

after less than

two years was back in Karbala.

Mulla `Ali was one of those who accompanied Sayyid Kazim Rashti on his last pilgrimage to

Kazimayn and was in Karbala when Sayyid Kazim died on 2 January 1844. This event caused a

crisis in the Shaykhi community because Sayyid Kazim had not appointed a successor. After

several weeks of indecision, some of the disciples including Mulla `Ali retired to the mosque of

Kufih for forty days of fasting and prayer (i`tikaf). They then decided to set off in search of the

new leader to whom Sayyid Kazim had alluded. Mulla `Ali, who reached Shiraz and recognized

the Bab about a month after Mulla Husayn Bushru'i (q.v.), was given the titles Thani man

amana ("the second who believed") and Letter of the Living, and may, in view of a statement

in the Persian Bayan (q.v.), have been regarded as the return of the Imam `Ali (BYP 1:3). He is

said to have been led to the Bab by a vision.

2. Mission to Iraq. The Bab instructed Mulla `Ali to go to Bushihr and meet there with the

Bab's uncle Haji Mirza Sayyid Muhammad (see "Afnan.1.c"). He then went to Najaf, a holy

city in Iraq that is the site of the shrine of the Imam `Ali and a center of Shi`i scholarship.

There he delivered a message from the Bab to Shaykh Muhammad Hasan Najafi, the foremost

Shi`i mujtahid of the day. The message was abruptly rejected and Mulla `Ali expelled from the

city. He arrived in Karbala, the other important center of Shi`i scholarship in Iraq and the

headquarters of the Shaykhi movement. Here he spread the writings of the Bab, especially

among the Shaykhis, many of whom accepted the message. So great was the messianic fervor

and controversy that resulted that it was even reported in the dispatches of the British consul in

Baghdad (BBR 83-89).

Eventually, the Shi`i `ulama in Karbala had Mulla `Ali arrested and transferred to Baghdad.

Najib Pasha, the governor of Baghdad, convened the most prominent of the Sunni and Shi`i

`ulama on 13 January 1845 to try Mulla `Ali. Among those gathered were Shaykh Mahmud al-Alusi, the Mufti of Baghdad; nineteen other Sunni `ulama; Shaykh Hasan ibn Kashifi'l-Ghita',

the leading Shi`i figure after Shaykh Muhammad-Hasan; Sayyid Muhammad-Baqir Qazvini, the

foremost cleric in Karbala, who had been the bitter enemy of Sayyid Kazim; Shaykh Hasan

Gawhar, a leading Shaykhi; and five other Shi`i `ulama.

Accounts of the proceedings are confused and contradictory. However, the written verdict of

the court is extant. It reveals that the court had examined a copy of the Qayyumu'l-Asma (q.v.,

which Mulla `Ali had brought with him) and had grasped the fact that the author of the book

was claiming divine revelation. The Sunni `ulama unhesitatingly pronounced both the author

and the bearer of the book to be heretics and condemned them to death. The Shi`i `ulama were

more guarded in their verdicts (probably because the affair had been politicized into a Sunni

versus Shi`i, and Turk versus Iranian issue) and refused to countenance more serious

punishment than banishment or imprisonment.

The events associated with Mulla `Ali in Najaf and Karbala and his trial in Baghdad are of

importance for several reasons. First, the commotion caused by Mulla `Ali and the willingness

of large numbers to accept his message was in itself remarkable--especially as the Bab had told

Mulla `Ali not to reveal the Bab's identity at first. The message of the Bab

reached here a level

of public awareness and controversy that was not seen elsewhere in the early years of the Bab's

ministry. Second, these events mark the first clash between the nascent Babi-Bahá'í religion and

the `ulama of Islam (Shaykh Muhammad-Hasan's rejection of the message brought by Mulla

`Ali is referred to in the Kitab-i-Aqdas, q.v., KA 166:79). The verdict of the court set the

pattern for later Muslim denunciations of the new religion. Third, the opposition met by Mulla

`Ali from both the religious and secular authorities altered the course of Babi history in that it

persuaded the Bab to abandon his original plan of proceeding from Mecca directly to Karbala.

The affair of Mulla `Ali had wider consequences in that it even threatened relations between

Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Concerned to maintain the jurisdiction of the Iranian

government over its subjects in Iraq, Haji Mirza Aqasi (q.v.) and Muhibb-`Ali Khan, the

governor of Kirmanshah, insisted on Mulla `Ali's return to Iran. The foreign ambassadors in

Istanbul were involved in attempts to mediate. The event is of importance in Islamic history

also: the coming together of Sunni and Shi`i `ulama to give a joint fatwa was unprecedented in

modern times and also marked the first occasion in which the Ottoman Empire had accorded

the Shi`i `ulama official recognition as a judicial authority.

3. Imprisonment and death. When the Iranian government intervened, Najib Pasha referred the

matter to Istanbul in a letter dated 25 January 1845. In mid-April instructions arrived to the

effect that Mulla `Ali should be sent to Istanbul. After being kept at Bolu for a time, he was

brought to Istanbul. He was interrogated there again and openly declared his

belief in the

message of the Bab. Since the authorities feared that if he were simply exiled to one of the

Aegean islands he would continue to spread the Babi teachings, he was sentenced to hard labor

in the naval dockyards outside Istanbul.

The Iranian government, however, continued to press for his extradition for punishment in

Iran. Eventually the Ottoman authorities agreed, but according to an Iranian report dated 4

December 1846, when orders were sent to release him from his forced labor, it was found that

he had died a few days earlier. He was thus the first Babi to die for his faith.

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See also GPB 10; DB 66-69, 87-92; ZH 3:105-9; BHD 58-68.

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