Context:

On the afternoon of August 15, 778, the rear guard of Charlemagne's army was massacred at Roncesvals, in the mountains between France and Spain. Einhard, Charlemagne's contemporary biographer, sets forth the incident as follows in his *Life of Charlemagne*:

*While the war with the Saxons was being fought incessantly and almost continuously, [Charlemagne] stationed garrisons at suitable places along the frontier and attacked Spain with the largest military force he could muster; he crossed the Pyrenees, accepted the surrender of all the towns and fortresses he attacked, and returned with his army safe and sound, except that he experienced a minor setback caused by Gascon treachery on returning through the passes of the Pyrenees. For while his army was stretched out in a long column, as the terrain and the narrow defiles dictated, the Gascons set an ambush above them on the mountaintops—an ideal spot for an ambush, due to the dense woods throughout the area—and rushing down into the valley, fell upon the end of the baggage train and the rear guard who served as protection for those in advance, and in the ensuing battle killed them to the last man, then seized the baggage, and under the cover of night, which was already falling, dispersed as quickly as possible. The Gascons were aided in this feat by the lightness of their armor and by the lay of the land where the action took place, whereas the Franks were hindered greatly by their heavy armor and the terrain. In this battle Eggigard, the surveyor of the royal table; Anselm, the count of the palace; and Roland, prefect of the Breton Marches, were killed, together with many others. Nor could revenge be taken at the moment, for as soon as the act had been done, the enemy scattered so completely that no trace of them was left behind.*

To make sense of his excursions into Spain, we must know that Charlemagne (742?-814), king of the Franks, was a committed, militant Christian. A loyal ally of the pope and a great conqueror, he forced conversions as he expanded the boundaries of his empire outward from his central territory, straddling present-day France and Germany. In 800 he was crowned emperor by the pope, legitimizing his rule over the former Roman empire in western Europe. While Spain was at this time an extremely prosperous, even splendid, Muslim state, European Christianity was rather fragile. Many of the tribes of Europe were pagan, Islam was expanding with phenomenal rapidity, and Spain in particular, at the southern borders of Charlemagne's land, represented just how precarious was Christianity's hold. In 778 Charlemagne invaded Spain, trying to take advantage of skirmishes between the Muslim rulers, but was repulsed at Saragossa. Later on, in 801, decades after the disaster at Roncesvals, vassals of Charlemagne were able to capture Barcelona and establish a frontier just beyond the Pyrenees. They never, however, got more than this slender foothold on the peninsula.

In the reliable chronicles, Roland and the Roncesvals massacre get only a brief mention. Perhaps, as some have suggested, the massacre really was a very bad blow to Charlemagne's empire, instead of the "minor setback" described by Einhard, and perhaps Roland was in fact much more than an ordinary "prefect of the Breton Marches"; perhaps, as Charlemagne's official historian, Einhard was trying to make an embarrassing defeat and a painful loss sound less grave than they were. We do not know. In any case, the story told in *The Song of Roland* has some connection to the history of Charlemagne's failed conquest of Spain in 778, but this connection is rather loose. Most of the story is doubtless just a story, without historical basis. *The Song of Roland* is not a history book, but an epic poem which takes all sorts of liberties, making vivid heroes out of dusty names, making adversaries into the most revolting of villains, and throwing on all alike an air of grandeur. It does not give us facts—any quick comparison shows that it contradicts the records of history in a thousand places—but instead legend.

While this epic isn't history in the same way that even Einhard's very biased chronicle, for instance, is, it *uses* history to great effect. We cannot say for certain who wrote *The Song of Roland*, or when, or where, but
evidence suggests that it was composed around the beginning of the twelfth century, centuries after Charlemagne's reign. This was the time of the First Crusade against the Muslims in the Holy Land, directly inspired by Pope Urban II's famous speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095. Urban exhorted all Christendom to fight for the Sepulcher, promising that such war was holy and that fighting in it counted as full penance. It is probable that the Song of Roland was written after this speech, for before this Turpin's militant theology would likely have been considered heretical. The Song of Roland, born during this time, serves the Crusades as a powerful piece of propaganda. It must be remembered that political and ideological motivations do not affect a poem's stature as a poem; The Song of Roland is certainly propaganda, but it does not therefore follow that it is "mere propaganda." Most works of art contain ideological or political elements, or at least make ideological or political assumptions; what ultimately distinguishes "mere propaganda" from real art is not political content, but aesthetic success. And by that standard, The Song of Roland deserves its place in the canon of medieval literature.

By the time that the The Song of Roland was written, more than three centuries after the events it recounts, Charlemagne had become a superhuman figure in the European imagination and a hero of romance; the stories of his exploits assumed the proportions of the fantastic. He provides an ideal base on which to build enthusiasm for the Crusades. While no one thought of going on a Crusade until centuries after his death, his figure as both a man of God, beatified and in some churches honored as a saint—he was thought to have been in communication with the angels and the direct instrument of God's will on earth—and as fierce a warrior as any made his image an excellent symbol for the spirit of the Crusades. The bits of history that find their way into the The Song of Roland are remolded to fit the crusaders' world-view. The massacre at Roncesvals becomes much more than a mishap; it becomes a drama of good and evil, a demonstration of the wickedness of betraying the Christian cause. While in Einhard's chronicle, the Frankish soldiers are ambushed by Gascons, a group of Christians hostile to Charles's empire, in The Song of Roland, they are ambushed by Saracens, the medieval European term for Arabs, and, by extension, all Muslims. This helps the crusaders of the twelfth century all the more easily see the situation of the Franks in The Song of Roland as applicable to their own. Charlemagne's conquest of Spain becomes a model for their own conquest of the Middle East. Roland, Turpin, and Olivier become their own glorious forefathers, demonstrating the ideal of the holy warrior, who serves God and his king with the same fierce loyalty; the portrayal of the Saracens, on the other hand, demonstrates the blatant evil of the Muslims, the enemy they will meet and fight in the Middle East. The final product of the epic poem has everything to do with the needs of the twelfth century and very little to do with the events of the eighth century; however, one of the needs of the men of the twelfth century was to find a heroic model for their own mission in the past.

Summary:

Charlemagne's army is fighting the Muslims in Spain. The last city standing is Saragossa, held by the Muslim king Marsilla. Terrified of the might of Charlemagne's army of Franks, Marsilla sends out messengers to Charlemagne, promising treasure and Marsilla's conversion to Christianity if the Franks will go back to France. Charlemagne and his men are tired of fighting and decide to accept this peace offer. They need now to select a messenger to go back to Marsilla's court. The bold warrior Roland nominates his stepfather Ganelon. Ganelon is enraged; he fears that he'll die in the hands of the bloodthirsty pagans and suspects that this is just Roland's intent. He has long hated and envied his stepson, and, riding back to Saragossa with the Saracen messengers, he finds an opportunity for revenge. He tells the Saracens how they could ambush the rear guard of Charlemagne's army, which will surely be led by Roland as the Franks pick their way back to Spain through the mountain passes, and helps the Saracens plan their attack.

Just as the traitor Ganelon predicted, Roland gallantly volunteers to lead the rear guard. The wise and moderate Olivier and the fierce archbishop Turpin are among the men Roland picks to join him. Pagans ambush them at Roncesvals, according to plan; the Christians are overwhelmed by their sheer numbers. Seeing how badly
outnumbered they are, Olivier asks Roland to blow on his oliphant, his horn made out of an elephant tusk, to call for help from the main body of the Frankish army. Roland proudly refuses to do so, claiming that they need no help, that the rear guard can easily take on the pagan hordes. While the Franks fight magnificently, there's no way they can continue to hold off against the Saracens, and the battle begins to turn clearly against them. Almost all his men are dead and Roland knows that it's now too late for Charlemagne and his troops to save them, but he blows his oliphant anyway, so that the emperor can see what happened to his men and avenge them. Roland blows so hard that his temples burst. He dies a glorious martyr's death, and saints take his soul straight to Paradise.

When Charlemagne and his men reach the battlefield, they find only dead bodies. The pagans have fled, but the Franks pursue them, chasing them into the river Ebro, where they all drown. Meanwhile, the powerful emir of Babylon, Baligant, has arrived in Spain to help his vassal Marsilla fend off the Frankish threat. Baligant and his enormous Muslim army ride after Charlemagne and his Christian army, meeting them on the battlefield at Roncesvales, where the Christians are burying and mourning their dead. Both sides fight valiantly. But when Charlemagne kills Baligant, all the pagan army scatter and flee. Now Saragossa has no defenders left; the Franks take the city. With Marsilla's wife Bramimonde, Charlemagne and his men ride back to Aix, their capital in sweet France.

The Franks discovered Ganelon's betrayal some time ago and keep him in chains until it is time for his trial. Ganelon argues that his action was legitimate revenge, openly proclaimed, not treason. While the council of barons, which Charlemagne gathered to decide the traitor's fate is initially swayed by this claim, one man, Thierry, argues that, because Roland was serving Charlemagne when Ganelon delivered his revenge on him, Ganelon's action constitutes a betrayal of the emperor. Ganelon's friend Pinabel challenges Thierry to trial by combat; the two will fight a duel to see who's right. By divine intervention, Thierry, the weaker man, wins, killing Pinabel. The Franks are convinced by this of Ganelon's villainy and sentence him to a most painful death. The traitor is torn limb from limb by galloping horses and thirty of his relatives are hung for good measure.

Themes:

The story of The Song of Roland is essentially the very old, inexhaustible story of the struggle between good and evil. The sides are as clearly marked as they come: the Christian Franks, led by Charlemagne, represent the good and the will of God, while the Muslim Saracens, led by Marsilla and Baligant, represent the purest evil. The good, in the medieval world-view, will always triumph in the end; this is the inevitable result of a good and all-powerful God who takes a real interest in human events. The characters clearly have free will; God didn't step down and stop Ganelon's dastardly plot before it took lethal effect. All the same, God intervenes fairly often to make sure that good comes out in the end; thus, for instance, Thierry miraculously beats Pinabel in a duel. Although he is the weaker man, he is just and right, and God makes sure he wins.

The presentation of the other side, of the Muslims, poses a problem for the poet: he must make them unquestionably evil and base, clearly less noble, less manly, and less brave than the Christians, but nonetheless a worthy enemy. Accuracy, of course, figures in not at all. His solution is to make the Saracens the reverse image, the evil twins, of the Christians, both opposite and identical. For instance, the Muslims of The Song of Roland worship Mohammed, Termagant, and Apollo, mirroring the form of the Christian Trinity but signifying the most villainous idolatry. Never mind that the Muslims are actually much more strictly monotheistic than Christians; the Christians of the early Middle Ages saw in Islam, which they knew next to nothing about, just another form of paganism, as signified by the notion that Muslims worshipped the ancient Greek god Apollo. Likewise, there are twelve Saracen peers to match the twelve Frankish peers on the battlefield; the opposing
armies organize themselves into the same forms, but the Christians fight more nobly. At times the need to make the Muslims a worthwhile adversary, to make the struggle more compelling and the eventual Christian victory more satisfying, comes to the fore. The description of Baligant in particular is shaped by the need to make him worthy of fighting Charlemagne. And so he is praised—"God, what a lord, if he were but a Christian!". The poet also enjoys spicing his depiction of the Saracens with a touch of the exotic; the description, while Baligant assembles his forces, of curious peoples from far-away lands, with all their peculiarities, is accomplished with an eye for the colorful detail.

The depiction of the larger-than-life heroism of the Christians is organized around the idea of vassalage. The obedience that a knight owes his lord is a model for the obedience that a man owes the Lord, and vice versa. The relation between man and God was truly feudal. And thus it made as much sense to go to war for God as it did for a local baron, only it was of course much holier. One can think of feudal society as a pyramid scheme; the peasants offered the local seigneur allegiance, fealty, and hard work in return for protection and so on up through the various ranks of nobility—the lesser noble owed the greater noble fealty in return for protection, and the greater noble had the same deal going with a still greater noble—all the way up to the king and then to God at the apex. This total synthesis of economics, military strategy, and religion into the same basic feudal pattern, in which each aspect justified and served as a model for the others, is brilliantly summed up by Roland's dying gesture. He lifts up to the heavens and to God his right-hand glove—the gesture of a vassal's fealty to his lord, repeated throughout the poem in the more ordinary, earth-bound context—and Saint Gabriel comes down to accept it. He dies the true vassal of the Lord, which he demonstrates by the same gestures he would make to an earthly lord, and thus is taken to Paradise.

Some have tried to fit the Roncesvals massacre into the pattern of the classical tragedy. Up to a point, this seems to work. Roland seems to be in the situation of the tragic hero; it is his pride that causes him not to blow the oliphant and call back Charlemagne's troops before it is too late. And he dies of a self-inflicted wound—not by a well-aimed blow from a Saracen, but by his burst temples, the result of his blowing his horn so hard. But the glory of Roland's death contradicts such an interpretation. He dies a martyr. The significance seems to lie less in his flaws than in how his perfect fealty to the Lord, as shown in particular by his recognition of the absoluteness of the values that the Franks are fighting for in Spain and his refusal to compromise with the Saracens, makes his flaws irrelevant. The passion with which he fights for Christendom saves him. We see the great value that the author of The Song of Roland ascribes to passion by how he describes the weeping, the moaning, even the fainting away of his bravest characters. It is their capacity for strong emotions, not self-discipline or stoic virtues or anything of that sort, that makes them great. Roland's closest comrade, Olivier, is a fine and noble man, and he does not make the mistakes of pride that Roland does—"Roland is bold, Olivier is wise"—but he lacks the great passion, and thus the great heroism and the great reward, of Roland, who goes in the end beyond wisdom.