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The Talisman, *The Book of Saladin*, and Reluctant Orientalism[1]

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Abstract

The renowned writer of historical novels Walter Scott's representations of historical figures reach beyond his country of birth. As a man of literature, he imagines the beyond. *The Talisman* is a product of such excess, but it is not the first in Europe depicting the leader of the Ayyubids Saladin who conquered Jerusalem and settled within the consciousness of the West as a result. Far before romantic orientalism during the nineteenth century, Renaissance was already interested in oriental exoticism. Saladin appeared in Dante's *Inferno*, Boccaccio's *Decameron,* and Voltaire's *Zaire* in varying but positive forms. Scott continued this tradition and created a fictional Saladin who 'was' an oriental despot with European virtues. Even though Tariq Ali penned *The Book of Saladin* one hundred and seventy-three years later, Saladin has always remained a popular fictional figure. He alternates the modernist and orientalist narrations of the East with postcolonial and postmodernist literary techniques, but he falls into the same modernist trap Scott had fallen into while creating an unusual Eastern character for European readers. Their common reluctant orientalism links these two narrations of Saladin inextricably as Eurocentrism haunts their non-Eurocentric depictions ironically. By using reluctant orientalism as a term for the first time and comparing Scott and Ali contrary to the accustomed analyses, this study does more than filling a positivist lacuna. It delays the Absolute meanings of Scott and Ali.

Keywords: *The Talisman*, *The Book of Saladin*, Saladin, Eurocentrism, Reluctant Orientalism

Introduction

In Western literature, Saladin appeared first in a French poem *Ordene de Chevalerie* written in the thirteenth century whose poet is unknown. Then, another French poem *Le Pas Saladin* was penned in the same century. In the first two representations, he is "portrayed as a chivalrous and noble leader" (France, 2016, p. 71). In *Divine Comedy,* Dante narrates him as a leader whose "great qualities as a ruler became a legend in Medieval Europe" (2003, p. 45) and Saladin stays at the upper layer of Hell with Averroes and Avicenna who cannot get into

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Heaven but are far away from the punishments the other 'infidels' face within the lower layers. In *Decameron*, his "courteous deeds and sterling worth" (1995, p. 778) are praised. For Petrarch (1806) and Voltaire (1901), he is *mighty* Saladin. His fame stretches throughout the countries and centuries and "it is…impossible to think another figure from history who dealt such a deep wound to a people and a faith, and yet became so admired" (Phillips, 2019, p. 315). Within the non-Western world, however, the figure of Saladin is used as an inspiration. G. R. Riggs alleges that "The figure of Saladin has become cultural shorthand in both the East and West for a vision of a region unified by Islam and antagonistic towards the Christian Other" (2011, p. xv). While he becomes a source of inspiration for the East because of his power and mercy, Saladin is imagined as an allegory of an Islamic ruler conquering Jerusalem when he becomes powerful enough to unite the Islamic World against the Judeo-Christian World.

It may sound interesting when one comes across Walter Scott's *The Talisman* and learn that it is about Saladin. As in Renaissance, the Orient was a desired imagined space for the nineteenth century. Edward W. Said argues that "Scott's knowledge probably came from Byron and Beckford" (1978, p. 101). Robert Irwin, on the other hand, states that his historical knowledge is taken from the history books of Charles Mill (1997, p. 132). Jerome Mitchell alleges that Scott "has numerous allusions to Chaucer and to medieval romance" (1987, p. 1). However, Scott himself wrote in the introduction of *The Talisman* that: "I felt the difficulty of giving a vivid picture of a part of the world with which I was almost totally unacquainted, unless by early recollections of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments" (1833, p. 3). Thanks to his interest in history, historical figures, and the Orient, the popularity of Scott was enlarged in his time:

> The number of contemporary reviews of each novel was large; from ten to thirty reviewing periodicals gave attention to each. The popularity of the novels can also be seen in the correspondence and diaries of the time: scarcely any were without some reference to 'the author of Waverley' or to his works (Hayden, 1970, p. 1).

Incongruent with Scott's fame as a novelist, Tariq Ali is not usually received as a man of literature. With its anti-Eurocentric agenda, his *Islamic Quintet*, however, is a howling success. By these series, he presents an alternative narration of the Islamic world against the oriental discourses within Western media, academia and politics, especially after the Gulf War and the Invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. *The Book of Saladin* (1998) is the second book of the series after *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1992) and followed by *The Stone Woman* (2000), *A Sultan in Palermo* (2005) and *Night of the Golden Butterfly* (2010) respectively. Together with *The Talisman*, *The Book of Saladin* will be examined from the point of their common reference Saladin. This paper will look at the collisions and collusions of his portrayal within the two narrations and put forward how they are inextricably linked to 'reluctant orientalism', albeit the long ages between Scott and Ali.

The Talisman

At first sight, *The Talisman* is the story of the Third Crusade against the Ayyubids to take Jerusalem back. Yet, it is also the story of a harsh conflict among the Crusaders, the illness of Richard the Lionheart, and his recuperation thanks to an Arabian healer who is Saladin in disguise. Besides, it is a negative depiction of the Crusades because Scott narrates the religious fanaticism of the Crusaders. Unlike them, Saladin "did not pursue any of the ordinary modes by which the followers of the Crusade condescended to recruit their diminished resources at the expense of the people of Palestine" (Scott, 1833, p. 8). Moreover, it is not centered upon King Richard because the novel is more about Scottish Sir Kenneth

and Saladin than him. Furthermore, it is intermittently implied that Saladin is even better than Germans and Scottish. It is narrated that the Germans "had retained withal no slight tinge of their barbarism" (p. 149) and "thou mayest live to prefer a true Turk to a false Scot" (p. 268).

Even if there is a "striking contrast" (p. 2) between Richard the Lion Heart and Saladin, the narrator tells that the disguised Saladin "was as unlike as possible to the exaggerated terms in which the minstrels of the day" (p. 17). At the very beginning of the novel, it is clear that Scott is aware of the exoticism towards the East. Then from a Saracen, Saladin becomes noble Saladin who is royal, generous, wise, brave, faithful, smart, just, and the healer. He tries to be more realistic but not in Lukacsian sense because oriental despotism is still there. It is neither a romantic novel teaching chivalry. Edward Said sees romantic orientalism in his "I don't mean you in particular" (1978, p. 101) attitude. Irwin, nevertheless, opposes Said's description of Scott as an orientalist by saying that Muslim characters "really come out better than Kenneth, Richard or any of the other protagonists in the story" (1997, p. 133). In this view, Saladin is like a Western hero who is represented as a gentleman with chivalric manners. Scott's "orientalizing of the West" (Kelly, 1989, p. 5) makes the Western characters Eastern while Saladin becomes a Western one.

Lukacs contends that Scott has "typical characters nationally, but in the sense of the decent and average, rather than the eminent and all-embracing" (1989, p. 36). These mediocre characters are in the "middle course" (p. 37) of historical clashes. In *The Talisman*, he does not produce an epic hero but a protagonist:

> An inferior writer would have made the king charge in imagination at the head of his chivalry, or wander in dreams by the brooks of Aquitaine; but Scott allows us to learn no more startling symptoms of the king's malady than that he was restless and impatient, and could not wear his armour. Nor is any bodily weakness, or crisis of danger, permitted to disturb for any instant the royalty of intelligence and heart in which he examines, trusts and obeys the physician whom his attendants fear (Ruskin, 1970, p. 524).

Ali's historical narrations appear more realistic and critical than epics or Victorioan novels to Ruskin and Lukacs. They are not that wrong for this point because the clash between the Crescent and the Cross in the Crusades as a popular theme is overlooked by the strange relationship between Saladin and Richard in the novel. In this way, Scott does not create an English epic hero because of his Scottish nationality. The novel does not only focus on Richard but also on Sir Kenneth and Saladin. Even if Richard hates the King of Scotland, his most entrusted knight is a Scottish. Therefore, readers -be they Scottish, English, or Arabic-fluctuate among them. According to J. M. D'Arcy, English readers are not the sole addressee of the novel:

> *Scottish reader*, the implied reader, however, can understand all the Scots and Gaelic references, can read between the lines, see the gaps and inconsistencies in the novels' political, historical and fictional discourses in order to appreciate Scott's subtle but harsh criticism of British imperialism (2005, p. 52, emphasis in original).

Even though it may seem that Sir Kenneth is a sovereign Scottish subject writing his own fate, the relationship between him and King Richard may also symbolize the Romantic unification of England and Scotland. For P. T. Henry, nonetheless, it is "a narrative grappling with the artificiality of the nation-state" (2017, p. 210). Rather than internal conflicts within the Empire or continental Europe as in the Treaty of Westphalia and the Treaty of Vienna, it appears that Scott was in favor of peace and order. With the lesson taken from the past, his oeuvre includes a developmentalist ideal. Monnickendam, nonetheless, claims that "Both *The*

Talisman and *The Siege of Malta* sustain a view that history is not progressive at all, and possibly regressive" (2013, p. 171). Likely, Lynch argues that

> The past for him is not in itself better than the present, nor necessarily even very different, but the past might have made the present better than it is, and has failed. It might have continued to keep its best potential alive, but again has failed to do so (2011, p. 213).

However, Lukacs sees a positivist side of Scott who handles the history of England as progressive regardless of its destructive role causing "the unending misery of the people which the collapse of old England brings (1989, p. 33). Scott's historical view is based on universal progression. For him, "the same state of society and civilisation produces similar manners, laws, and customs, even at the most remote periods of time, and in the most distant quarters of the world" (Scott, 1835, p. 15). Even Caubul tribes were ahead of Scottish Highlanders due to their governmental organization "until the destruction of clanship in 1748" (p. 16) in Britain. Despite the religious fanaticism of the Crusades and the internal conflicts within Europe in the past, Britain transcended nationhood with the Act of Union in 1707 but it also needed to overcome the remnants of ethnicism with the Battle of Culloden. Similar to the Hegelian dialectic, Scott believed that Britain would progress linearly. This Whiggish historiography is a general characteristic of Western history-writing. According to that Eurocentric looking to the past from the present, history progresses linearly. Yet, it is a narration and a "true novel" (Veyne, 1984, p. x) fictionalizing the events of the past:

> Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts (White, 1978, p. 121).

History and historiography was used to legitimize colonization too. Due to their 'modernity', the 'civilized' European needed to develop a non-Western world that had stayed passive for centuries and became anachronistic for the modern world. Therefore, the 'backward' people lacked a vanguard bourgeoise class for development. Within this historiography, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution are the beginning of modernity, and the non-Western world must follow suit if the Other desire to progress toward civilization. By this, the West also constructed a racial hierarchy:

> Historicism thus posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization. In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 7).

On this score, those who could not be modernized became anachronic. Therefore, in spite of the positive representations of Muslims in *The Talisman*, they are backward as is evident in the novel that they use the talisman as an alternative traditional method to the modern medicine of the day. Al-Hakim uses it to treat King Richard and he recuperates, but it is an orientalist scene remembering *the Arabian Nights* belonging to the far past. Accordingly, Said claims for Scott that: "no matter how deep the specific exception, no matter how much a single Oriental can escape the fences placed around him, he is *first* an Oriental, *second* a human being, and *last* again an Oriental" (1978, p. 102). Watt, on the other hand, argues that *The Talisman* avoids "the increasingly influential language of racial essentialism, and

complicate the mythology of oriental despotism, while at the same time focusing on the ramifications of cultural contact and exchange" (2004, p. 94). The positive and negative reactions towards Scott are confusing because while he portrays Saladin better than the majority of the characters in the novel, the oriental despotism is still there:

> The period relating more immediately to the Crusades which I at last fixed upon was that at which the warlike character of Richard I., wild and generous, a pattern of chivalry, with all its extravagant virtues, and its no less absurd errors, was opposed to that of Saladin, in which *the Christian and English monarch showed all the cruelty and violence of an Eastern sultan, and Saladin, on the other hand, displayed the deep policy and prudence of a European sovereign, whilst each contended which should excel the other in the knightly qualities of bravery and generosity* (Scott, 1833, p. iii, emphasis is mine).

The Book of Saladin

The Book of Saladin is the second book of Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet Series* which is a project planned to subvert the Eurocentrism of the Western meta-narratives towards Islam, its history, and its culture. It may sound interesting for an atheist, but he defines himself as a cultural Muslim. Just like Scott, he opposes fundamentalism even if it is a contemporary secular one. He demeans Bush administration's "religious multiculturalism" (2002, p. 6) because invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan is a kind of postmodern fundamentalism for him: "'Culture' and 'religion' are softer, euphemistic substitutes for socio-economic inequality - as if diversity, rather than hierarchy, were the central issue in North American or European society today" (p. 311).

Analogous to Scott's depiction, Saladin is portrayed in a positive manner in his novel. Ali narrates a tolerant and cosmopolitan Muslim ruler in his *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* published three years after *The Book of Saladin*:

> Jerusalem was taken in 1187 and once again made an open city. The Jews were provided with state subsidies to rebuild their synagogues. The churches were left untouched. No revenge killing were permitted. Like Caliph Umar five hundred years before him, Saladin proclaimed the freedom of the city for worshippers of all faiths (2002, p. 42).

In a similar vein, Amin Maalouf contends that: "His victory was to have liberated the holy city from the yoke of the invaders—without a bloodbath, destruction, or hatred" (1984, p. 200). In this context, Saladin has a "symbolic power" (Phillips, 2019, p. 392) over Eastern people who sometimes invent traditions in his name. In a recent article, the writers are in hope of "another Salah ad-Din" to unite Muslims and take Jerusalem again (Iqbal and Asif, 2020, p. 9). Some scholars like Phillips and Jones, on the other hand, allege that "for the most part Muslim and anti-Islamophobic accounts of Islamic civilization fail to contest civilizational thinking" (2008, p. 734). For them, Ali degrades Western civilization by increasing the value of Islamic civilization. Ali's imagined Orient, however, foregrounds reluctant orientalism in his book. In Fanonian terms, he looks at his history from the gaze of the West. Still, his unorthodox Marxist gaze is not *totally* Eurocentric because instead of narrating a Hegelian linear history he depicts the twentieth-century Muslims as civilized, and "he complicates the ongoing Western discourse that Muslim women are passive and thus in need of emancipation" (Yousef, 2019, p. 123). In an interview with Cara Cilano, Ali talks about "the sceptical strain in Islam philosophers, poets, scholars, painters who challenged orthodoxy" (2016, p. 192). Yet, when he advocates a "dominant narrative" (2007, p. 23) in world history in another interview with *Amerasia Journal* he becomes a developmentalist again. Although he believes in the sedimentations of history, the West is portrayed implicitly as the locomotive of history.

By saying that "I took what I needed and never tried to rewrite or change historical facts", Ali declares his realist style. Then, by adding that "I read as much as I could of the real history – but what is real? Each side writes its own history and the victor's ideology dominates" (p. 191), he has a critical realist standpoint. Ahmad Gamal, however, reads *The Book of Saladin* as a postcolonial metafiction reinscribing the master language with notes, glossaries, and orality. The history of Saladin is narrated from multiple points. In opposition to Eurocentric narrations, it is an alternative history in that women are agents and Muslims are civilized (2010). Coterminous with his stance, Bruce King states: "This is very much a postcolonial book, one in which the Europeans not only invade a foreign land but are also barbarians withy filthy habits, defilers of holy places, liars, and killers of women and children and especially of Jews" (2017, p. 245).

From a postcolonial angle of view, Ali makes a "functional change in sign-systems" through "discursive displacements" (Spivak, 1988, p. 197). Ali reminds the deleted past; he rewrites it and displaces the Western discourses in it:

> Remind these frightened Christians of what Believers and Jews suffered ninety years ago. The heads of our children were displayed on pikes. Old men and women of all ages were tortured and burnt. These streets were washed in our blood, Balian (p. 317).

In his story, barbarians who "ate flesh and did not bathe" (p. 33) are the Westerners. Dissimilar to *The Talisman*, King Richard is represented as a slayer of the captives, as an animal, and as a pederast in his novel:

> He is like an animal. He refers to Richard of England, whom he describes in the letter as a bad son, an even worse husband who cannot satisfy his wife nor any other woman but has a fondness for young men, a selfish ruler and a vicious and evil man, but not lacking in courage (p. 329).

Women in the story, on the other hand, are not subjected to patriarchy. Because "slaves and peasants do not always obey to their masters" (Ali, 2002, p. 4), one of the Soldan's wives Jamila is not a subaltern whose voice cannot be heard but an intellectual contemplating over the political problems within her age:

> One of the problems of our great religion is that we exclude half the population from enriching our communities. Ibn Rushd once remarked that if women were permitted to think and write and work, the lands of the Believers would be the strongest and richest in the world (p. 126).

His postcolonial alternative narration draws on postmodern historicism too. For Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism seeks to "rehistoricize" (1996, p. 225) from "textualized remains" (p. 119). It dedoxifies cultural and political biases. While doing this, it is self-conscious and self-regulating. Thanks to such self-awareness, postmodern fiction does not present an alternative history, but it brings another narration by revealing how history is a narration too. The Jewish scribe Ibn Yakub tells Saladin that "Your majesty is talking about facts. I am talking about history" (1999, p. 12). Dissimilar to official history that is written by numerous writers and compared after Soldan finishes his speech, he is alone while scribing. He also uses Shadhi's memories as oral history. Moreover, he narrates his personal deficiencies as a historian by saying that "Reader, I did not take any notes of that crucial meeting which decided the fate of Jerusalem. On that subject my notebook is a blank" (p. 303). He tries to show covertly that his history is nothing more than narration. With its explanatory note, summaries before each section, glossary, and multiple narrations from the narrator, Saladin, Shirkuh, and Shadhi, Ali tacitly reveals the fictionality of his historical narration. Therefore, it is not *The History of Saladin* but *The Book of Saladin*.

Ali's portrayal of Saladin and his state is self-conscious because *The Islamic Quintet* series was a deliberate project against the oriental discourses of the Western media, especially after the Gulf War. Because "there is no escape from contingency" (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 3), there is no unity or telos within the stories of postmodernism. Ali selects what he needs from history. He imagines his fictional world, but his certain conclusion is intentional. His language economy fails to expel the linear progression of history. The repressed returns as the reader faces the inexorable laws of history again. As a staunch leftist, Ali does not leave his "historiche Idee" (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 36) behind. Due to his preconceptions, "anti-Eurocentric-Eurocentrism" (Wallerstein, 1997, p. 132) pervades the pages. While subverting the discourses of modernist Western history, he refurbishes the theme of oriental despot even if he *reasonably* designs a cosmopolitan state. At its best, this postmodern narration becomes a "modernist critical of modernity" (Amin, 2009, p. 17).

Originally, Ali's postcolonial and postmodernist displacements were the strategies of former Enlightenment thinkers against the Catholic Church. As is evident in Voltaire's *An Essay on History* (1759), Saladin was a humanitarian in opposition to the violent Crusaders. After the fall of Jerusalem, the fictional Saladin tells that "we are all the People of the Book, and this city belongs to all those who believe in the Book" (p. 317). Moreover, even if he sees it as a mistake before, Saladin refuses to capture the city of Tyre not to damage his friend Raymond of Tripoli there. Instead of a sharia rule, his state is portrayed as a secular one. *Şura* functions as a parliament and meritocracy as a bureaucracy. Saladin is secular and even a socialist ruler sharing the wealth of his sultanate with his people. Art is very strong due to the freedom of thought there. There are huge libraries in the cities. People are equal even in the military order. He can be parodied in a carnival symbolizing the freedom of speech because he is a leader who thinks that "To dream and to know, is better than to pray and to be ignorant" (p. 11). Saladin is a skeptic and the rationality of Ibn Rushd overwhelms the thoughts of corrupt theologians and the Khalifa of the Islamic World in that day. In his state, there are gay scholars, pederast emirs, and soldans, lesbians in harems, brothels, taverns, and opium:

> Cairo and Damascus, not to mention Baghdad, are full of male brothels where beardless youths satisfy every conceivable need and desire of those who visit them. This is tolerated, but mention women smelling the musk of each other's bodies and it is as if the heavens were about to fall (p. 96).

Despite all the positive representations of him in Ali's fiction, Saladin uses the same civilization discourse to legitimize his plan to invade the West:

> I will go to the lands where the Franj live, and I will pursue these scoundrels till all of them acknowledge Allah and his Prophet. I will do this even if I die in the attempt. It is important, because others will then pick up my sword and finish what I could not achieve. Unless we strike at the roots of the Franj, they will continue to eat our flesh, like locusts that darken the sky and devour our crops (p. 300).

By this scene, reluctant orientalism foregrounds itself because the sultanate of Saladin is not a primitive communist state nor a cosmopolitan democracy anymore. It is true that Ali rewrites the past and narrates the story of a secular and cosmopolitan Islamic state that is far more tolerant and democratic than the Western states of the twentieth century. Still, this state is in the far past and has no resonance with today's Islamic states. Even if it is possible to read *The Book of Saladin* as a self-conscious metafiction, he creates an alternative Orient yet embellished with oriental discourses he tries to subvert. The sultan's plan for "civilising the lands of the Franj" (p. 34) makes him an imperialist like the Crusaders. Due to his Marxist angle of view, dialectical Eurocentrism haunts Tariq Ali even if he is not an orthodox one

because he portrays Saladin as a developmentalist like his European counterparts. Linda Hutcheon argues that "as producers or receivers of postmodern art, we are all implicated in the legitimization of our culture" (2002, p. 15). He seems to look at the Orient from the gaze of an orientalist. Still, he is a reluctant one not at odds with Walter Scott. Their common reference to oriental dictatorship blots out the image of *good* Saladin and connects them, albeit the long centuries between them.

Conclusion

Tariq Ali revises the history of the Islamic world against the metanarratives within Western media, academia, and politics, especially after the Gulf War. He creates a cosmopolitan sultan. *The Book of Saladin* is an anti-imperialist fiction to show the political culture of Islam to them who signified oriental despotism unremittingly. Cosmopolitanism is of great importance in his life. Ali is cosmopolitan like his grandfather who opposed the partition of India as the leader of the Unionist Party. In much of his non-fiction writings, multicultural Lahor before the violent bifurcation keeps a salient point. To revive it, it seems that he is after a modernist Islamic reformation. To this end, the cities of the Ayyubids are represented as secular in *The Book of Saladin* where skepticism pervades.

Less tangible, but no less important, is that Scott and Ali weave Saladin into the fabric of orientalism, albeit with a reluctant attitude. Therefore, the figure of Saladin fails to dam the linear progress of Western historiography. Despite his central role in the two novels, he faces a kind of epistemic violence by which he is represented in a certain way. Therefore, he talks but his voice cannot be heard. His words cannot succeed in overcoming the bars of the prisonhouse of language. Regardless of the three Jewish characters (Ibn Yakub, Maimonides, and Shadhi) who are the main characters in *The Book of Saladin* and staple parts of his sultanate, Saladin is not tolerant towards European "scoundrels" (p. 300) and plans to civilize them because he has "all the cruelty and violence of an Eastern sultan" (Scott, 1832, p. xii).

Scott and Ali's universality is another common point. The intertextuality of *Arabian Nights* is in their novels. Both are against religious fundamentalism. Although their historical narrations are against the grain, they are progressivist. The two novelists acknowledge the existence of an alternative civilization that is not Western but historical progress looms over their literary works. The two fictions, however, are reluctant orientalists because inasmuch as they portray a positive side of the East, *The Talisman* and *The Book of Saladin* are laden with oriental discourses. Even though Ali subverts the canonical ones, he creates an Eastern space in which a Western-type secular life is dominant and whose leader has an Absolute Idea to civilize the uncivilized. Despite Ali's postcolonial and postmodernist narration, *The Book of Saladin* becomes modernist like *The Talisman* when Reason triumphs over evil in Saladin's state and after he decides to civilize the 'uncivilized'.

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