Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Crusading as an Act of Vengeance, 1095-1216

Review Number:
1118
Publish date:
Monday, 1 August, 2011
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ISBN:
9780754665823
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£65.00
Pages:
240pp.
Publisher:
Ashgate
Place of Publication:
Farnham
Reviewer:
Brett Edward Whalen

?I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me: And showing mercy unto thousands to them that love me, and keep my commandments? (Ex. 20:5?6). Medieval crusaders, argues Susanna A. Throop in *Crusading as an Act of Vengeance*, viewed the biblical notion of the Lord?s vengeance with deadly earnestness and interpreted their own actions through the ?vocabulary of vengeance?. In this book, based on her University of Cambridge dissertation, Throop seeks to dislodge the widely accepted position among crusade historians (in part, due to the magisterial work of her former advisor, Jonathan Riley-Smith) that the idea of crusading as an act of vengeance represented a largely secular phenomenon, developing among the ?rude? laity, one that peaked around the time of the First Crusade only to disappear as later generations of clerical authors refined the theology of crusading. Throop, to the contrary, declares that an interpretation of crusading as vengeance inhabited a vital place in the clerical as well as the lay imaginations, and that far from fading over the course of the 12th and early 13th centuries, the notion occupied an increasingly prominent place in crusade histories, *chansons de geste*, letters, poems, and other sources. Along the way, she makes a number of intriguing observations about the nature of religious violence and the place of crusading within medieval Christian ?mytho-history?, suggesting some of the wider possibilities raised by her close reading of the vocabulary of vengeance and related terms.

As noted by Throop, Carl Erdman, in his highly influential 1935 work *The Origin of the Idea of Crusading,* judged the idea of crusading as an act of vengeance to be ?an obvious improvisation suggestive of how immature the idea of crusading still was?.(1) Erdmann, followed by other scholars including Riley-Smith, Peter Partner, Jean Flori and others, associated this ?immature? idea squarely with the laity, part of their ?feudal? notions of honor, shame, and military obligation. Throop takes issue with this interpretation of the evidence. ?The concept of crusading as vengeance?, she declares, ?was no anomaly, and crusading was conceived as an act of vengeance not only through the application of ?secular? values, but also through values inherent in twelfth-century Christianity? (p. 9). Or, as she puts it elsewhere: ?Text after text suggests that it would be inaccurate to envision a heavy ideological dividing line separating a pro-vengeance laity from an anti-vengeance Church? (p. 31). She seems to feel that by skirting the idea of crusading as vengeance, or writing it off as a product of ?unlettered? minds, historians have left medieval churchmen off the hook for their articulation of crusading not just as an act of love (in the famous formulation of Riley-Smith), but also as an act of hatred ? hatred and a desire for revenge against Jews, Muslims, and heretics, those who crucified Christ, seized the place of his self-sacrifice, or denied his divinity.(2) Crusade studies, she observes, have focused on crusading as an act of ?pilgrimage, penitential warfare, just war, holy war, the defense of the Church, liberation, Christian love, and the imitation of Christ?, approaches that attempt to reconcile modern ?Christian values? with bloody reality of crusading.(3) Examining crusading as an act of vengeance requires us to move a ?step further? down that road, to grasp how medieval Christians could see their faith as calling for them to take violent revenge against enemies of their community.

The stakes are large in this issue, complicated by modern assumptions about religious belief, violence, and the meaning of vengeance. Throop, to avoid the dangers of anachronism, cautiously limits her approach and methods by focusing on a set of ?signposts,? terms that she claims as having an equivalency to the modern English word ?vengeance? ? *vindicta, ultio,* and *venjance.* She offers a working definition of what these words meant, and what ?vengeance? effectively means throughout her monograph: ?violence (both physical and nonphysical) driven by a sense of moral authority, and in certain cases divine approbation, against those who are believed to question that authority and/or approbation? (p. 12). Her reading of sources for the First Crusade and its aftermath, divided into ?eye-witness? and ?non-participant? accounts (a traditional division that some scholars are starting to question in terms of its value for historical analysis) leads her to conclude that the notion of crusading as vengeance was not nearly as widespread as modern scholars often assume in the ?early years? of crusading. This position, one should note, leaves her at odds with historiography on the anti-Jewish pogroms in the Rhineland during the First Crusade, often understood as the most clear-cut example of crusading as revenge, in this case against the Jews for killing Christ (pp. 64?70). Rather, she argues, through the writings of both crusaders and those who never went on crusade (monastic authors, in particular), the idea of crusading as an act of vengeance developed over time, increasing rather than decreasing as the 12th century progressed.

Her understanding of crusading as vengeance does not lead her to discount the idea of crusading as an act of love: to the contrary, Christian love (*caritas*) for one?s neighbor could fuel the desire for revenge against Muslims and others (p. 62). Indeed, these sort of uncomfortable pairings (uncomfortable, that is, for modern sensibilities) form an important component of her research. Later in the book, she examines the related term of *zelus,* ?zeal? for Christianity, for God, or for justice, as a ?catalyst? for the idea of crusading as an act of vengeance, tying together ?love of God, anger at sin, a passion for justice, and the vocabulary of vengeance? (p. 170). Through her careful exploration of that vocabulary, Throop concludes that there were wide-ranging, pre-existing ?patterns of thought linking religion, emotion, and violence? that offered ?powerful motivating tools at the disposal of those who encouraged the crusading movement and sought a united Christendom, internally reformed and externally expanding? (p. 169). Simply put, crusading as an act of vengeance made powerful sense for 12th- and 13th-century Christians, both lay and clerical, accounting for its appeal and increasing prominence.

Throop?s handling of her terms ? primarily *vindicta, ultio, venjance,* and *zelus* ? is convincing, although at points, her trawling of the sources that include those terms casts a rather indiscriminate net to yield her particular catch: In a few short pages, analyzing links of justice and vengeance, she quickly ranges from

Thomas of Chobham to William of Tyre, to Robert of Clari and James of Vitry, and then to Gratian and Bernard of Clairvaux (pp. 16?19); or, in a single paragraph on zeal and anger, she jump centuries from Hincmar of Rheims to Thomas of Chobham without really alerting the reader to the differences in their historical context (p. 158). The repeated marshalling of anecdotes and pastiche of references for her vocabulary of vengeance makes for some odd moments, such as when the exact same passage from the 12th-century crusader account of the siege of Lisbon, *De expugnatione Lyxbonensi*, is used on consecutive pages, to make similar points, apparently without cognizance of each other (pp. 106?7). Some readers might wish that she spent more time situating her various texts and authors, locating their notions of vengeance within the broader frame of their particular time and place. That said, Throop is quite explicit that her ?deliberate goal has been to identify broad cultural themes, rather than individual proclivities? (p. 8). Her search for vengeance through her terms also anchors her attempt to avoid anachronistic interpretations of vengeance colored by modern emotions and value-judgments. As she notes in her introduction: ?It is worth repeating that I have not myself interpreted events as being ?vengeful? or ?acts of vengeance? (p. 6). The sources, she implies, speak for themselves. Of course, as Throop no doubt realizes, sources never speak for themselves, even when the modern historian conscientiously tries to avoid warping his or her evidence through anachronism. On the positive side, her caution avoids projecting modern notions of vengeance back into the past. The price paid for this approach, however, is a sometimes limited scope of historical analysis, heavy on the parsing of terms, without the rewarding pay-off that pushes beyond the parts to grasp a greater whole. At points, one wishes that Throop *had* taken a little more interpretative risk, making scholarly calls about the significance of vengeance, even when the precise terminology she highlights is not present.

Nevertheless, at some tantalizing points, Throop?s analysis of vengeance leads to some insightful claims about the relationship between crusading, vengeance, and memory, with a specific eye toward the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Divine vengeance, she rightly observes, struck sinners, including Christians themselves when they violated God?s laws. Both Christians and Muslims, by this logic, operated within the same redemptive and retributive economy of salvation, suggesting that ?Muslims were not *the others*, but rather *those of us who are doing wrong*? (p. 56; emphasis is her own). This is a striking claim that deserves more consideration. In the Book of Exodus, for example, God punishes the Egyptians without any suggestion that they were also his ?Chosen People,? only doing wrong. At the same time, undoubtedly, Throop captures something important about medieval Christian theology of history, in the sense that its inclusive universalism always sits paradoxically alongside self-definition through exclusion. The ambivalent relationship between Judaism and Christian offered a particularly fraught example of this tension, but a similar problem inhabited the Christian sense of Muslims as providential actors in salvation history: were Muslims to be killed or converted? Damned or saved? Were they pagans or a derivative of Christian heresy?

As Throop also observes, vengeance happens because it forms part of a story. As a ?reaction to a prior event (real or imagined),? she observes, ?vengeance was always embedded in a chronological context? (p. 13). For an individual such as a feudal lord, that event might fit into a personal narrative of violation, anger, and revenge (à la Stephen White, Richard Barton, and Daniel Smail). Within the context of crusading, however, the chronological context for vengeance reaches the level of what Throop (following Riley-Smith) calls ?mytho-history,? the ?narrative framework underlying contemporary culture in the Christian West that assigned meaning and order to historical events on the basis of religious belief? (pp. 101?2). The sweep of biblical history, including the crucifixion, the sack of Jerusalem by Roman armies under Titus and Vespasian, the Islamic conquest of the holy places thereby intersected with the ideology of crusading as an act of vengeance. This meta-narrative, including the ?common theme of creating a world united by ?true? Christian faith through the means of just war and conversion? (p. 135), meant that the medieval Latin theological imagination could assign the bloodiest of crusaders a moral purpose in God?s plan for history. Indeed, considering her claim that vengeance equally involved clerical thinkers, not just the laity, one might have expected to see even more about the importance of the Bible, exegesis, and Latin historical thinking for notions of vengeance. As Throop herself notes, much of Philippe Buc?s current work is wrestling with precisely this sort of ?exegetical perspective,? yielding considerable insights into the ?relationship between Christian sacred texts and the concept of vengeance? (p. 192).

At moments, therefore, Throop does throw some ?big questions? into the mix about religion, emotion, violence, history, and memory, set within the context of the dynamic 12th century. In her conclusion, she looks forward to a wider-ranging synthesis that might situate her own topic of crusading as vengeance within broader parameters. As she observes:

The last century of scholarship have {sic} seen the emergence of the twelfth-century ?renaissance,? ?reformation,? ?revolution,? and, most recently, ?crisis.? As it happens, the chronology of the development of the idea of crusading as vengeance coincided with a historical period of great intellectual regeneration, religious reformation, increasing Church power, shifting political structures, and increasing violent persecution. No one yet, to my knowledge, has worked to integrate the overall historiography of the twelfth-century with our evolving understanding of twelfth-century crusading (pp. 184?5).

This is a desirable goal, and whether Throop undertakes this task herself, or leaves it to others, in *Crusading as an Act of Vengeance*, she has done a valuable service to scholars who wish to tackle the crusades and the dilemma of religious violence.

Notes

1. Carl Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusading*, trans. M. W. Baldwin and W. Goffart (Princeton, NJ, 1977), p. 116. In her notes and bibliography (the latter of which includes a number of distracting typos), Throop cites the English translation of Erdmann?s *Die Enstehung des Kreuzzugsgedanken* (Stuttgart, 1935), and never mentions the original publication, which might mislead some readers about his place in crusading scholarship.Back to (1)
2. Jonathan Riley-Smith, ?Crusading as an act of love?, *History*, 65 (1980), 177?92.Back to (2)
3. Throop also includes, as appendixes (pp. 189?206), a ?Historiographical overview? and ?Resumé of sources?, that graduate students or scholars new to the field of crusading studies will find particularly helpful.Back to (3)

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