

5.16 Islamic Perspective on the Crusades

Instructions: Read and act out this play and then answer questions 1 – 4.

Introduction: This play opens in the 620th year of the Hegira, or as those in Christendom might say, the year 1223 AD. The dialogue takes place in the palace of the Sultan in the city of Cairo, Egypt. All around the Mediterranean world – in Spain, North Africa, Palestine, Syria, and throughout Christendom - warfare had been raging for centuries. Christians killing Christians, Muslims killing Muslims, Muslims killing Christians, Christians killing Muslims and Jews, and lately, a new and violent power had arrived from the east, the Mongols. So much murder, and most of it carried out in the name of Allah, or God! In the Muslim world, the wars of Christians against Muslims is called al-Hurab al-Salibiyya, or the “Wars of the Cross.” Christendom came to refer to them as the Crusades.

The Palace of the Sultan

Narrator: It is the 21st day of the moon Sefer, in the year of the Hegira 647 (1249 AD). The Sultan, surrounded by advisors, has just received a letter from King Louis. He bids an advisor translate the letter aloud.

Sultan: Let me hear the words of this heathen king. Read.

Advisor 1: This is what the French King writes, Your Highness: “You are not ignorant that I am the prince of those who follow the religion of Jesus CHRIST, as you are of those who obey the laws of Muhammad. Your power inspires me with no fear. How should it? I who make the Muslims in Spain tremble! I lead them as a shepherd does a flock of sheep. I have made the bravest among them perish, and loaded their women and children with chains. They endeavor by presents to appease me, and turn my arms to another quarter. The soldiers who march under my standards cover the plains, and my cavalry is not less redoubtable [impressive]. You have but one method to avoid the tempest that threatens you. Receive priests, who will teach you the Christian religion, embrace it, and adore the Cross; otherwise, I will pursue you everywhere, and God shall decide whether you or I be master of Egypt.”

Sultan: This troubles me greatly. How sad! How sad! This man, this Christian, is bent on our destruction. What should I do? What say you all?

Advisor 2: Your Highness, we are in great danger. We must not underestimate our enemies. They have come with many ships, and many thousands of mounted soldiers. Already our army is fleeing from Damietta!

Advisor 3: Do not fear, your Highness! Our forces shall regroup, and we shall defeat the infidels. We are fighting to defend our homeland, and we must not forget that the enemy is far from their homes, far from any hope of re-supply!

Sultan: It is so! Let me respond to this King Louis. Write this as I say it: In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful, salvation to our prophet Muhammad and his friends! I have received your letter: it is filled with menaces, and you make a boast of the great number of your soldiers. Are you ignorant that we know the use of arms, and that we inherit the valor of our ancestors? No one has ever attacked us without feeling our superiority. Recollect the conquests we have made from the Christians; we have driven them from the lands they possessed; their strongest towns have fallen under our blows. Recall to your mind that passage of the Qu’ran that says, ‘Those who make war unjustly shall perish’; and also another passage, ‘How often have the most numerous armies been destroyed by a handful of soldiers’! Allah protects the just, and we have no doubt of his protection, nor that he will confound your arrogant designs.

Questions

1. What does the King of France demand in his letter to the Sultan?
2. What does the Sultan respond to King Louis?
3. Why is the Sultan so confident?
4. In your opinion, should people or nations go to war to advance their religious beliefs? Explain.