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Seeing the Proof: The Question of Contacting the Hidden Imam in Early Twelver Shī'ī Islam

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Mar-2013

Abstract (summary):

The history of what has come to be known as Twelver Shī'ī Islam since the late 3rd/9th century is a history of attempts to deal with the abrupt loss of the Imam. According to the Imāmi/Twelver Shī'a, the final Imam, known most famously as the Qā'im and Mahdī, did not die like the Prophet Muḥammad and the previous eleven Imams but rather concealed himself (commonly referred to as the Imam's ghayba or occultation) and continues to be physically alive on earth while waiting for the appointed time of his (re)appearance. A letter said to have been dictated by the Imam in the year 329/941 on the eve of what has come to be known as the period of the Greater Occultation declared anyone who claims to see him before his return a "lying impostor." Based on a critical study of this letter and the earliest extant Shī'ī sources concerning the occultation and in particular the question of seeing and contacting the Hidden Imam, this dissertation will show that in the early years of the Greater Occultation, Shī'ī authorities maintained that seeing the Imam was no longer possible. This position, however, proved untenable to maintain before historical exigencies and the incessant longing for direct contact with the Imam. Almost a century after the start of the Greater Occultation, prominent scholars began to concede the possibility that some Shī'a can see the Hidden Imam, thus foreshadowing a radical shift. A century later, accounts began to appear detailing encounters between the Imam and the most privileged of his votaries in a wakeful state. In the earliest accounts, the Imam is most often presented as a healer and miracle-worker. It is much later, after the Imam's final letter had been negotiated, that the stories of encounters with him began to grow in number and become more embellished. While the Imam continues working miracles, in some of these later accounts, he also answers vexing legal or theological questions to prominent Shī'ī ulama, in essence providing the same direct knowledge to his de facto surrogates that is believed to have been suspended when the Greater Occultation began.

URI:<http://hdl.handle.net/1807/69004>

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He has published extensively on Shī'ī Islam, including *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* (New York 1994), *Revelation and Falsification: The Kitāb al-Qirā'āt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī* (with E. Kohlberg, Leiden 2009), *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London—New York 2011). He received his Ph.D. in 2012 from the University of Toronto, having written his dissertation on the question of encounters with the Hidden Imām in early Twelver Shī'ī Islam. On the Shī'ī side, the Imām already represents the principle of infallible guidance. See S.A. Arjomand, *The Consolation of Theology: the Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shi'ism*, in *The Journal of Religion* 76/4 (1996), 548–571, 556. Among its earlier modern bearers one may find religio-political leaders of the constitutional revolution of 1905 to 1911, Sayyids 'Abd Allāh Bihbahānī (d. 1910) and Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1918). But anticonstitutionalist mujtahids were also called “ayatollah,” and a spiritual leader, 'Abd al-Karīm Ḥā'irī-Yazdī (d. 1937), founder of the new theological center of Qom, is said to be the first mujtahid to bear this title. *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*. Chicago, 1984. Arjomand, Said Amir. *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York and Oxford, 1988. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. New Haven, Conn., 1985. Nasr, Vali. Proof #7: Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV is the forty-ninth hereditary Imam of Shi'i Islam in direct, documented, lineal descent from Mawlana Isma'il ibn Ja'far al-Sadiq. When faced with reports that Ismail was reportedly seen alive after his supposed funeral, the Twelver scholar Shaykh as-Saduq, who above was quoted saying that God changed His mind because He was unaware Ismail would die, now produces hadiths where the Imam Ja'far allegedly says that a demon was appearing in the form of his son Isma'il. Of course, the existence of the above hadiths in Twelver books raised the question of why they are there in the first place.

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