



‘ALĪ BESTĀMĪ

‘ALĪ BESTĀMĪ, MOLLĀ, early Bābī *‘ālem* and member of the *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* or *sābeqūn*, the first followers of the Bāb. Born (date unknown) near Bestām in Khorasan, he studied in Mašhad where he embraced the tenets of the Šaykī school. Later, in Karbalā, he became a close disciple of the head of the school, Sayyed Kāzem Raštī. Following the latter’s death in 1259/1844, he was one of the first to accept the claims of the Bāb in Shiraz and, in the autumn of that year, headed for Iraq on the Bāb’s orders to urge those claims among the Šaykīs of the region. In Naʿjaf, he presented a letter from the Bāb to Shaikh Moḥammad-Ḥasan Naʿjafī, the leading Shi‘ite *‘ālem* of the period; a violent debate ensued in the course of which Bestāmī was expelled from the city. This marks the first direct clash between orthodox Shi‘ism and the emerging Bābī sect. Arriving in Karbalā about October, 1844, Bestāmī soon aroused fierce opposition among the Shi‘ite *‘olamā*, while winning many converts among the Šaykī population. The controversies thus engendered and the spread of various early works of the Bāb that Mollā ‘Alī had brought to Karbalā led to his arrest and transfer to prison in Baghdad on the orders of the governor, Naʿjīb Pāšā, who summoned the leading Shi‘ite *‘olamā* from Naʿjaf and Karbalā to hold a court of inquiry with the Sunni *‘olamā* of Baghdad, apparently the first meeting of its kind. This court met on 13 January 1845 and reached a contradictory verdict, the Sunnis arguing for the death penalty on grounds of heresy, the Shi‘ites for imprisonment or banishment. The trial and its outcome threatened to cause serious trouble in the region, already in a state of messianic turmoil as a result of Bestāmī’s proclamation of the imminent advent of the Imam. The verdict was reported to the British Foreign Secretary



in London, while the British and Russian envoys in Istanbul made representations to the Sublime Porte that Beṣṭāmī's punishment be commuted. Requests for the transfer of Beṣṭāmī to Iran were made by Ḥājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī, the grand vizier, and Moḥebb-'Alī Khan, governor of Kermānšāh. The interest of these parties indicates the nature of Sunni/Shi'ite, Ottoman/Iranian tensions in Iraq at the period, tensions which Beṣṭāmī's preaching had served to acerbate. Naḥīb Pāšā had the matter referred to the Sublime Porte and, at the end of April, following orders received from there, he had Beṣṭāmī transferred to Istanbul. There, it appears, he was sentenced to labor in the docks, where he died in prison toward the end of 1846. Some secondary sources note that he was banished to Karkūk, but this is based on a misreading of the Turkish word *kürek* ("forced labor") in a letter published in *Ẓohūr al-ḥaqq* (p. 109).

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