

## **KINGDOM OF HEAVEN:**

In director Ridley Scott's latest foray into epic storytelling, "Kingdom of Heaven" is a follow-up to his previous, grandiose but banal Roman Empire epic "Gladiator" which undeservedly won the best movie award at the Oscars in 2000.

In this film, the time is 1184. The place is France. Jerusalem is in the midst of the second Crusade. Peasant and lord embark to Jerusalem. The destination is to fight in a holy war called the Crusades in which death and/or salvation, for a cause, was a heartbeat away.

The guise of the Crusades of the Middle Ages is that they were conducted for the glory of God. And for salvation. But they were also about power. And plunder.

Director Ridley Scott whose greatest film was the science fiction masterpiece "Blade Runner" from 1991, has created a movie on a grand scale but with a "simple" message. It is a message for peace and hope amid madness and chaos. He shows us the roots of the mayhem.

Prior to the Crusades, Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in relative harmony in Middle East. Only when a few Christian zealots decided to take Jerusalem back in the name of Christ, did things begin to unravel.

And, it is interesting to note that the height of papal earthly power occurred in this period. The pontificate of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) was the zenith of papal influence over worldly affairs. Popes immediately prior to Innocent III and after, encouraged the holy wars through four senseless Crusades spanning over 200 years.

"Holy wars" indeed.

As the film begins, it is winter. The snow is gently falling and barely covers the ground. Like the landscape, minds and hearts are frozen.

The movie unfolds with a pensive and morose blacksmith Balian (Orlando Bloom), whose despair is because of his wife's suicide as their child died at birth. By Catholic religious doctrine, she cannot go to heaven, but is condemned to hell.

The father he never knew, Godfrey of Ibelin (Liam Neeson), comes to his village with his entourage of troops seeking assistance and tries to enlist Balian into his group. Godfrey asks Balian forgiveness for abandoning him as a child. Balian joins the crusade.

One day Balian will lead a great army in a misguided war few comprehend, yet everyone is consumed with. On his way to Jerusalem from the port of Messina, he is told by one of Godfrey's men, "God will keep you if he has a purpose for you in Jerusalem, otherwise, may God bless you." Such were the superstitions at the time.

Director Scott has a ravishing visual style in his directing. That shows throughout here. These images include an early attack against Balian and his father by the bishop's henchmen, the encounter with a sultan in a hot, deserted desert, the catapults hurling fire breathing boulders at the city of Jerusalem in a midnight sky, and the swords destroying bodies.

There is much bloodshed, with heroic though misplaced ideals, noble words and noble actions, politically correct statements and noble gestures, but all in noble vain. We are once again reliving the past. Yet again.

It is director Scott's message loud and clear. When will we understand? And learn from history? I think the message by Scott is that the troubles in the Middle East could be resolved, except for a band of hard core fanatics on both sides.

I think that this is a rather flimsy implication. The crisis in the Middle East has been a century old mess, full of cultural differences, full of raw emotion and full of symbolic barriers. It is timeless. It is our experience. Perhaps, it is our destiny.

As a war film, the fight sequences are all gallantly staged. Balian and his group are noble and good as is King Baldwin of Jerusalem and Saladin (Ghassan Massoud) who is the leader of the Muslim army. Only a small band of opportunistic zealots and power hungry Crusaders led by Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas) is in the way of peace.

But these zealots persevere in their mischief. At one point, Lusignan tells one of his warriors, "Give me a war." The implications for the present day in Iraq are numbing.

The script by first time writer William Monahan has its moments, but it does have a 21st Century mentality to it. For example, Balian says to a boy of about 14 just prior to the culminating battle, "I make you a knight and you will fight better." Oh really now?

Scott has also included a naive love scene. Balian's love "affair" with Sibylla (Eva Green),

the sister of the King of Jerusalem, is mundane, silly and totally unnecessary. At least their one love scene is handled tactfully, but without any motive or purpose to the overall story.

The cinematography by John Mathieson is, as usual, brilliant. The music has an angelic choir-like sound to it during battle sequences. This contrast happens to magnify, rather than distract from the horrific battles. And the use of costumes is well done. Of particular note is the silver mask that the King of Jerusalem wears to cover his leprosy. It has a uniquely mesmerizing quality about it.

And the acting? Well, it's all over the board. Orlando Bloom, as Balian, is noble but bland. His father Godfrey of Ibelin, played by Liam Neeson, is in the wrong century. Eva Green, as Sibylla, looking like a fashion model in the Middle Ages, is sadly wasted.

On the other hand, the Hospitalier played by David Thewlis, is believable. The stereotype scheming Guy de Lusignan, played by Marton Csokas, is effective. King Baldwin, played by Edward Norton, is noteworthy and the mischievous Reynald, played by Brendan Gleeson, is giddily evil.

Saladin, played by Ghassan Massoud, is cool and noble, like his counterpart Balian. After the final battle, he tells Balian quietly, "Jerusalem is nothing. It is everything."

Ultimately, the movie depicts the ridiculousness of fighting for war because of symbols, and yet, that's why most wars start. In "Kingdom of Heaven," Scott makes good use of showing us the crescent (Muslims) versus the barren cross (Christians). Two symbols. Two ideologies. One idea.

As epics go, this is a far cry from monumental films like the engaging "Spartacus," the electric "Lawrence of Arabia" or the eclectic "Andrei Roublev."

This film has its moments even in its thinly veiled simplicity. It is stirring. It has a message. One can't fault it for that.

And, Scott's message is simple. As Balian says to his followers, before the culminating battle with Saladin, "I do not fight for the walls of Jerusalem. I fight for the people inside." Amen.

145 Minutes

MPAA Rating: R (for strong violence and epic warfare)

**RATING: B-**

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