



Kingdom of Heaven

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Parable for the modern world?

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Film title: Kingdom of Heaven

Director: Ridley Scott

Screenplay: William Monahan

Starring: Orlando Bloom, Liam Neeson, David Thewlis, Brendan Gleeson, Jeremy Irons, Edward Norton, Ghassan Massoud

Distributor: Twentieth Century Fox

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Certificate: 15 (UK); R (USA)

Kingdom of Heaven offers a very twenty-first century take on twelfth century history. In a war-torn world troubled by religious conflict, sectarian fundamentalism threatens the uneasy consensus that has, for a period, held the peace. A hero emerges, aloof from all the bigotry. He is personally involved yet professionally detached; brave, passionate and principled yet – crucially – agnostic about all the contentious issues. An inspirational leader with a ‘can-do’ philosophy rooted in an appreciation of the human spirit. All this and a fine head of hair too. Orlando Bloom’s Balian is a man for our times. In this way Ridley Scott’s latest epic can be – and has been – seen as a modern day parable, extolling the virtues of liberal humanism over the threatening forces of religious intolerance in the contemporary world.

Of course, it has been recognised that this is a travesty of history – secular agnostics were not easy to find in twelfth century Europe – but the point remains a strong one. Our Jerusalem, it is suggested – the place which represents our most

cherished ideals, where we would take our last stand – is not made up of religious memory or enshrined dogma; still less is it a place of brick and stone. If it could be described as a kingdom at all it would be, in Balian’s words, a ‘kingdom of head and heart’, ‘a kingdom of conscience’ – our head, our heart and our conscience. If Jerusalem is indeed ‘dead’, new shrines have emerged to take its place. It is in exploring these new ‘holy sites’ that the film generates its own moral heart. A parallel is drawn between an old Jerusalem, worth nothing, and a new one, worth everything. An old and decaying ‘Kingdom of God’ – which God will do with as he will – and a sparkling, shiny ‘Kingdom of Conscience’. In the latter, the values of family loyalty, individual responsibility (‘A King can demand a man’s action but his soul is his own’) and innate human value (‘It has fallen to us to defend this city, not to protect these stones but the people living within these walls’) are self evident. After all, ‘What kind of man does not try to make the world a better place?’ In this place the power of holy relics are superseded by strength of character, and creed overcome by compassion. The Patriarch of Jerusalem himself, who ‘taught [Balian] much about religion’, stands for the out-datedness, irrelevance and hypocrisy of the cruel old days, every bit as much as the blood-soaked glory-hunting of the Templars.

So is *Kingdom of Heaven* a familiar piece of Hollywood fare, taking a firm aim at the easy target of Christendom for the sake of secular humanism? Well, perhaps – but perhaps not. Balian’s lack of faith is more of a struggle than a position of firm conviction. The fact that he ‘does not know God’ and that he ‘does not speak to me, even on the hill where Christ was crucified’ are clearly sources of anguish and longing rather than celebration. As more and more people in the movie affirm ‘God wills it’ about increasingly contrary positions, it begins to become clear that the issue is not so much God but the beliefs and discernment of his followers. More significantly still, Balian adopts from his father (Liam Neeson) a creed of his own:

‘Be without fear in the face of your enemies, be brave and upright that God may love thee, speak the truth always even if it leads to your death, safeguard the helpless and do no wrong. That is your oath.’

It affirms bravery, honesty and justice – but does so over and against human life in the name of

securing God's love. In other words, some sense of divine absolute fires Balian's mission too. His struggle is not just to hear God's voice but to live in genuine accord to his will in the most challenging of circumstances. The intriguing Tiberius (Jeremy Irons) speaks more than he knows when he says, 'If God does not love you, how can you do the things you do?' And so, considered again, this film may not be quite the parable some have assumed it to be. Maybe it is more of a plea, appealing for a way of faith which genuinely seeks to be obedient to a God of love and justice simultaneously. An acknowledgement that that is a complex and demanding task that we would do well to pursue humbly, but also a recognition that it is a necessary task because God's will is, in the end, the bottom line. If it is such a plea, it's interesting that this search is encapsulated in a thirty-something artisan, receiving a mission from his father to redeem a lost city and save its inhabitants, upsetting the old religion as he expounds a new way to interpret God's rule – a way of inclusion, acceptance and compassion; a way that, ultimately, leads to a novel and unlikely victory. Which makes it a different kind of parable altogether.