

Selected Book Review and Quotations from The Assassins – A Radical Sect in Islam by Bernard Lewis – 2003 Basic Books

In chapter one, Lewis gives quotes from the Crusade period in which the existence of the Assassins cult is gradually revealed. Lewis remarks of the quotes regarding the Syrian activities of this group, "The word first appears in the chronicles of the Crusades, as the name of a strange group of Muslim sectaries in the Levant, led by a mysterious figure known as the Old Man of the Mountain, and abhorrent, by their beliefs and practices, to good Christians and Muslims alike." – p. 2

One of the earliest descriptions is by an envoy of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1175.

"Note, that on the confines of Damascus, Antioch, and Aleppo there is a certain race of Saracens in the mountains, who in their own vernacular are called Heysessini, and in Roman segnors de montana....They live in the mountains and are well-nigh impregnable, for they withdraw into well-fortified castles. Their country is not very fertile, so that they live on their cattle. They have among them a Master, who strikes the greatest fear into all the Saracen princes both far and near, as well as the neighbouring Christian lords. For he has a habit of killing them in an astonishing way. The method by which this is done is as follows: this prince possesses in the mountains numerous and most beautiful palaces, surrounded by very high walls, so that none can enter except by a small and very well guarded door. In these palaces he has many of the sons of his peasants brought up from early childhood. He has them taught various languages, as Latin, Greek, Roman, Saracen as well as many others. These young men are taught by their teachers from their earliest youth to their full manhood, that they must obey the lord of their land in all his words and commands; and that if they do so, he, who has power over all living gods, will give them the joys of paradise. They are also taught that they cannot be saved if they resist his will in anything. Note that, from the time when they are taken in as children, they see no one but their teachers and masters and receive no other instruction until they are summoned to the presence of the Prince to kill someone. When they are in the presence of the Prince, he ask them if they are willing to obey his commands, so that he may bestow paradise on them. Whereupon, as they have been instructed, and without any objection or doubt, they throw themselves at his feet and reply with fervour, that they will obey him in all things that he may

command. Thereupon the Prince gives each one of them a golden dagger and sends them out to kill whichever prince he has marked down."

A few years later William of Tyre continues to add these details, "At once whoever receives the command sets out on his mission, without considering the consequences of the deed nor the possibility of escape. Zealous to complete his task, he toils and labours as long as may be needful, until chance gives him the opportunity to carry out his chief's orders. Both our people and the Saracens call them Assassini; we do not know the origin of this name."

In 1192 the first Crusader victim falls to the Assassins, Conrad of Montferrat, King of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. This made a profound impression on those who chronicled such history, such as the comments of German Arnold of Lubeck.

"I shall now relate things about this elder which appear ridiculous, but which are attested to me by the evidence of reliable witnesses. This Old Man has by his witchcraft so bemused the men of his country, that they neither worship nor believe in any God but himself. Likewise he entices them in a strange manner with such hopes and with promises of such pleasures with eternal enjoyment, that they prefer rather to die than to live. Many of the even, when standing on a high wall, will jump off at his nod or command, and shattering their skulls, die a miserable death. The most blessed, so he affirms, are those who shed the blood of men and in revenge for such deeds themselves suffer death.He hands them knives which are, so to speak, consecrated to this affair, and then intoxicates them with such a potion that they are plunged into ecstasy and oblivion, display to them by his magic certain fantastic dreams..."

William of Rubruck, a Flemish priest traveled in Persia on a diplomatic mission and found that the Persian word for the Assassins was Muliach – a corruption of the Arabic word mulhid. " The word literally means deviator, and was commonly applied to deviant religious sects, and particularly to the Ismailis, the group to which the Assassins belonged. It appears again in the account of a very much more famous traveller who passed through Persia in 1273, and describes the fortress and valley of Alamut, for long the headquarters of the sect.? P. 6

"Austrian orientalist, Joseph von Hammer, published in German in 1818 The History of the Assassins. Hammer's history, though based on oriental sources, is very much a tract of the times – a warning against 'the pernicious influence of secret societies... and ... the dreadful prostitution of religion to the horrors of unbridled ambition'. For him the Assassins were a 'union of impostors and dupes which, under the mask

of a more austere creed and severer morals, undermined all religion and morality; that order of murderers, beneath whose daggers the lords of nations fell'. In case any of his readers missed the point, Hammer compares the Assassins with the Templars, the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and the regicides of the French National Convention. 'As in the West, revolutionary societies arose from the Freemasons, so in the east, did the Assassins spring from the Ismailites...' " p. 12,13.

Under the Mongol Invasion of Persia in 1256, the Ismaili Iman Rukn al-Din gave orders for the fortresses to surrender, but some held out. When Rukn al-Din was murdered himself in a ruse by the Mongols the vast majority were wiped out. But "the extirpation of the Ismailis in Persia was not quite as thorough as a Juvayni suggests. In the eyes of the sectaries, Rukn al-Din's small son succeeded him as Iman on his death, and lived to sire a line of Imams from which, in due course, the Aga Khans emerged in the nineteenth century." – p. 95.

On the practice of killing rulers Lewis writes; " The Shi'a claimed that it was their Imams, and other members of the House of the Prophet, who were being murdered at the instigation of the Sunni Caliphs; their literature includes long lists of Alid martyrs, whose blood called for vengeance. In sending their emissaries to kill the unrighteous, the Ismailis could thus invoke an old Islamic tradition. ...The ancient ideal of tyrannicide, the religious obligation to rid the world of an unrighteous ruler, certainly contributed to the practice of assassination, as adopted and applied by the Ismailis. But there was more to it than that. The killing by the Assassin of his victim was not only an act of piety; it also has a sacramental quality. In all their murders, in both Persia and Syria, the Assassins always used a dagger; never poison, never missiles....the Assassin is almost always caught, and usually make no attempt to escape; there is even a suggestion that to survive a mission was shameful." P. 127

In comparing the relatively ineffective attacks of the Assassins against the Crusaders Lewis writes the following; "The Old Man of the Mountain,' says Joinville, speaking of a later Ismaili chief in Syria,'paid tribute to the Templars and the Hospitalers, because they feared nothing from the Assassins, since the Old Man could gain nothing if he caused the Master of the Temple or of the Hospital to be killed; for he knew very well that if he had one killed, another just as good would replace him, and for this reason he did not wish to lose Assassins where he could gain nothing. The two orders of knighthood were integrated institutions, with an institutional structure, hierarchy and loyalty, which made them immune to attack by assassination. It was the absence of these qualities that made the

atomized Islamic state, with centralized, autocratic power based on personal and transient loyalties, peculiarly vulnerable to it." P.130-31

In summing up his history Lewis quotes the Russian Scholar V.V. Barthold. " In his view, the real meaning of the Assassin movement was a war of the castles against the cities – a last, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the rural Iranian aristocracy to resist the new, urban social order of Islam. Pre-Islamic Persia had been a knightly society, to which the city had come as an Islamic innovation. Like the barons – and robber-barons – of medieval Europe, the Persian land-owning knights, with the support of the village population, waged war from their castles against this alien and encroaching new order. The Assassins were a weapon in this war.

Later Russian scholars revised and refined Barthold's attempt at an economic explanation of Ismailism. The Ismailis were not against the towns as such, in which they had their own supporters, but against certain dominant elements in the towns – the rulers and military and civil notables, the new feudal lords and the officially favoured devines. Moreover the Ismailis could not simply be equated with the old nobility. They did not inherit their castles, but seized them, and their support came not so much from those who still owned their estates, as from those who had lost them to new owners – to the tax-farmers, officials and officers who had received grants of land and revenues from the new rulers at the expense of the gentry and peasantry."