

Story 1080 (1980 Tape 1)

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Behlül Dane¹ as Advocate of All Mankind

Behlül Dane, who lived in Baghdad during the time of Harun Reşit, was a saint.² He was actually a brother of Harun Reşit, and the Caliph frequently took advice from him. Nobody said anything was one if Behlül Dane said that it was two.

One year there was a famine in that area. The padişah³ gave an order to this effect: "Have bread distributed to all of the Moslems." There were, however, many people in Baghdad at that time who were not Moslems. When Behlül Dane heard about his brother's order, he went to the mosque and said to the imam,⁴ "Let me lead the prayer service today."

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¹Behlül Dane is largely a legendary figure in the Moslem past of the Abbassid Period. Whether there is any historicity to this figure is questionable, though until the 18th century there was a grave at Baghdad that was supposedly his. He was said to be the mad half-brother of Harun Reşit (Haroun al-Raschid), greatest of the Abbassid caliphs, who flourished around 800. There was method in his alleged "madness," for his antic behavior was a "cover" for his role as satirist and critic of worldliness of the powerful and wealthy--notably the caliph himself. At times he was, like the Jewish schlemihl, a saintly fool.

²The word used for saint here is veli.

³The word padişah refers to a political leader, most often in Turkish folktales to a sultan. But it is also used for any ruler. Here the caliph is called padişah.

⁴An imam is a prayer leader in the mosque.

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The imam agreed to this, and Behlül Dane went to the front of the mosque to conduct the service.

While Behlül Dane was reciting the Fatiha prayer,⁵ he said, "Elhamdulillah rabbil müslimin," instead of "Elhamdulillah rabbil alemin." In other words, he prayed incorrectly. When he had finished leading the prayer service, he went home. But he had not been there very long before worshipers from the mosque arrived also to complain about him to the padişah.

The padişah said to these people, "Behlül Dane does not make any mistakes about religious matters. This may somehow be my fault. Let me call him here and ask him about it." When Behlül Dane had been called, Harun Reşit asked him, "Why did you change the words in the Fatiha prayer today, my brother?"

Behlül Dane answered, "You ordered that bread be given to Moslems during the famine. You made no provision for the people who are not Moslems. It was you, therefore, who changed the Fatiha prayer. That prayer says, 'God is everybody's God. He gives sustenance to everyone.'"

Then Harun Reşit said, "Forgive me." He immediately thereafter changed his order concerning the famine. He ordered, "Give bread to everybody."

⁵This is the first prayer in the Koran.