warranted. But any such discussion about the pros and cons of the matter must be made under a clear understanding of what exactly transpired and

why. This book admirably serves that purpose, and must be the starting point for any future debates over the topic.

291 of 320 people found the following review helpful.

Compelling and passionate--will overturn all your beliefs about the Crusades

By Jeri

Dr Rodney Stark, who has written some of the most intelligent and readable books on religion in the last 20 years, has done it again. "God's Battalions" is an explosive retelling of the Crusades. And it will no doubt overturn the smug assumptions of many people.

Stark points out that the Crusades were not Christian wars of aggression. Pope Urban called for a Crusade because the emperor of Byzantium had written to him, begging for help. The letter "detailed gruesome tortures of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land and vile desecrations of churches, altars, and baptismal fonts" (p 2). Moreover, Islamic armies stood within one hundred miles of Constantinople.

Vast stretches of once Christian lands were now in Muslim hands. The entire of North Africa, once so solidly Christian it had produced a pope and boasted of 500 bishoprics, now lay under Islamic rule. Egypt was lost, save for some pockets of Coptic Christians. Much of the Middle East was lost. Now, Muslim armies seemed poised to attack a weak Byzantium, and after that, a fractious, divided Europe. The situation appeared dire.

This is the background that so many of the modern critics of the Crusades ignore.

But Stark doesn't merely overturn beliefs about the Crusades. He points out that "the many claims that the Arabs achieved far more sophisticated medicine than had previous cultures are as mistaken as those regarding 'Arabic' numerals" (p 60), which in fact were Hindu numerals. The medical knowledge came via Nestorian Christians. In fact, most of what was regarded as Arabic culture "originated with the conquered populations" (p 61). These conquered populations contained the libraries of thousands of monasteries, thousands of churches.

Stark also overturns the myth of the Dark Ages in Europe as well. About many modern historians on the topic of the Dark Ages, Stark says tartly, "Some of these claims are malicious, and all are astonishingly ignorant" (p 66).

As for all those who claim the knights went on Crusades for gold and glory, Stark argues instead that, instead, most of the men went as a way to do penance for sins, and, of course, to liberate the Holy Land.

Stark, a terrific writer, provides a thrilling, fast paced account of the Crusades. There have been other revisionist histories of the Crusades, but they were usually written by Catholics, and read primarily by Catholics. Stark, however, was described in a recent magazine article as an agnostic. This book should have broad appeal and change some deeply rooted prejudices.

84 of 90 people found the following review helpful.

A much needed corrective

By Jesse Rouse

The popular understanding of crusades history is that ignorant, intolerant, and over-aggressive Western Christians suddenly invaded the cultured, tolerant, and peaceful Muslim Near-East bent on killing everyone who wasn't a Christian. In this book, Rodney Stark sets out to refute every one of those assumptions. He argues that the crusades were not unprovoked, the Christian West was not a backwards culture, the Muslims were not more intellectually advanced or more tolerant, and the crusaders were no more brutal in their warfare than the Muslims that they were fighting. On most of these counts Stark makes a convincing case.

Stark begins his account where few crusades historians do: at the rise of Islam. I've read a great many books about the crusades (it's my field of study), and almost every single one begins either with the loss of Byzantine territory to Turkish Muslims in the second half 11th century or, even less helpfully, with the campaign of Pope Urban II just prior to the First Crusade. Stark notices this, and points out the very important fact that the Muslims attacked first, capturing the Holy Land, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily, and most of Spain from Christian control during the centuries prior to the First Crusade. The Crusaders were not simply trying to take territory from the Muslims, they were trying to take back territory the Muslims had taken from them by force during the great expansion of Islam in the early Middle Ages. It wasn't as if Christians suddenly decided to attack some innocent bystanders over in the Near East; the Near East had for centuries been Christian before bands of Islamic warriors took it by force from the Byzantine Empire. The West was further provoked by the recent (11th century) attacks on Christian pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem. They had been relative safe during the period when the Holy Land was controlled by Egypt, but when Turkish Muslims conquered it in the latter half of the 11th century they began killing Christians and disrupting the pilgrim route.

Stark then attacks the idea that Islamic culture in the Near East was significantly more advanced than Western Christian culture. He systematically goes through the major thinkers in Islamic culture who advanced learning, and nearly every one of them turns out to be either a Christian, Zoroastrian, Hindu, or Jew who happened to be living in territory ruled by Muslims. Even the most cherished Arabic discovery put forth to show the superiority of Islamic culture, Arabic numerals, was not Arabic at all, but Hindu, and was not even adopted among the Muslims except by its advanced mathematicians. The supposedly advanced Muslim medicine was actually the medicine of Nestorian Christians. The great feats of copying Greek philosophy and medicine were accomplished mostly by dhimmi, those living in the Islamic society who were not themselves Muslims. Almost everywhere in the Islamic empire, besides the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt, the vast majority of the population was not Muslim, but was simply ruled by a very small class made up of Muslims. Most of the academic accomplishments were done by the cultures over which a few Muslims happened to rule, not by Muslims themselves. And in the field of technology, Islamic culture lagged far behind the Christian West. Islamic fleets could not begin to compete with either Western fleets or Byzantine fleets. The reason the crusader army of only 20-40000 soldiers was able to come in and conquer the Holy Land from vastly larger Muslim forces was its significant technological superiority. The crossbow, plate armor, effective saddles, etc. allowed small groups of Western knights to demolish ill-equipped Muslim hordes. There is a reason the Muslims thought Christian knights were invincible before the disastrous Second Crusade showed that they could be stopped.

Also disproven is the popular notion that crusaders went East to gain wealth. It is (or at least was) common to hear that many who joined the crusades were families' younger sons, who had no prospects in the West. Instead, they turned their attention to the East in hopes of gaining loot and perhaps prestigious positions. Stark shows that it cost a great deal more than one could hope to gain just to equip oneself and make it to the Holy Land. It cost four to five times his annual income for a knight to go on a crusade; many people sold all that they had (including land) to fund their journey and bankrupted themselves before they even set out. The idea that people went East to gain money is absurd when one considers the cost of crusading.

Finally, Stark discusses the brutality of the crusaders. The most common example given to show that the crusaders were bloodthirsty brutes is the massacre following the capture of Jerusalem. The crusaders had besieged Jerusalem, which refused to surrender. When the crusaders finally breached the walls months later, after suffering heavy casualties due to starvation and attacks from the city walls, they slaughtered everyone inside. Stark points out, quite correctly, that this was, in fact, standard procedure in medieval warfare, both for Christians and Muslims. An invading army suffered serious casualties when it was forced to keep a lengthy siege and storm a city, and so the common practice was to massacre cities that held out against a

siege as an example to keep other cities from doing the same. If a city surrendered, however, the population was spared (of course, there were some out of control soldiers at times on both sides which sometimes broke this rule). It is ridiculous to compare the massacre at Jerusalem when the crusaders conquered it with the release of the citizens when Saladin reconquered for the Muslims a hundred years later; when the crusaders captured it Jerusalem had held out and cost the crusaders a great number of lives, and when Saladin captured it the Christians surrendered. Muslims were just as prone to massacre Christians, with the exception of Saladin, who was, from time to time, generous toward the crusaders (though he brutally massacred them too, from time to time). If one wishes to judge the crusaders by the modern conventions of warfare, then at least be consistent and judge the Muslims to have just as bad.

Most of the points Stark makes are very convincing, but much of it is not really new. You can find a refutation of the crusading-for-money theory in Jonathan Riley-Smith's *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*. An account of why the crusades were, at least in part, a reaction to Muslim conquests and persecution of Christian pilgrims can be found in the writings of Thomas Madden or, again, Riley-Smith. Even the defense of the massacre at Jerusalem can be found in the work of crusades historian John France. Stark, however, is the first author I have seen to realize the significance of all the separate points and put them all together in one volume, and some of what he said I had not encountered elsewhere. In all the reading I have done on the crusades I had never once seen a historian note the significance of the crossbow (and other technological superiorities besides armor) to the success of the crusades (even R. C. Smail's standard work, *Crusading Warfare*, failed to discuss crossbows), and the fact that the Muslims ruled over a largely non-Muslim population had escaped my notice. Stark puts together a very good case, but he tends to go too far in many places. Instead of being content with demonstrating that the crusaders were not culturally or morally inferior to the Muslims, he tries to justify everything the crusaders did and present them as wholesome warriors of God. While the crusaders have been unduly vilified, largely as a result of anti-Catholic propaganda during the Enlightenment, they were certainly not all holy warriors seeking first the kingdom of God. Many of them were ruthless, greedy, opportunistic exploiters. It is just as wrong to claim that they were all good as it is to claim that they were all evil. Stark has done much in this book to help us reach a more balanced appraisal of the crusades, but he has not quite achieved it himself.

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From Publishers Weekly

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“[Stark’s] new book, *God’s Battalions: The Case for the Crusades*, gives historic and sociological evidence for a fresh assessment of the Crusades.” (United Methodist Reporter)

“[Stark] wants to challenge the prevailing television pundit-level misunderstanding of the Crusades, and in this, his accessible, enjoyably argued book succeeds.” (Christianity Today)

“Award-winning author and sociologist Rodney Stark humbly goes to war against the many politically correct myths surrounding the history of the Crusades in this well-researched and easy-to-read academic masterpiece. Stark proves himself once again as a historical myth-buster.” (CBN.com, A+ rating)

“[Stark] makes the case [for the crusades] with admirable frankness and flair.” (The Catholic Thing)

“Rodney Stark turns what we ‘know’ about history on its head.” (Relevant Magazine)

“Stark’s style is clear and direct. He sets the pace of narrative masterfully...The result is a good read...Christian readers should welcome Stark’s affirmation of the best in scholarship, both old and new, and his willingness to argue a controversial position.” (Christian Scholar’s Review)

“Stark’s wonderfully readable prose and politically incorrect conclusions... point us to the question—Will 21st-century infiltration lead to surrender or revival?—on which Europe’s future hinges.” (The World Magazine)

“[God’s Battalions] rewards a careful reading, and not only because the story itself is so gripping, with tales of courage and desperation, outsized characters, and fate of cultures hanging in the balance. ...Masterful... sets the record straight.” (National Catholic Register)

“[God’s Battalions] avoid[s] the black-and-white nonsense of current secular thinkers, who condemn the Crusades as part of their condemnation of the Catholic Church and of much later Western imperialism. ...Stark demonstrate[s] a more sophisticated view of history, religion and culture.” (Catholic San Francisco)

“Stark’s clear, factual narrative offers larger-than-life characters.... [his] works are an encouraging corrective to the anti-Western history routinely taught in our schools.” (New Oxford Review)

“In God’s Battalions, Stark provides an account of the Crusades perfectly fitted for the Fox News audience. Clearly this is not the politically correct version of the Crusades, and that is fine: there is little that was politically correct about the Crusades in the first place.” (Christian Century)

“In God’s Battalions Princeton sociologist of religion Rodney Stark seeks to dispel myths about the medieval Crusades and replace them with a more factual account...The historiographic arguments made by Stark regarding the antecedents and consequences of the Crusades are very convincing.” (Jack Kilcrease, Historical Society of the Episcopal Church)

From the Back Cover

In God’s Battalions, award-winning author Rodney Stark takes on the long-held view that the Crusades were the first round of European colonialism, conducted for land, loot, and converts by barbarian Christians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. To the contrary, Stark argues that the Crusades were the first military response to unwarranted Muslim terrorist aggression.

Stark reviews the history of the seven major Crusades from 1095 to 1291, demonstrating that the Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocations, centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West, and sudden attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places. Although the Crusades were initiated by a plea from the pope, Stark argues that this had nothing to do with any elaborate design of the Christian world to convert all Muslims to Christianity by force of arms. Given current tensions in the Middle East and terrorist attacks around the world, Stark’s views are a thought-provoking contribution to our understanding and are sure to spark debate.

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