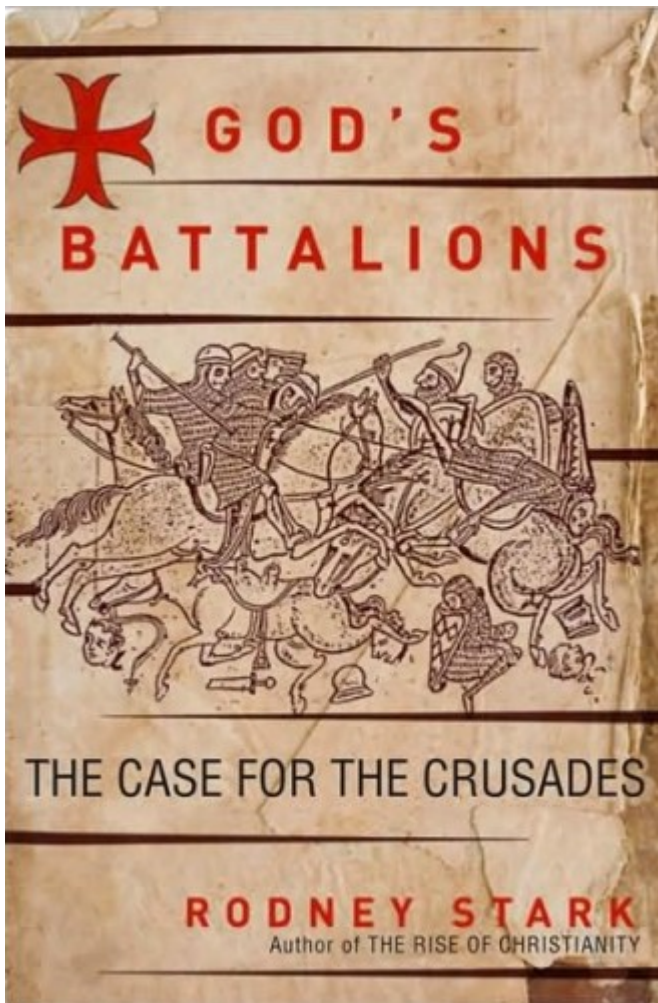


A review of God's Battalions and Fighting for the Cross

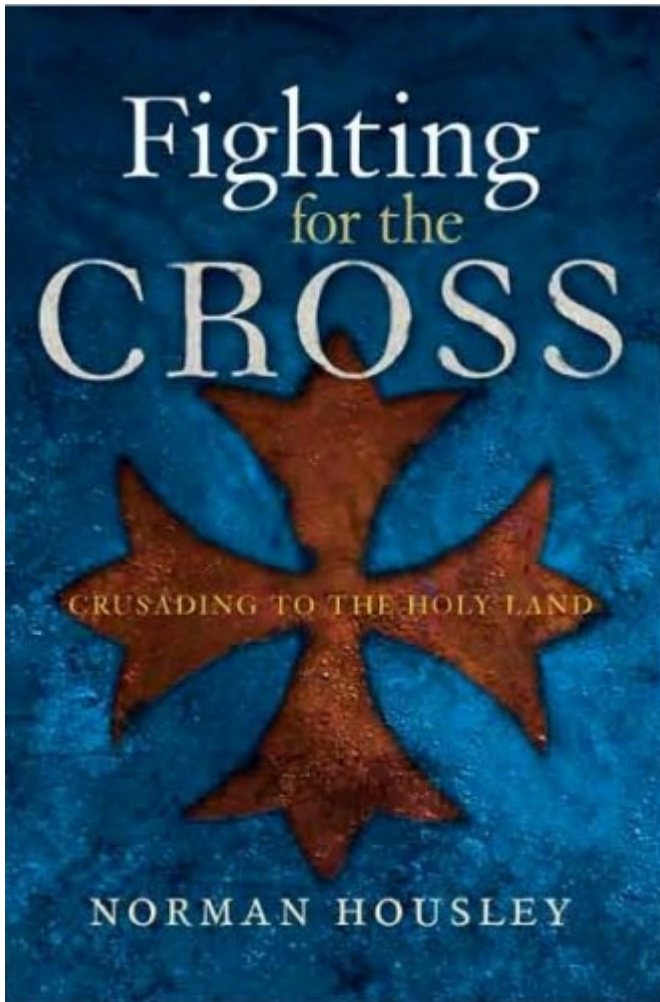
By [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

In Review



God's Battalions

Rodney Stark
HarperCollins



Fighting for the Cross

Norman Housley
Yale University Press

There was a time not long ago when Americans hurried home from work each evening to watch the news. For 30 minutes, they tuned in to the networks to learn what the president had done that day, to be updated on the latest global skirmish or natural disaster, and perhaps watch a human interest story and have a chuckle. Individuals might prefer the style of one particular anchor over another, and on occasion a network would scoop its rivals with an exclusive story, but the nightly news was strikingly similar from source to source and from station to station.

Today, *the* news no longer exists. One of the signature developments of the past decade has been the proliferation, compartmentalization and repackaging of information to fit the tastes of almost any consumer. News is not merely broadcast

24 hours a day. It is cast in radically different ways to appeal to distinct, targeted audiences. Conservative viewers tune in to Fox News for a confirmation of their judgments and perceptions, while liberals find a home—and a sympathetic spin on the events of the day—on MSNBC. The median age of a viewer of the *CBS Evening News* is now over 61, while 18-to-24-year-olds make Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* their preferred broadcast source for current events. A growing number of young people do not get their news from television at all (let alone from newspapers), but follow breaking events—from the death of Michael Jackson to the earthquake in Haiti—by reading firsthand accounts posted by everyday individuals on Facebook, Twitter and other electronic sites.

I couldn't help thinking of this seismic shift as I read two of the latest books on the Crusades, Rodney Stark's *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* and Norman Housley's *Fighting for the Cross: Crusading to the Holy Land*. There clearly has been a marked rise of interest in the Crusades since the start of the present war in Iraq—an interest spurred at least in part by President George W. Bush's talk of an American crusade against terror in the days following the 9/11 attacks. Up to this point, the renaissance in publications about the Crusades largely has been limited to works that fit squarely within traditional historical scholarship. Christopher Tyerman's thousand-page history of the crusading period, *God's War*, and Thomas Asbridge's *The First Crusade: A New History* are just two examples. Stark and Housley, on the other hand, provide Crusades volumes for an age in which information is targeted to distinct and splintered interest groups.

In *God's Battalions*, Stark provides an account of the Crusades perfectly fitted for the Fox News audience. If the book's subtitle—*A Defense of the Crusades*—does not tell the reader that something is afoot, the chapter titles will: "Pilgrimage and Persecution," "Muslim Invaders," "Christendom Strikes Back." For most of the past 30 years, historians of the Crusades have worked to correct what they perceived to be a fundamental flaw in Western understanding of the period. Many of the accounts circulated in the West since medieval times had been written from an overtly Christian, even apologetic, perspective. Muslims were portrayed as a backward and bloodthirsty people who killed Christian women and children; the crusaders were noble and valiant protectors of the Holy Land and defenders of the one true God. Contemporary historians have labored so furiously to correct this understanding that most Christians now believe, according to Stark, that "during the Crusades, an expansionist, imperialistic Christendom brutalized, looted, and colonized a tolerant

and peaceful Islam."

Stark's response to this new consensus is direct and unqualified: "Not so." It is not that Stark believes that after centuries of anti-Muslim accounts, the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. He believes that the pendulum never should have moved in the first place. In summarizing his own position, he writes: "The Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocation, by centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West and by sudden new attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places."

To historians who have worked to combat the view that Islamic culture at the time of the Crusades was backward and barbaric and who have extolled Arabic architecture, art and technology, Stark responds: "The belief that once upon a time Muslim culture was superior to that of Europe is an illusion." In fact, the greatest achievements of the Arab world represented "the culture of a conquered people," with many of the great ideas lifted from "the Judeo-Christian-Greek culture of Byzantium," among other sources. To those who laud the great Muslim libraries of the day as evidence of Islam's respect for learning, Stark cites the sacking of Alexandria by the Muslim caliph Umar, who is said to have brought thousands of scrolls from the library at Alexandria back to his native Damascus to be burned as fuel in the city baths.

Most pointedly, for Stark, "the crusaders were not barbarians who victimized the cultivated Muslims." They were devout Christians who, while admittedly not following the modern rules of war, often acted with faith, nobility and justification. In contrast, he calls claims of Muslim tolerance "nonsense" and the idea that the Qur'an forbids forced conversions "empty legalism."

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. The difficulty I have with Stark's account is not that it is controversial and even confrontational, but that his conclusions are often grounded in outdated historical sources—many of the same sources responsible for creating the portrayal of backward, barbaric Muslims in the first place.

Stark concedes that his book is not based on his own exploration of the primary sources. He writes: "Many superb historians have devoted their careers to studying aspects of the Crusades. I am not one of them." Instead, he describes himself a

synthesizer of existing research. The curious thing is that much of the research he uses to refute the historical accounts of the past generation is itself over 30 years old. Does *God's Battalions*, then, prove that the accounts of contemporary historians are wrong, or does it merely revisit and resurrect the scholarly accounts that gave rise to contemporary Crusades historiography in the first place?

If Stark's book is a version of the Crusades for the Fox News audience, then Housley's *Fighting for the Cross* presents the Crusades for the Facebook generation. It's not that Housley's scholarship is anything less than impeccable. What makes his account distinctive and compellingly contemporary is that Housley, a professor of history at the University of Leicester, has unearthed dozens of fascinating primary sources that are being used here for the first time—long-ignored firsthand accounts from the range of participants in the Crusades. Using letters, diaries, songs and poems—most of them written at the time of the Crusades—as well as traditional historical sources, Housley attempts to portray what it was really like to be a crusader.

Through these firsthand accounts, we glimpse evidence of the devout Christian fervor that motivated many of the crusaders (and about which Stark writes forcefully). Bohemond of Taranto, for instance, upon hearing accounts of the crusaders' war cry, "God's will, God's will, God's will," became so inspired by the Holy Ghost that he ordered that his most valuable cloak be cut into crosses to adorn the crusaders' tunics, and then he joined them in battle. We also see ugly excesses, including crusaders killing European Jews in 1096, saying: "You are the descendants of those who killed our deity and crucified him." And we hear the guilt and remorse of some of those involved in such excesses: "The enormity of our evil deeds and the vast number of our crimes were compelling the vengeance of divine decision."

We learn of the foul conditions that typified life on the ships that took many crusaders to and from the Holy Land. One traveler described the "sudden change of air, the stink of the sea, tasteless and rough food, fetid and polluted water, crowded people, limited space, hard beds and the rest, causing all kinds of sickness."

Perhaps less expectedly, we also see the crusaders as authors of exotic travelogues, with their testimonials exposing Europeans back home to tales of wildlife, plants and human culture that were beyond imagination. Fulcher of Chartres, a veteran of the First Crusade, emerged as an astute naturalist. He recorded an account of locusts in 1117 ("You could see them advance like an army of men in good order as if they

previously arranged it in council"), described Nile hippopotamuses, and recounted how he discovered with wonderment that the bite of one poisonous snake could be cured with an antidote made from the animal's own body. At a time when London's population hovered around 20,000, the crusaders were astonished when they got their first sight of the city of Constantinople, with a population of several hundred thousand.

Housley traces the major events of the Crusades chronologically through such firsthand testimonials, giving us a deeper appreciation not merely of the Crusades but of the ways in which our understanding of any historical event is shaped by the unique perspective of each observer. Just as Muslims at first saw nothing distinctive about the Crusades—the encounters seemed to them to be just more in a long line of violent skirmishes with Christians from the north—so too the crusaders reported events in ways both more vivid and more mundane than those eventually captured in most history books.

Fighting for the Cross is not a full-fledged people's history. Many of the participants in the Crusades were too poor or too illiterate to leave behind diaries and letters; countless others died before their stories could be captured. Yet one cannot help but feel that one has a better understanding of the Crusades after reading through the firsthand accounts that have survived—accounts of triumph and anguish, bravery and weakness, and a great deal of genuine human confusion.

Housley warns us that in the recounting of the events of the Crusades, accuracy and consistency are "vain hopes." By its very nature, human recollection serves a host of functions "including commemoration, exhortation, didacticism, and entertainment." What we can seek from our historical sources—and from history—is not *the* truth about what happened because such does not exist. Rather, we can hope to find a better and fuller understanding of events that always can be and will be seen in a multitude of ways.

Perhaps this is the most important lesson we learn from Rodney Stark's and Norman Housley's latest contributions to Crusades literature: there is a richness and complexity to these events that defies capture by any single account. Perhaps this is also a reason, in our own time, to embrace rather than lament the explosion of disparate voices that contribute to our understanding of world events. Perhaps it is time to celebrate the demise of the evening news.