

Kerak, The Crusades, and a Revelation

It is my third day in Jordan. We have had bright sunny days, cobalt blue cloudless skies, and short-sleeve shirt temperatures. Today low, scurrying black clouds obliterated the morning sky as we drive into the center of Kerak, a small city in the west-central part of the country near the Jordan River. An obscenely large crusader castle, high on a promontory, dominates the town below. The sheer vertical distance from the street to the top of the castle walls is about 300 feet, clearly a defensive consideration by the ancient architects. Salah Khfeifat, our Bedouin guide, heads us towards the castle's massive wooden gate as wind-driven, bone-chilling raindrops arrive. I wonder if it snows here... in May.

I expected to see tour buses and guides hustling large groups through the castle gates. The streets are almost empty. Salah explains " It's not just the weather. Tourism is a major industry for Jordan and it is down by 70 or 80 percent." Jordan is feeling the effects of the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian struggle but has been relatively free of conflict itself. I am one of a group of nine photographers traveling in Jordan Our trip was delayed a year by security concerns. Every night we watch CNN, BBC, and local Arab TV broadcasts of the day's Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We note that Arab TV contains more violence and desolation than do the other networks. We never sense personal danger.

The castle resembles a euphonium partly because of the shape of the land upon which it sits. Near the wider top of the horn is the current entrance adjacent to a small museum. The castle walls are suffering from neglect and weathering. Loose stones lie where they have fallen. Repaired sections are easily identified by the lighter colored stones. I am amazed at the quality and quantity of restorations given the scarcity of money in Jordan. Salah, a few inches shy of six feet tall, is a handsome, dark haired, dark complected, mid-40 year old Bedouin and Jordanian man. He has a B.S. degree from Jordan University in anthropology and history and is a licensed free-lance tour guide. His family for centuries were Bedouin nomads now living in a permanent village, as do most Bedouins today. I ask why he wore western and not traditional clothing. He runs his hand over close-cropped black hair and replied that tourists too often asked him to pose for photographs, interfering with his duties as group leader. Contrary to tribal customs, he was married to Italian women for about five years. After the separation he talked to his mother and sisters about what he would like in a wife. According to tribal customs they, over a year, consulted with the other female members of the family, investigated several families with eligible daughters, and soon identified a prospective bride. Her family also investigated Salaha's background. They got married and today she is working on a Ph.D. in molecular biology at Jordan University

As we wander the twilight zoned tunnel-like cavernous interior of the castle we stop at what the guidebook labels as the chapel. There is nothing to positively identify it as such. It looks like just another ruins. Further along, almost Alfred Hitchcockish, is the dark dank, multiple celled dungeon with iron rings and shackles. It was here that Salah tells us more about the castle.

" Around 1136 Payen the Cupbearer, built the castle under the instruction of Baldwin 1st, the monarch of Jerusalem. When Baldwin the 3rd died, the heir to the throne, was only thirteen, and too young to rule a kingdom. Therefore, he allowed a regent to do the work on his behalf. Soon the regent died, with no successor. A woman named Stephanie assumed that role. Soon a nobleman named Reynaud de Chatillon, who had come to the Holy Land on the 2nd crusade, rushed to the site where he wed Stephanie who had become the most powerful and wealthiest dowager in the Holy Land. Reynaud was barbaric. and hated by all Muslims. One of his favorite pastimes was tossing prisoners off the top of the castle wall. To make it more interesting he invented a device to protract the head to so that death was slow."

We finish our visit of the castle by slowly and carefully climbing, sometimes on hands and knees, to the uppermost parapets for a view of the valley stretching to the horizon far away to the east. Breathing laboriously from exertion, I think that the view justifies the effort even in the almost horizontal rain, on slippery rocks and loose gravel. Sipping hot tea in the warmth of a small tourist hotel a few meters from the castle gate several of us are sprawled around a table in the almost empty cafe. As we wait for lunch Salah tells us about the crusaders. "...they came as invaders." He says. "They built a line of castles from Turkey to here to control trading."

Trading is not an objective that I remembered from high school where I was exposed to the crusades. "Wasn't it in the 11th century that Pope Gregory called Western European Christians to go to the East and assist their Christian brothers against the attacks of the Muslim Turks? Wasn't the liberation of Jerusalem a major objective of at least one of the seven crusades? Didn't the Pope say something like God wills it and would lead them?" " What you say is true. But we are taught in school that it wasn't for religion or a holy war. The crusades were about holy visions, unholy alliances, promises made with fingers crossed, sieges and slaughters. It was an economic war that used religion."

Azzam Alshwiki, the hotel owner joins us. He is resplendently attired in traditional Arab dress from the black Agal atop his head to the soft sandals on his feet. I can not guess his age but his dark face has hundreds of miles of wrinkles. He ascribes to dark sunglasses. I never see his eyes. He agrees with Salah and adds philosophically " The Crusaders came as invaders. The Romans came as invaders. The big powers always are interested in their own interests." He pauses to light a cigarette. " Muslims are not the only ones who suffered at the hands of the crusaders. My friends in Israel say the Crusades started with the killing of Jews in Germany" I suddenly remember a conversation with our guide in Lalibela, Ethiopia a year ago telling about the crusades and the thousands of Eastern Orthodox Christians who were killed.

"You remember our conversation yesterday morning in the Palestinian refuge camp in Amman? " asks Salaha. "When I told you about the Arabs strong negative reaction to Mr. Bush calling the American incursion into Afghanistan a crusade against terrorism? Our ancestors lived here and considered the crusaders vicious usurpers. That view persists today. The crusades are a very emotional issue. It plays an important role in our thinking and reacting to the rest of the world."

I am reading Karen Armstrong's Holy War while traveling in Jordan. She contends that the Crusades are the source of today's Middle East conflicts. I don't know if that is true or not. Like most travelers to Jordan I arrive focused on Petra and Wadi Rum. But I leave with something more important than photographs. I begin to understand the importance to the Arabs of ancient history, such as the Crusades, and the role that plays in defining their culture.