

Holy Warriors

by: James Reston Jr.

## THE TEMPLARS

By Piers Paul Read

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Whenever a well-known and respected novelist takes on serious history, we perk up and pay attention, for expectations are high. The promise and pitfalls are well known. Flashes of fine writing may make familiar sagas vivid. The novelist may trivialize events as he reaches for a popular audience, or, the reverse, he may strain to show that he can dig just as deeply in his research as any professional historian. *The Templars* displays both the promise and the pitfalls of such treatments.

Piers Paul Read has taken on a subject well suited to a novelist's sensibility. The military monks of the Middle Ages are as fascinating as they are strange, since the brutal and fearsome warrior who was also a man of the cloth had a blessedly brief history during the Holy Wars of the 12th and 13th centuries. How they came to exist (when to kill in battle seemed so antithetical to Christ's teaching), how they protected and cared for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, how they fought in military conflicts and why they disappeared so suddenly in disgrace early in the 14th century--these are endlessly intriguing questions, and Read is scarcely the first writer to address them.

The Order of the Temple was the child of the Crusades. It came into existence after the First Crusade captured Jerusalem in 1098 and after the Kingdom of Jerusalem was established, stretching from Antioch to the Red Sea. At the beginning, the mission of the Templars was to guard the holy sites and to defend pilgrims in their dangerous trips to the Holy Land and to outlying religious shrines in hostile Muslim territory. With time, as the Muslim world organized itself to reclaim its land from the European invaders, the mandate of the Templars and the Hospitallers (a rival, more charity-minded order) became increasingly militant. The military monks were now called upon to protect Christ's homeland against the infidel in a Holy War of survival.

After the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, these pious, severe knights formed the backbone of Richard the Lionhearted's army in the Third Crusade. A hundred years later, after further unsuccessful crusades, after acquiring immense power and wealth, after becoming famous for their arrogance, secrecy and strict rule and becoming entangled in sectarian conflict, the Order of the Temple disappeared in the fire of the Inquisition. Under France's King Philip the Fair, their members were arrested and charged with heresy and devil worship, and their masters were burned at the stake.

Read chooses to recount the tale of this remarkable order in three parts. In his overlong and ponderous first part, he deals with the origins of the Templars in the Temple of Solomon, stretching back to ancient times. Here the novelist is reaching to be taken seriously. While his research is prodigious and his erudition manifest, his first 83 pages, on the period before the Templars existed, could profitably have been compressed into an introduction.

For it is in his second and third parts that the novelist realizes his promise. Here his prose is clear, his material is concrete, and his storytelling is strong. The author wonderfully recounts the tale of the Templars' founding, their famous Rule of 73 clauses including chastity, their heyday as the guardians and the warriors of the Holy Land and their fiery collapse, although he is given to long digressions into the historical context, in which he loses track of the Templars' role in events.

Read shows how the sin of "homicide" became the virtue of "malecide" when killing was visited upon the enemies of Christ. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great propagandist of the Second Crusade, promised paradise to the Christian martyrs of the battlefield. And Read portrays well the motives of Philip the Fair, who brought the Inquisition down upon the Templars in the early 14th century because he coveted their wealth and resented their power.

In areas where traditional historians are shy and uncomfortable, the novelist-cum-historian is in his element. For example, Read openly discusses the problem of homosexuality among the Templars. The Order's masters went to considerable lengths to suppress it; that in the trials of the Order at its end the masters themselves were charged with sodomy is an irony of this history.

In his preface Read credits the influence of the new generation of Crusade historians that has come to the fore in recent years. With *The Templars* he can now take an honored place among them.

James Reston Jr. is the author of several books, including "Warriors of God: Richard the Lionhearted and Saladin in the Third Crusade," forthcoming next spring.