

Saladin

A Medieval Archetype of Righteous Muslim Leadership

[NOA HELMER]

On Saladin's deathbed, he was read the words of the Qur'an: "There is no other God but He, and in Him is my trust."¹ At that moment "the Sultan smiled, his face illuminated, and he gave up his spirit to his Lord."² This final display of righteousness cemented Saladin's character as one of ultimate piety and virtue. In this paper, I will explore how the Muslim author Baha ad-Din employs his portrayal of Saladin to represent an ideal Muslim ruler whose values and actions are consistent with those outlined in the Qur'an. I will begin by introducing the figure of Saladin before reviewing the nature of the Qur'an and Baha ad-Din's written work. I will then juxtapose Baha ad-Din's portrayal of Saladin with the Muslim ideals laid out in the Qur'an, specifically righteousness, charity, equitability, and reverence towards God.

Yusuf ibn Ayyub, known also as Salah ad-Din—meaning "righteousness of the faith"—or Saladin, came into power in Egypt after the death of his uncle, Asad ad-Din Shirkuh, in 1169. Asad ad-Din was sent to Cairo by Nur ad-Din Zengi, the ruler in Palestine, and he managed to topple the existing Fatimid ruler, who was part of the Shia sect of Islam. Saladin helped to establish the Ayyubid Dynasty, and he aimed to restore Sunni rule in Egypt, allying with Nur ad-Din until the latter's death in 1174. Thereafter, Saladin successfully took over Nur ad-Din's territories, uniting Northern Egypt and all of Syria under one ruler—himself. During this time, he was given two additional honorary titles, resulting in his full name and title of al-Malik al-Nasir Yusuf ibn Ayyub Salah ad-Din. As Sultan, Saladin was on relatively good terms with the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and the other cru-

1 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 251.

2 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 251.

sader states due to his relationship and the resulting truce with King Baldwin IV, who then died in 1185. After a Christian noble broke the truce, Saladin declared war in 1187, and he managed to reconquer most of the territories previously under Christian rule as part of the crusader states, including the city of Jerusalem itself. This sparked the call for the third crusade, which ended when Richard I Lionheart and Saladin finally signed a truce a year before Saladin's death in 1193.

Baha ad-Din became a part of Saladin's service in 1188 and remained a loyal member of his household until the Sultan's death.³ Under Saladin, he was made Qadi—a judge of religious law—to the army, and wrote a biography of the Sultan in which he provides historians with the most complete portrait of Saladin, dictated by his sincere devotion and admiration for the Sultan.⁴ Although his devotion and admiration may have resulted in a more positive depiction of Saladin than in reality, this is beneficial to my exploration. I am not aiming to compile a complete and factually accurate reconstruction of Saladin, but rather to explore how Baha ad-Din employs his portrayal of Saladin to exemplify Muslim ideals. Thus, an idolized portrait of Saladin further aids in the formation of that image. Baha ad-Din covers the many archetypal qualities that Saladin possesses, supplementing his observations with specific anecdotes and descriptions of particular occurrences.⁵ Additionally, he provides a thorough account of the events leading up to Saladin's death, as well as those occurring shortly thereafter.⁶

The Qur'an was recorded after the founding of Islam in the early seventh century, and is the driving text for Muslim piety.⁷ It is believed by Muslims to be the word of Allah as directly revealed to Mohammed, an Arab prophet who had mystical visions that led to the recording of the Qur'an.⁸ The Qur'an is regarded in Islam as a more important text than even the Bible in Christianity, as it is believed to be the direct teachings of God to Mohammed.⁹ The Qur'an outlines the ideals and guidelines of every aspect of Muslim life and faith, with the excerpts provided within this source focusing on the Islamic view of war and interfaith relations.¹⁰ This source will serve as a crucial piece of evidence to determine the values of Muslims and the attributes devout Muslims believe ideal Muslim rulers to possess and embody.

The first quality Baha ad-Din highlights is that of righteousness.¹¹ Verses 113–115 in sura 3 of the Qur'an describe righteous Muslims as those who pray

3 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, xxix.

4 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, xxix.

5 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 87-113.

6 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 246-252.

7 The Qur'an, in *The Crusades: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 8.

8 The Qur'an, in *The Crusades*, 8.

9 The Qur'an, in *The Crusades*, 8.

10 The Qur'an, in *The Crusades*, 8.

11 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88-90, 92, 96-98, 100, 102, 105-107, 110, 250.

“through the night,” “fall prostrate” during prayer, advocate righteousness and forbid evil, and “hasten to do righteous works.”¹² The Qur’an also states that God is aware of those who are righteous, and that “any good deed they do will not go unrewarded.”¹³ Baha ad-Din’s examples of Saladin’s righteousness are abundant throughout his writings.¹⁴ Beginning with the prayer aspect, Baha ad-Din explains that if Saladin woke up during the night, he would make two raka’at—the series of prostrations and elevations involved in canonic prayer—otherwise performing them before morning prayers.¹⁵ He continues to describe how Saladin would even dismount from his horse if the hour of prayer befell him during his travels, and how he only omitted the canonic prayers at the end of his life due to his lack of consciousness.¹⁶ Throughout Baha ad-Din’s biography of Saladin, he continuously stresses the prominent and frequent role prayer plays in Saladin’s daily habits and lifestyle.¹⁷

Moving to the latter of the Qur’an’s requirements for righteousness, these can be seen by Saladin’s steadfast devotion to Islam. When Saladin was in his room at night, he would ask anyone who was still awake to recite suras from the Qur’an while he listened.¹⁸ Additionally, Saladin was often moved to tears by hearing the Qur’an recited and enjoyed hearing hadith—sayings of the prophets—“delivered by a profound scholar of tradition and doctrine.”¹⁹ He was quick to fill any voids in his day with righteous activities such as praying and hearing recitations of the Qur’an and hadith. Saladin was also always eager to help those who needed it, often listening to litigants to aid in administering justice.²⁰ “Whether on journeys or at home,” Saladin was “always ready to receive the supplications addressed to him and to remove the abuses brought to his notice. Every day he ordered the pleas to be collected and opened the Gate of Justice.”²¹ This not only shows his fervor to perform righteous acts but also shows his selflessness and charitability, the next virtue Baha ad-Din emphasizes in Saladin.²²

Charitability comes from verse 195 of sura 2 in the Qur’an, which states that “you shall spend in the cause of God” and that “you shall be charitable; God loves the charitable.”²³ Saladin was indeed exceedingly charitable throughout his lifetime: “he died without leaving a large enough estate to be subject to it, for his

12 The Qur’an, in *The Crusades*, 9.

13 The Qur’an, in *The Crusades*, 9.

14 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88-90, 92, 96-98, 100, 102, 105-107, 110, 250.

15 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88.

16 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88, 250.

17 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88-90, 92, 98, 100, 106, 110, 250.

18 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 89.

19 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 90.

20 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 93.

21 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 93.

22 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88, 96-97, 100, 107, 110, 251.

23 The Qur’an, in *The Crusades*, 9.

extra-canonic gifts had consumed all his wealth.”²⁴ The Sultan, “ruler of all those lands, died leaving forty-seven Nasirite *drachmas* of silver in his treasury and a single piece of Tyrian gold whose weight I have forgotten. He used to give away whole provinces; when he conquered Amida, Qara Arslan’s son asked him for it and he gave it to him.”²⁵ As an accomplished leader who conquered vast spans of land, Saladin was presented with an unfathomable degree of wealth throughout his lifetime. Rather than hoarding it all for himself, he enthusiastically handed out both money and land to others. Saladin was “as generous when he was poor as when he was rich, and his treasurers kept certain reserves concealed from him for fear that some financial emergency might arise. For they knew that the moment he heard of their existence he would spend them.”²⁶ His commitment to charity regardless of his financial circumstances shows his true generosity and enjoyment in sharing his wealth.

Not only was he charitable in monetary aspects, but also in assisting those in search of the faith. A well-known scholar and mystic who dedicated himself to learning and acts of piety came to visit Saladin in Jerusalem, having seen his pious acts.²⁷ After meeting with Saladin, the man left without saying goodbye, so as to not disturb Saladin.²⁸ Upon hearing this, Saladin searched for the man to apologize for not seeing him prior to his departure and encouraged him to come visit again.²⁹ Once he did, Saladin received him with great joy and showered him with many gifts for the man, his family, and his neighbors to give to them upon his return.³⁰ During both of these encounters with the man, Saladin engaged in theological activities and encouraged the man’s religious zeal.³¹ He was generous with his fortune and his time, sharing both with all whom he encountered.

The penultimate trait Baha ad-Din illustrates through Saladin is that of equitability.³² Verse 8 of sura 60 in the Qur’an proclaims that “God loves the equitable.”³³ During one of his many public justice sessions, a man from Damascus came with a complaint against Taqi ad-Din, Saladin’s nephew.³⁴ Despite his nephew being “one of the people he loved and respected most, he did not allow personal feelings to affect his judgement.”³⁵ Saladin still listened to the complaint, examined the case, and received the plea as if it were any other person that was

24 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 88.

25 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 96.

26 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 96.

27 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 109-110.

28 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 110.

29 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 110.

30 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 110.

31 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 110.

32 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94-96, 109, 111-112.

33 The Qur’an, in *The Crusades*, 11.

34 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94.

35 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94.

involved.³⁶ As a fair and just ruler, he was able to set aside his feelings and personal ties in the name of justice, and expeditiously acted in accordance with the law. On top of remaining impartial when complaints were brought against family, he remained open to listen to complaints brought against him as well.³⁷ An old man came to face Saladin and asserted that “the defendant is the Sultan himself, but this is the seat of justice and we have heard that you are not partial in your judgements.”³⁸ Saladin proceeded to listen to the man’s grievance and state that “we must act in this matter as the law requires.”³⁹ The Sultan proceeded to admit his wrongdoing and “ordered that the man should be given a garment of honour and a large gift of money.”⁴⁰ This occurrence is a key example of Saladin’s “humility and submission to the Law,” and showcases his truly just and equitable character.⁴¹

The final virtue highlighted by Baha ad-Din is Saladin’s ascription of his victories to God.⁴² Verse 10 of sura 8 in the Qur’an explains that “victory comes only from God. God is almighty, most wise.”⁴³ On the day of the battle between the Muslims and the Franks on the plain of Acre, the center of the Muslim ranks was broken.⁴⁴ Despite this, Saladin “stood firm with a handful of men until he was able to withdraw all his men to the hill and then lead them down into battle again.”⁴⁵ After the Sultan’s army defeated the Frankish forces, Saladin was content in knowing that “God gave the Muslims victory over their enemies.”⁴⁶ Saladin did not attribute his victory to himself, but rather to God, who enabled all of His followers in Saladin’s army to claim victory over enemies of God and the faith.

Baha ad-Din’s portrait of Saladin as righteous, charitable, equitable, and reverent towards God displays the virtues of an ideal Muslim ruler who is aligned with the values defined by the Qur’an. As Baha ad-Din worked in close proximity to Saladin for the final five years of the Sultan’s life, he was able to utilize the various stories and anecdotes he had observed of Saladin and his life throughout his work to illustrate how Saladin embodies the ideals designated within the Qur’an. Baha ad-Din’s portrayal can be framed as part of a larger practice in which historical writings and narratives serve to define and reinforce the qualities of legitimate and ideal Muslim leadership. This situates Saladin as a model used to articulate and perpetuate Islamic religious ideals of the medieval period. Exploring this depiction also opens broader questions regarding how medieval Muslim

36 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94.

37 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94-96.

38 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94.

39 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 94-95.

40 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 95-96.

41 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 96.

42 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 99.

43 The Qur’an, in *The Crusades*, 11.

44 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 99.

45 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 99.

46 Baha ad-Din, in *Arab Historians*, 99.

authors employed narratives and historical writings to convey moral instruction and to promote virtuous conduct within the medieval Islamic world.