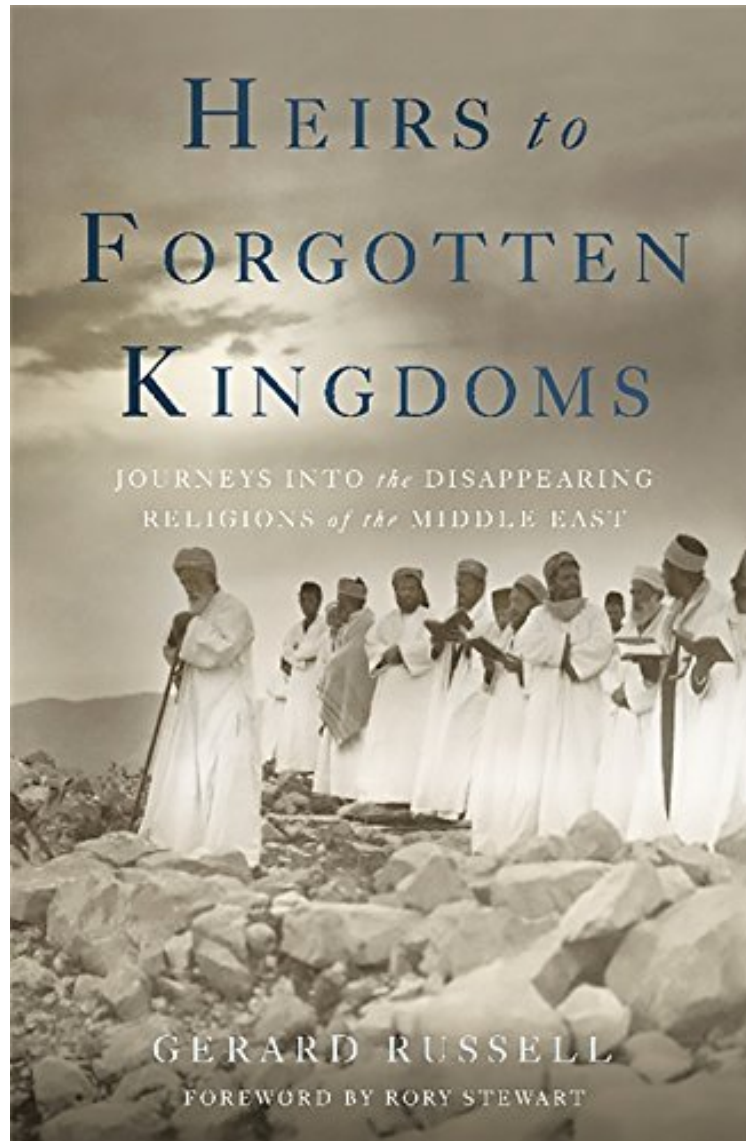


(Mobile book) Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East

## Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East

*Gerard Russell*

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**Gerard Russell : Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East:

58 of 59 people found the following review helpful. So who are the Yazidis and why should I care? By Robert Johnston...that was a question I wondered about. We don't get much background from media who told us ISIL had slaughtered them, hounded them, and then finally corralled them up an obscure mountain called Sinjar to end them. Who are these peculiar people of such primitive, ancient and 'backwoods' roots? The 21st century veil of obscurity is raised here by Russell. Here you can discover the Yazidis and Harranians, the Mandaeans, Zoroastrian's and Bhai, Druze, the Samaritans, the Copts and Kalasha in an extraordinarily well framed witness to "Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms". Russell takes the reader into the lethal peculiarities of these accursed living lines. We can see them through Russell's expert eye as they fade from existence in the harshest ways. This is the story of ancient 'heretics', followers of a lesser god and pagans living in the deepest tribal isolation under the unrelenting pressure of genocide in today's Islamic wars. Russell explores the ancient nuances revealed in the Islamic Sunni vs Shiite real estate grab of today. I was blind to the implications of Islamic 'justice', finally consummated according to medieval fatwas befalling these living heretics and pagans. Here is the story of 8th century justice at last rendered on the living. What struck me most in the fascinating read is the magnitude of the catastrophe. It must be historically unique to the 21st century. How can it be that these tightly knit and ancient enclaves are being lost forever with barely a peep from the mightier powers that might preserve them? Are they just not worth it? This book pulls hard at humanitarian concepts and pulls hardest at the reader's heartstrings ... the 'Last of the Mohicans' is the feeling. It seems this story can't possibly be true but a quick search attests to veracity. What an unmitigated human disaster Russell has profiled. It sticks to me. Russell explores the planet's most endangered species, these humans of a lesser god and of the bloody stain on nations that could make it otherwise. It's the story of witness that I've not seen in my lifetime. The story is incomplete in some ways. The extreme persecutions of the few remaining Jews in Muslim lands are under no less jeopardy ... 10 Jews left in Cairo? This is not a criticism of what the book covers so well. It's simply the fact that there is more to the story. The epilogue as Russell follows the remnants of these communities to exile in America and elsewhere is an uneasy story to conclude upon. Happy they are to be alive, but broken. How will the story continue? This is a 5-star, well written, must read ... for the interested. I found myself embarrassed for 21st century evolved notions of humanity'. I was humbled. A related but more ancient telling of similar calamity caught my attention a while back. If you choose to read this book, you might also enjoy *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It Died*. The Kindle edition is well constructed and the photo's were crisp.

37 of 37 people found the following review helpful. Three reasons I loved this book By Michael Webb

Most reviews of this book focus on its timeliness in the face of ISIS (let alone Modernity). This is no doubt a good reason to read it. But here are some other reasons:

1. What insight into humanity's imagination! Every other page I exclaimed in delight at some marvelous story or ritual that Russell has uncovered - either in an ancient text he has found in some dusty archive, or by direct observation of its practice today. Consider the characters of Mandaean mythology. There is Krun, the flesh mountain, who according to Russell "sounds a bit like Jabba the Hutt"; the dragon Ur, who sits above an ocean of flammable oil, and, Russell's professed favorite, the demon Dinanukht, "who is half man and half book and 'sits by the waters between the worlds, reading himself.'" Or consider the Kalasha, whose rule-makers seem to have had a touch of OCD: "The right hand, the male sex, the high mountains, purity, odd numbers, and life all were affiliated with each other; to these were opposed the left hand, the female sex, the low valleys, impurity, even numbers, and death. So the men sat on the right-hand side of their houses and the women on the left. Likewise, it was men who herded the goats and women who planted crops, men who went into the mountains and women whose place was in the valleys, and women who were prone to all kinds of impurity." Russell then tells how "I was scolded for touching a village house as I passed it, since even this made it impure, and meant more juniper branches would need to be burned to restore its pristine state."
2. You'll learn a lot The author wears his learning lightly, yet it bursts through on every page. What I appreciated especially was the enormous range of his references. For example, a modern Mandaean tells Russell that "I am sure there was a time when Mandaean women could be priests, not just men." Russell not only is able to confirm the particular fact about Mandaeanism: "She was right: in the *Drasa da Yehia* [a Mandaean holy book], a Jewish woman converts to Mandaeanism and becomes a priest." But he also mentions in passing: "Similarly, in ancient Babylon women could serve as priests. For that matter, women occasionally achieved secular positions of power in the ancient Middle East. The ancient Persian navy had a female admiral - Artemisia, back in the fifth century BC - and in the third century AD Palmyra had a powerful queen, Zenobia." He also gives fascinating philosophical and historical context for many of his observations. For example, while describing asceticism, he speculates about the philosophical source of the self-denial: "Society was technologically advanced... Yet cesspits had to be cleaned out by hand, diseases such as typhoid were common, and wounds might easily develop gangrene. The body's weakness and foulness were in strange contrast to the intellect's amazing achievements. Since at this time it was not generally understood that the intellect had any connection with the brain (Galen realized that it did, but Aristotle had thought the brain existed just to release heat from the body), it was easy to suppose that the mind, or soul, could survive without the messiness of the body." What a striking thought - and how simply, and gracefully, argued.
3. Last chance to see? Apart from at the very end, Russell does not say much about what \*he\* thinks about these religions and what's happening to them: he is the dispassionate academic observer, if one with unusual skill, intrepidity, and verve. He

allows his subjects to speak for themselves. But when they do, it is often with considerable passion, beauty, and insight. Consider George, a Palestinian living in a Jewish neighborhood in Detroit. "Coming here [America] was the worst decision I ever made," he tells Russell. "I thought it would be like a salad, every ingredient taking on flavor from the other. It's more like a blender - everything ends up gray." And this is one reason these religions may not be here for much longer, to say nothing of their more violent and deliberate destruction in recent years and months. The modern world must bear a debt of gratitude to Russell for writing this book: the product of a lifetime of learning, and years of travel in the most dangerous places on earth. That his documentation of these ancient religions has yielded something of enduring beauty - and that is, dare I say it, a page-turner - is remarkable. I urge you to buy it.<sup>30</sup> of 31 people found the following review helpful. I learned a lot from this book and have recommended it to friends. By Ellen Robert The subject matter of this book is inherently interesting: small, isolated groups of followers of ancient religions in the middle east. I learned a lot from this book and have recommended it to friends, with a couple of caveats. Too often it read like a travelogue of people the author had talked to and experiences he had. This subject cries out for pictures and maps. The few that were in the book were of poor quality and did not focus on important aspects of the religion or region. I found myself going on-line a lot to dig for images and more detailed general and historical descriptions of the groups described in the book. Nonetheless, I would read it again.

Despite its reputation for religious intolerance, the Middle East has long sheltered many distinctive and strange faiths: one regards the Greek prophets as incarnations of God, another reveres Lucifer in the form of a peacock, and yet another believes that their followers are reincarnated beings who have existed in various forms for thousands of years. These religions represent the last vestiges of the magnificent civilizations in ancient history: Persia, Babylon, Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs. Their followers have learned how to survive foreign attacks and the perils of assimilation. But today, with the Middle East in turmoil, they face greater challenges than ever before. In *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*, former diplomat Gerard Russell ventures to the distant, nearly impassable regions where these mysterious religions still cling to survival. He lives alongside the Mandaean and Ezidis of Iraq, the Zoroastrians of Iran, the Copts of Egypt, and others. He learns their histories, participates in their rituals, and comes to understand the threats to their communities. Historically a tolerant faith, Islam has, since the early 20th century, witnessed the rise of militant, extremist sects. This development, along with the rippling effects of Western invasion, now pose existential threats to these minority faiths. And as more and more of their youth flee to the West in search of greater freedoms and job prospects, these religions face the dire possibility of extinction. Drawing on his extensive travels and archival research, Russell provides an essential record of the past, present, and perilous future of these remarkable religions.

Emma Sky, Senior Fellow at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Yale University Gerard Russell's beautifully written book provides wonderful insights into the Middle East and the beauty of the different cultures that have flourished there for centuries. It is a welcome respite from the usual portrayal of violence in the region, and at the same time a wake-up call of what will be lost if a perverse form of violent extremism is allowed to prevail. At a time when religion is so often seen as a cause of war, this book shows how lives can be enriched by maintaining rituals and beliefs through generations. James Traub, columnist for *foreignpolicy.com* Gerard Russell has written a wonderfully beguiling Baedaker to the vastness of the Middle East, where ancient religions have survived like the remnants of an all-but-extinct species. At a time when the region is boiling with sectarian violence, Russell reminds us that the Arab world, and Islam itself, has given shelter to ancient faiths when Christian Europe would not. *Heirs To Forgotten Kingdoms* is a loving tribute to the ancient and the strange, to spliced genealogies, and to the heroic defense of heterodoxy in an increasingly intolerant world. Carne Ross, former diplomat and founder of Independent Diplomat *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* has the beauty, wisdom, and tragedy of the best elegies. Gerard Russell's book is both timely and necessary, a scholarly and personal observation of religions that are the heritage of all mankind, yet are rapidly disappearing. It is part travelogue and part history of some of the original wellsprings of human culture, both ancient and modern, but also a meditation upon rites and beliefs that are mysterious and fascinating but grievously threatened. *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* is essential reading for everyone who cares about the Middle East, religion, and indeed our common history. Peter Bergen, author of *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* As the al-Qaeda splinter group, ISIS, storms across Syria and Iraq and attempts to destroy the Yazidi religious sect, now comes Gerard Russell, an erudite, polylingual former British diplomat, who documents the fates of the ancient religions of the Middle East, many of which are on the brink of extinction. Russell writes beautifully and reports deeply, and his account of these disappearing religions' will be an enduring anthropology of largely-hidden worlds that may disappear within our own lifetimes. Ali Asani, Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures, Director, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Islamic Studies Program, Harvard University An eloquent and sensitive portrayal of the Middle East's lesser known religions, whose existence is severely threatened by the strident nationalisms and proxy wars that are currently tearing apart a region once renowned for its tolerance. Gerard Russell gives a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, those whose traditions handed down through many centuries are being disregarded and indeed obliterated in a blaze of violence and hatred. He lifts the veil of ignorance'

and reveals just what is at stake both in the Middle East and around the world. Through extensive and meticulous research, and encompassing years of travel to distant places to meet in person those whose lives have been turned upside down, Mr. Russell's passionate message touches the heart and reminds us of the value and beauty of tolerance. Tom Holland, author of *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* It is unbearably poignant that a book so learned and so beautifully written should have been written about the religious minorities of the Middle East just as many of them seem on the verge of extinction. Rarely have I read anything so timely. *Wall Street Journal*