

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 67  
Christianity In The Crusader States.

Hello again. Last week we completed our look at the events of the Third Crusade. This week we are moving outside the chronology and plugging one of two gaps that I've failed to fill so far on our journey through the narrative. The gap we will fill in this episode involves taking a closer look at non-Latin Christianity in the Crusader states.

The history of the Crusades is essentially a clash between two great religions, Islam and Christianity, with Christianity in the conflict being represented by the Latin Christians, who came predominantly from Europe and had the Pope in Rome as the head of the Church. We've touched lightly on Greek Orthodox Christianity, which has for the head of its Church the Patriarch in Constantinople, but I've utterly failed to mention that there are other forms of Christianity being practiced in the Middle East at the time of the Crusades. Who were these other Christians? How did they fare during the Crusades? Where are they now? We're about to find out.

Just one quick word before we begin, in the form of a disclaimer. This is only one 30-minute episode, and there is no way, in the short time I have available that I can do proper justice to all the different forms of Christianity in the Middle East, and the troubles they experienced up to the time of the Crusades and until today. It would take an entire podcast series to do that. I know there are some Orthodox Christians who listen to this podcast, and there are also some listeners from the Middle Eastern Christian religions, and I just want to apologize to you if I seem to be glossing over your beliefs and the troubles your religion has experienced to date. Right, okay, let's begin.

Now, the Middle East, of course, is the birthplace of the three great Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the region contains holy sites central to the three faiths. Jerusalem is a city proclaimed as holy for each of the religions, a fact that has caused conflict over the centuries and continues to be a source of unrest today. Even before the advent of Christianity and Islam there was conflict. The Jewish people were subjected to exile and persecution during times of antiquity, at the hands of many people. These ranged from the Persians, people of the Zoroastrian belief who were based roughly in the area of modern day Iran, who forced the Jewish people out of Jerusalem and into exile in the city of Babylon; to the pagan Romans who, tired of the constant unrest caused by the Jews trying to overcome their Roman occupiers, not only drove them all out of Jerusalem, but did their best to destroy Jerusalem itself, dismantling its religious sites and renaming it in the first century AD.

Christianity had its roots in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who was crucified by the Romans during the troubled years of unrest in Jerusalem. After a slow start, the form of Judaism preached by Jesus of Nazareth during his lifetime spread and extended until eventually it split from Judaism altogether and formed itself into a new religion, Christianity. Christianity got a major break on its way to becoming a significant religion when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great openly supported the religion, and converted to Christianity during the fourth century AD. The vast pagan Roman empire, which stretched from northern Africa across the Middle East and through Europe to England, gradually became Christianized, and Bishops were appointed in each of the major Roman cities, from Rome to Constantinople to Antioch and Alexandria. The Bishops provided an

administrative base for the Church in their region, and were able to advise on matters of theology. It's not surprising that over time the different Bishops formed their own views on matters of theological doctrine, which often clashed with the views of Bishops and Christians in the other regions. And so over time each region developed its own version of Christianity, and of course, each of the regions believed that their version of faith was more true and more correct than the others.

The large and unwieldy Roman Empire split into two after the death of the Emperor Theodosius in 395 AD, with the eastern half being ruled from Constantinople and the western half being administered from Rome. Not long after this, the west fell into decline and eventually collapsed altogether. The Papacy survived, and the Roman Church kept its administrative base in Rome, providing support and guidance to the remnants of the crumbling empire.

Greek-speaking and culturally distinct from the west, the eastern Roman Empire, which later became known as the Byzantine Empire, survived for another 1,000 or so years, with the Christians within its vast territory being headed by the Patriarch in Constantinople.

Now, I've mentioned that the heads of the Churches in the different regions developed different interpretations of the Christian faith. One of the most divisive debates in the early church concerned the nature of Christ. Was he human or divine, or was he both at the same time? The Eastern churches tended towards the theory of the Monophysite, which decreed that Christ had only one nature, with the human nature being absorbed into the divine. The Roman Church held a different view, that both natures, the human and the divine, were present within Christ. A council was called in Chalcedon in 451 AD, to determine the question once and for all. The Papal delegates prevailed, and Monophysism, was condemned. This led to the main proponents of the Monophysite theory, the Copts of Egypt, the Nestorians, the Syrians, the Armenians and the Georgians, breaking away from the Roman Church and forging their own path, and it is these Monophysites, these Christian religions based in the Middle East, to whom this episode is dedicated.

By the time of the Crusades, eastern Christians had been living and practicing their faith in the Middle East for 1,000 or so years. They had survived both the Persian invasion and the rise of Islam in the 600s, and had preserved their faith and practices under various rulers, from the Byzantine Emperor to the Islamic state of the all-conquering Arabs.

Fortunately for the Christians, the proponents of the Muslim faith were generally tolerant of the Christians and Jews living within their territory. To the Latin Christians, these Middle Eastern Christians were a strange, exotic people. Generally speaking Greek, Syriac or Arabic, the churches and the monasteries of the eastern Christians were markedly different to those in the west. For one thing, the liturgy was not celebrated in Latin and was accompanied by the use of incense and perfumes.

So how did these Middle Eastern Christians fare during the period of Latin Christian rule in the Holy Land? Well, the Latin Christian conquest of the major cities of Edessa, Antioch and Tripoli was accompanied by massacres, and the expulsion of the local population. The conquering Crusaders often didn't distinguish between the local Muslims, Christians and Jews, because to these early invaders they all looked alike. They all dressed in the garb of the Middle East and spoken languages that the Crusaders didn't understand. So some of the native Middle Eastern Christians were killed or displaced when the Crusaders

conquered the cities, but many of them remained in the countryside and in the smaller urban centers.

According to Joshua Prawer in his book "The World of the Crusaders", the local Christian population in the Crusader states could be broken down as follows. The County of Edessa jutted out into Muslim territory and covered the area between the upper Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Its geographical location meant that it only fell within the reach of the Byzantine Empire when it was at its peak. From the seventh century onwards it was ruled not by Christians by a succession of non-Christians: the Persians; the Arabs; and the Seljuk Turks. Despite this, the majority of the population of the County of Edessa were Christian. Armenians and Jacobites made up the bulk of the native Christian population but there were also Syrian Christians, Nestorians, and other small Christian communities. The County also housed a small Muslim population, but they were definitely in the minority. With only small communities living in the cities and countryside.

The Armenians seemed to fare particularly well under Latin Christian rule. Armenia had been the first nation in the world to convert to Christianity, doing so in the third century AD. Since that time, the Armenians had been used to keeping their heads down, so to speak, and had suffered persecution under various rulers. The Muslims had largely left them to their own devices, but early on, when they fell under the rule of the Byzantine Empire, they were often persecuted as heretics, due to their adherence to the outlawed Monophysite beliefs.

When the Latin Christians first arrived in what was later to become the County of Edessa, the city of Edessa was ruled by King Thoros, the King of the Armenians. He had managed to defend his city against successive waves of Seljuk Turks, all without the assistance of the Byzantine Empire. He initially welcomed the arrival of Baldwin of Boulogne and his Latin Christian knights and soldiers, believing he could use them as mercenaries in his battles against the Seljuk Turks. But as we all know, King Thoros was overthrown and killed in mysterious circumstances, while Baldwin, whom he had named as his adoptive son, was present in the palace. Baldwin then became ruler of both the city of Edessa and the region surrounding the city, proclaiming himself Count Baldwin and naming his newly-formed Latin Christian territory the County of Edessa.

Count Baldwin was generally on friendly terms with his Armenian subjects. He valued their skills as fighters, and he employed Armenians in administrative roles. However, as more and more Latin Christians came to live in Edessa, the influence of the Armenians gradually declined, as those in administrative roles found themselves replaced by Latin Christians, their estates in the countryside were handed over to new Latin Christian owners, and the wealthy Armenians found themselves paying high taxes. Despite this, the Armenians remained influential in the politics of the Crusader states. Count Baldwin, who later became King Baldwin I, married an Armenian Princess, as did his successor King Baldwin II. King Baldwin II's Armenian Queen, Queen Morphia, bore him four daughters, Melisende, Alice, Hodiernia and Joverta, and Armenian blood would flow through the future royal family of Jerusalem.

Adjacent to the County of Edessa was the Principality of Antioch. While it's difficult to know whether the majority of the people living in this Principality at the time of the Crusades were Muslim or Christian, it is generally assumed that Christians made up the majority. There were three main groups of Christians in Antioch: those belonging to the Byzantine

Church; adherents of the Syrian Church, where the liturgy was in Greek but whose members spoke Arabic; and the Jacobites.

The Jacobites were Monophysites, and their faith was named after its founder, Jacob Baradaeus. Jacobites were present in every Crusader state, but were most numerous to the north, and their Patriarch was based in Antioch. Their staunch anti-Byzantine outlook pleased the Latin Christians, and they continued to operate their churches and monasteries under Latin Christian rule.

Further south, in the County of Tripoli, most of the native population were Muslim, and everyone spoke Arabic. While there were some Jacobites and other Middle Eastern Christians living in the County, by far the most distinctive group in this part of the Holy Land were the Maronites. The Maronites were Monothelites, as distinct from Monophysites, and believed that Christ only had a single nature, the divine. They viewed the Byzantine Church as being hostile to their faith, and sought refuge from the Byzantine Empire in the mountains and valleys of Lebanon, where they farmed the land and apparently developed a talent for archery. The Maronites were much taken with their new southern French Latin Christian rulers, and the two groups enjoyed a cordial relationship. In fact, the Maronites, in a major and unexpected move, brought themselves under the auspice of the Roman Catholic Church in 1184, maintaining their identity as Maronites but rejecting Monothelitism, and recognizing the Pope in Rome as the head of their Church. It's safe to say that of all the Middle Eastern Christians, the Maronites were closest to their Latin Christian rulers, and more open to European influence than any of the other sects.

And French influence in the region that was known during the Crusades as the County of Tripoli still has echoes today. In the 20th century, after the First World War, in 1923 to be exact, France was instrumental in creating a mandate over the area occupied by the Maronites, which they named "The Lebanon". Lebanon gained its independence from France in 1943, during the chaos of World War Two. Its constitution did its best to represent the interests of all the different groups living in the country. Religious tensions within the new country simmered along under the surface, before erupting in a devastating civil war which began in 1975 and ended in 1990. As a result of the war, around one quarter of a million Lebanese, Christians included, emigrated from the country, and troubles in Lebanon continue to this day.

Within the Kingdom of Jerusalem to the south, the population was more varied. The Kingdom contained most of the cities considered holy across the Christian faiths, as well as the city of Jerusalem itself, a city not only considered holy to Christianity but to those of the Jewish and Muslim faiths as well. Within Jerusalem, the Armenians had their own quarter, while the Jacobites maintained their own churches, along with other Middle Eastern Christians whose homelands fell outside the Crusader states: the Georgians; the Coptic Christians from Egypt; and the Ethiopians. Across the Kingdom of Jerusalem the common language spoken amongst its native inhabitants was Arabic, and while there was a strong Christian presence in the cities and around the holy sites, the rural population was predominantly Muslim.

So, in a nutshell, that is a breakdown of the various native Christian populations in the Crusader states at the time of the Crusades. What happened to these non-Latin Christians? Do they still live in the region today? Well, the answer to this question is rather tragic.

Firstly, let's look at the Armenians. As I stated previously, they were adept at keeping their heads down and preserving their faith despite living under foreign rule. They managed to do so successfully until 1915, where perhaps a million and a half Armenians were killed at the hands of the Young Turks. Many survivors of this genocide or massacre took refuge in the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem, and the Armenian quarter in Jerusalem is still home to the remnants of the exiled Armenians today, with around half the population of the Armenian quarter identifying themselves as Armenian.

Like the Armenians, many other native Christians have taken refuge in Jerusalem to escape the troubles in their traditional homelands. However, even in the Holy City, their numbers are in steep decline. In 1922 52% of the population of the Old City of Jerusalem had been Christian. By 2009 that had fallen to just 2%, and apparently there are now more Jerusalem-born Christians living in Sydney in Australia than in Jerusalem itself. The massacre of the Armenians, along with other troubles in the region during the first part of the 20th century, meant that the Christian population in Anatolia, which is currently in Turkey, declined from around four million at the start of the 20th century to only a few thousand today. The situation in Anatolia is at the extreme end of the equation, but generally the population of Christians today in the territory which once formed the Crusader states, is minuscule.

Back in the 600s AD, a monk called John Moschos decided to take a tour around the eastern Mediterranean, staying in monasteries and checking up on the local Christian populations. At the time, the Byzantine Empire was in decline, yet John Moschos just was able to describe the region as a flowering meadow of Christianity. He published a book of his travels, which became a 7th century bestseller. Nearly 1500 years later, during the 1990s, the travel writer William Dalrymple retraced John Moschos' journey, traveling through Greece, through Turkey, to what was once the city of Edessa, and then down to Antakya, formerly Antioch, through Lebanon and Israel, and staying wherever he could in the same monasteries as John Moschos, and talking to the local Christian inhabitants about their experiences and their fears for the future. Like John Moschos, he turned the diary of his travels into a book, the wonderful "From the Holy Mountain".

At the conclusion of his book, William Dalrymple expressed concerns about the very survival of Christianity in the Middle East. He stated, and I quote, "Christianity is an Eastern religion which grew firmly rooted in the intellectual ferment of the Middle East. John Moschos saw that plant begin to wither in the hot winds of change that scoured the Levant of his day. On my journey in his footsteps, I have seen the very last stalks in the process of being uprooted. It has been a continuous process lasting nearly one and a half millennia. Moschos saw its beginnings. I have seen the beginning of its end." End of quote.

William Dalrymple was right to be concerned. The unrest which has spread across the Middle East in recent times, has seen a mass exodus of the local Christian population. While Muslims and Jewish people in the region have also suffered persecution due to their religion, the rise of Muslim extremism has seen Christians increasingly targeted. In an article for "The Independent" in January 2014 entitled "The War on Christianity", Peter Popham questions whether Christianity will actually survive as a presence in the Middle East. Recently, Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, pointed out that there is a smaller proportion of Christians in the Middle East than in any other part of the world, just 4% at the moment and falling rapidly.

Some recent examples of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East are as follows. In Egypt recently, some supporters of the deposed President Morsi took revenge on the local Coptic Christians, blaming them for his downfall. Christian churches were burnt and the 1600 year old Monastery of the Virgin Mary and St Abram was looted. Thousands of Christians were forced to flee. In Iraq on Christmas Day 2013, 24 people were killed when a bomb exploded outside a church in southern Baghdad as worshipers were leaving at the end of the service. Prior to the Iraq war, there were 1.4 million Christians living in Iraq. Today, the number has fallen to around 300,000.

Even the strongest Christian presence in the region, the Greek Orthodox Church, has taken a massive hit. Affected by the events of the Fourth Crusade, which we will be dealing with shortly, and then by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire, there was still a sizable Greek Orthodox presence in Istanbul in the early 20th century, with an estimated population of 300,000 in 1924. In 1955 there was a pogrom against the Greek Orthodox population within the city. For two days, Christians were killed, and many of the ancient Byzantine churches within the city were looted and burnt, with the Turkish government doing little to intervene. Today, the Greek Orthodox population of Istanbul, once the great Greek Orthodox center of Constantinople, possibly amounts to less than 2,000 people.

As I've stated before, the Christians certainly don't have a monopoly on being persecuted for their religion in the Middle East, but due to the unrest and violence in the region, and the fact that many Christians have moved out of the region to escape the troubles, there is a distinct possibility that at sometime in the future there may be no Christians living in the region from which their religion arose.

Well, on that not-so-cheery note, that ends our special episode on Christianity in the Crusader States. If you would like to explore the decline of Christianity in the region further, I urge you to read William Dalrymple's fabulous book "From the Holy Mountain". Join me next week as we continue with our specialist episodes, and take a closer look at Life in the Crusader States. Until next week, bye for now.

End