The Devastation of Virtue

In his Chronicle of the first Crusade, Jean de Joinville often touts the virtue and holiness of the saintly King Louis. His descriptions of the king are rather glowing, yet they take an almost tongue in cheek aspect when Jean’s own behavior as well as his relationship with the king is examined. In fact the Chronicle of the first Crusade reads almost as a damning of pure virtue in this light. Jean illustrates the ease with which he slips in and out of virtuous behavior in quite a few places and how he uses virtue to serve himself. One such example is the episode of his capture.

As Jean is fleeing the aftermath of the king’s failed siege he comes upon the enemy’s naval blockade and knows he will be caught and decides not to resist. As the enemy’s ships approach he and his men ready themselves for capture a scene takes place that could easily have been a biblical parable. One of Jean’s men disagrees with surrender stating that they should instead, “… all let ourselves be slain, for thus we shall go to paradise.” (Joinville, 243). Being a war waged for the apparent purpose of liberating the Holy Lands from heathens the first Crusaders could do nothing better than die in God’s service. Jean, however states that, “… none of us heeded his advice” (Joinville, 243). In one sentence Jean rejects virtue and has become an analogue to Peter when he denied
Christ. Rather then suffer the consequences of standing up for his faith and even serving his king to the utmost, he tries to find a way out. This way is presented by another of his men, who suggests they lie to the Saracens and say Jean is the king’s cousin. Jean then approves a sin on the part of his men and tell them that he was, “…quite willing for him to say anything he liked” (Joinville, 243).

Joinville basically had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. One of his men speaking from the font of virtue, the other the basin of sin and not only did Jean choose to surrender, but to allow his men to commit a sin that they may keep their lives. This Faustian deal of his then materializes in the form of a Saracen who conducts him and his men to safety and saves him from the treasure and blood-thirsty crew of the ship that captured them. Later he is brought before the admiral of the blockade fleet, the leader of the heathen men who captured him. The admiral compliments Jean on the methods he used to avoid capture and immediately arranges for a meal. Is it not hard to continue the religious allegory and see the admiral as Satan or one of his greater servants who is complimenting Jean in his sin. During the meal Jean discovers it is a Friday during Lent and immediately stops eating meat. This rigid adherence to observation of Christian doctrine only serves to strongly silhouette Jean’s sin with his newfound staunch virtue.

With this example Jean illustrates the compromises many of the men who survived obviously had to make and the general weakness of virtue. When virtue is launching rocks at a city far away everyone is a paragon of faith, however when sin comes looking for you at the tip of a Saracen sailor’s sword, virtue quickly becomes an afterthought. Not only the entire Crusade but the strength of the Christian faith is thrown into question. Later Jean’s crew are brought before him and the Saracen admiral tells him
they all converted, later still Jean describes the execution of all the prisoners not of high
standing who would not recant (Joinville, 246-247). This implies that any man who
survived his imprisonment who was not worth more alive than dead would have to have
converted and renounced Christianity.

Jean’s own peculiar silence on treatment of prisoners other than himself speaks volumes.
In many places Jean documents Crusaders being killed out of hand or with little or no
reason. He never condemns these practices or even says if he regrets the summary
execution of these people. Jean’s performance as a soldier is a further example of his lack
of virtue in the face of adversity and begins to shed aspersions on the value of the king’s
touted virtue.

Jean’s problems began when he and his men rode into a Turkish camp away from
the king’s army looking to seize their baggage. They quickly became encircled when
found out and those that did get away barely escaped. While limping back, they see the
king’s army, which Jean left for his raid, is engaging the enemy host. Jean states it was,
“… a truly noble passage of arms, for no one drew either a bow or a crossbow;”
(Joinville, 222) Jean reports that the king’s other battalions were hard pressed and the
king was sending relief to them. This care for his own vassals undermined the king’s
battlefield position and much of his army was routed. As Jean and his men try to escape
the enemy, who is moving up rapidly, he sees the effects of the king’s noble fight. Dead
and dying men and horses as well as their gear choke a small stream. Jean stops at this
point and suggests that his small company defend a bridge here. Jean wants nothing to do
with noble fights when they choke the land with the dead. Up until this point he was quite
adamant about getting back to their own lines and rejoining their own army until he sees the fate of the men in the service of the king, at which point he will go no further.

Jean decides to guard the bridge since if the king and his, “…people are attacked from two sides they may well be overpowered” (Joinville, 223). Not only is the army already in a rout, but immediately after setting up the guarding of the bridge, Jean writes that they, “…should have been lost that day if it had not been for the king,” as the king was personally inspiring his troops and beating back the enemy as much as he could, not only saving himself but keeping the enemy busy enough that they did not worry much about trying to cross the bridge Jean and his men were so boldly guarding. Clearly Jean has no allusions about the fact that his guarding of the bridge had no real tactical value and was for his own protection. Not only does he guard the king’s rear when his army is already in a rout, but he stated that the king’s own actions saved him and his men. When read more closely, this episode reveals an internal war within Jean.

Jean sits directly on the boundary between the Turks and his king and does not show much preference to either side. He does not let the Turks pass, but he does not press any attack against them. He sits directly on the border and protects himself as best he can. It seems that here he is already thinking about the merits of surrender or of at least sitting out the war. The manner he protects himself is also revealing. At one point Jean picks up a cast-off Saracen overgarment that is padded to resist missiles and holds it up in front of himself to absorb the Turkish darts and slingstones being hurled at him and his company. He takes the armor, that which protects the Saracens, and holds up in front of himself, protecting himself with it. This can be seen as an allusion to how he protects himself by endearing himself to the Saracens in part later when he and men were captured by the
enemy blockade. Beyond this Jean also indirectly admits that he does not fight nobly and that the noble fighting of the king was a waste of resources.

Early on he sends for more men to help him hold the “little bridge” they are guarding and it arrives by the waning of the day as the king’s crossbowmen. Earlier Jean speaks of the king’s commitment to noble battle by mentioning that no bows or crossbows were being employed. Here he readily accepts the crossbowmen and mentions that, “As soon as the Saracens saw them, … they left us and fled” (Joinville, 225). Earlier Jean saw the king’s battalions being beaten back into a rout and the mounds of dead choking the stream because the king was fighting nobly with melee weapons only. The Saracens that fled from the king’s crossbows at the bridge had been harassing Jean and his little company all day not only with missiles of various types but even Greek fire. At even the sight of the crossbows they immediately ran off. Surely here Jean must be thinking of all the men’s lives that would have been spared if the king was not so committed to ‘noble’ warfare. Jean then moves from the gully of the noble dead to despising the king’s virtue and even using it to manipulate him.

During the ransoming of the king’s men Jean begins to show his impatience with the king and his noble virtue. When the king finds he can not raise enough money to pay the ransom for the remainder of his army he goes to Jean, his seneschal, to solve the problem. After securing more money by basically burgling the Templar Knight’s holdings it is found that they still do not have enough. When this is reported by one Philippe, Jean, “… stamped on … Philippe’s foot, and told the king not to believe him…” (Joinville, 260). The king, in his relentless virtue, demanded the payment to be made if there was indeed a deficit. Jean had already gone too far in the collection of money for the king and
obviously really didn’t care if the ransom was still off but just wanted to be done with it. Later the Saracens violated the treaty the king agreed to and raped the city of Damietta, over which there is much outrage but there is nothing anyone can do about it at the time. Jean doesn’t say a thing but earlier told the king that the, “…Saracens were the shrewdest reckoners in the world” (Joinville, 260). Jean remains silent on the issue of the Saracen’s treaty breaking and travels with the king to Acre. Once in Acre, Jean’s manipulation of the king becomes apparent.

The only voice to plead for the king to stay and basically ‘do the right thing’ is Jean, who is financially hurting. Jean’s incredible military prowess was well demonstrated with his defense of the little bridge over a stream on the field of battle. For his plea to the king’s virtue and the king’s subsequent decision to continue with the Crusade, Jean’s household is financed and he gets money to outfit himself as well. Jean’s play upon the king’s virtue is completely successful. Even though he may speak of the king’s virtue in glowing terms Jean clearly has no respect for it and in fact uses it in order to get what he wants from the king and portrays it as a waste of resources. Although he may not be saintly, Jean certainly doesn’t mind, in fact it seems he dislikes the king for his virtue. It is never told how or why the king made Jean de Joinville his seneschal, but this also happened when Jean was very low on cash, and was followed by an immediate stipend from the king.

Far from being a glowing and wonderful extolling of the saintly king’s life, Jean’s history of the life of saint Louis seems to be much more an indictment of blind goodness and virtue as well as an example of how dangerous, destructive and easy to manipulate it is. Even though he doesn’t come out and state his opinions, they are close to the surface
and the fact that the book was not written until after the king’s death is telling. The
history seems almost to be a cautionary tale to other men of standing about the dangers of
obeying your duty a little too well and being a little too virtuous, as it is a very easy way
to end up dead.