**St. George and the Land of Palestine**

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**Dan Koski**

Dan has been interested in St. George his entire life, and especially since he became a resident of Palestine. He is involved in Marketing and Administration at Tantur, helping other staff members with various tasks and programs.  He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota at Duluth, and has a professional background in Law Enforcement, nonprofits and tourism.  Married to Sofia, a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem district, Dan is involved with the local Orthodox Christian communities.

* + - 1. Introduction. Dan first encountered St. George as a child, and got interested more as he traveled through the Balkans. That was the beginning of a journey that has brought him to the Holy Land.
         1. The relics of St. George are in a crypt in Israel’s city of Lot. St. George is venerated on April 23.
         2. St George is a patron saint of Palestine, and he is one of the first indigenous examples of sainthood.
      2. The Life of St. George (Georgios or Gerrius: “tiller of the land”). “El Ghadr” is the Arabic name.
         1. The World of St. George.

Often mythologized, St. George lived in pre-Christian Palestine during the Emperor Diocletian. The time of the Roman Empire lasted from 200 BC to 350 AD.

Cappadocia, above Syria, was where George was martyred.

* + - * 1. Biography.

George was born in Bethlehem. There is a monastery in El Ghadr. His mother may have been a Roman Palestinian.

Christianity. He inherited his Christianity through his mother, who is an Orthodox saint.

Profession. He was a solider. Diocletian ordered a persecution of Christians. He protested Diocletian’s order. Diocletian disgraced and executed him

* + - * 1. Features of His Life.

George was given poison to drink by a wizard. He did not die. The wizard was persuaded of the spiritual power of St. George.

He was whipped, beaten, hung on a wheel or rack, crucified, placed in a lime pit to starve. On April 23, AD 303 he was beheaded in Nicomedia. St. Andrew was also crucified, but on an x-shaped cross.

* + - * 1. Comments.

What would have happened if he had cooperated with the emperor? He died so soon before the toleration of Constantine. St. George and his cadre of martyrs helped persuade the Roman world that the persecution of Christians was wrong. In 311 there was the Edict of Tolerance by Galerius, and in 313 there was the Edict of Milan.

The early church had so many martyrs, that there weren’t enough days on the calendar to celebrate them.

* + - 1. Byzantine Era.
         1. There is an early icon of St. George in the Sinai. He is depicted as a Byzantine-Hellenic figure, wearing a sword. He is a martyr, but also a warrior-saint. His vocation was a knight or professional soldier. Soldiers could identify with him, and so he aided in evangelizing soldiers.
         2. Contemporary Icons of George.

He has a lance and a breast-plate, but no dragon or horse.

George was not a crusader. Venerable Bede lists St. George, long before the crusades. His cult spread to England and Western Europe, but he was even stronger in the East.

* + - * 1. Pendant.

Pendant of St. George from Cappadocia in the sixth century.

St. George is not absent from any Orthodox community in the world. Every Orthodox Church considers him important.

* + - 1. Islamic Period and Crusades.
         1. Few crusaders had children, but some of the Frankish crusaders did.
         2. Appearances.

Even though people knew about St. George before the crusades, he became popular after the crusades. He even supplanted Edmund as patron of England.

In 1098, St. George appeared in the sky over Syrian Antioch; inn 1099, St. George appeared at the siege of Jerusalem.

* + - * 1. Modern Depictions. Ramsey Abbey in England. In the popular mind, George morphs into a “crusader” saint, especially in the English world.

He was viewed by Baden Powell as a symbol for Scouting. The scout was the modern “page,” the aspirant to knighthood

In WWI, St. George was depicted as slaying the dragon of Germany.

During the Reformation, St. George was preserved as an exemplar of faith and an acceptable saint for veneration.

* + - 1. Ottoman Period.
         1. St. George remained important for Russians and is the patron of Moscow. He was identified with the Romanoff dynasty.
         2. George is connected with the spread of Christianity in the Slavic lands. The horse of St. George is depicted as a white or a black horse.

George is also depicted with Demetrios, the patron of Thessaloniki. The city was liberated by the Turks on the Feast of St. Demetrios. He and George were warrior saints.

There is even a cult of St. George in Kerala and in Goa.

* + - * 1. St. George is seen as the patron of resistance to the Ottoman Turks, and even the patron of those who seek to pay off debts.
      1. Contemporary Iconography.
         1. Features.

He appears with a horse and spear.

The dragon’s tail attacks the rear leg of George’s horse.

The dragon represents original sin.

The Princess Elizabeth is often in the icon, representing Christianity and purity. Her castle represents the church as a fortress.

He saves children who fall into wells.

* + - * 1. Dan’s Story. His Palestinian’s wife’s grandfather fell into a well, and was saved – literally – by St. George.
        2. The Dragon. How does iconography allow for the insertion of a mythological figure, a dragon, into a Christian icon? It is a form of good triumphing over evil.
        3. Contemporary Devotion.

In the late Ottoman period, some churches were dedicated to St. George, and even some Moslems venerate him.

Christians in the Holy Land decorate public buildings with icons of St. George. The icons include a talisman to wear off the evil eye (a heritage of Turkish folklore).

Evangelical Christians in the Holy Land decry St. George because his cult is often linked with protection against the evil eye.

May 6 is the day to celebrate St. George, and even Muslims participate.

* + - * 1. “Summer starts with St. George and ends with the Feast of the Transfiguration.”
      1. In Palestine.
         1. Even in the Palestinian town of El Ghadr, there is a veneration of St. George.

About 100,000 Russian Christians venerate St. George. The castle in their icons has a red star.

Eritreans and Ethiopeans venerate St. George.

* + - * 1. In 2009-2010, an Israeli-Palestinian policeman was seen to honor St. George.
      1. Conclusion.
         1. The Transcendence of St. George: he transcends time and ethnicity.

For some, St. George is about Palestinian liberation theology.

For others, St. George is the patron of xenophobia and national self-protection.

* + - * 1. The Holy Land has a variety of narratives, and St. George can be a symbol for all of them. For Dan Koski, veneration of St. George is a part of daily life.
      1. Discussion. Dan’s discussion shows that St. George can mean many things for many people. Modern scholarship is sometimes called “historical critical” because it is interested in history, and it is self-critical. The early part of Dan’s lecture was historical critical, in that he raised the question of the historicity of St. George and his contribution to the evangelization of the Roman Empire. But it is hard to take a purely historical-critical approach to St. George, because his later development has transformed his identity, and he now stands, in the popular imagination, for many things, some contradictory. If the veneration of icons is not to become individualistic and capricious, a kind of hagiographical “choose your own adventure,” how should we explain the veneration of icons in general, and of St. George in particular?