

REASONS FOR DWINDLING OF ZOROASTRIANS

Dr, Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

What Montgomery Watt (*The Formative period of Islamic Thought*, the University Press, Edinburgh, 1973, (pp. 20-22) notes about the extremist and fanatical views of the early Arab sects such as the Kharijites and Azraqites may help one to understand how Zoroastrians dwindled from millions to about eight to ten thousand in Persia by the nineteenth century. Just as the members of a nomadic tribe regarded as potential enemies members of all other tribes, except where there was an alliance, so the Kharijite bodies tended to regard all outsiders, even Muslims of differing views, as enemies whose blood might be shed. This justified not merely raiding of the desert type but also activities that were little better than brigandage.

The Kharijite bands differed from desert clans, however, in that they had an Islamic basis. Strange as it seems to the occidental observer, their brigandage was combined with a vigorous religious faith.

The first doctrinal development beyond the position of the earliest Kharijities is generally ascribed to Ibn-al-Azraq and his followers, the Azraqites. Ibn-al-Azraq was not an academic or theoretical thinker, but was deeply involved in affairs as a political and military leader.

The Kharijites were strong enough and the opponents weak – and this happened several times in the region between Basra and al-Ahwaz and also elsewhere – pillage, arson and massacre became the order of the day, and none were exempt except those who actively supported the Azraqites.

The doctrinal position of the Kharijite Ibn-al-Azraq was very much influenced by the conception of group solidarity. They held that “those who 'sat still' and did not 'go out' or actively associate themselves with the group prosecuting the struggle against the unbelievers were themselves breaking a divine command and therefore unbelievers. In effect this meant that the only true Muslims were the persons in the Azraqite camp. The corollary was that all other persons -(except the *Dhimmas*) who had officially received 'protection' (*dhimma*) might lawfully be robbed or killed. This was the religious justification of their terrorism. Moreover it applied also to the wives and children of non-Azraqite Muslims, since by their conception of group solidarity the families of unbelievers were also unbelievers. Because when they encountered other Muslims they questioned them about their beliefs the word *isti'rad*, which properly means 'questioning', came to connote

'indiscriminate killing' of theological opponents. Before joining the Azraqites, too, a test (*mihna*) was made; and this is said to have consisted in giving the candidate a prisoner to kill. If the man complied, he would be more closely bound to the Azraqite body, since, especially if the man killed was of his own tribe, he would have broken existing ties, and would be dependent on the Azraqites for 'protection'. This test, however may have been an occasional rather than a regular practice.