

Article Review: "The Crisis of the
Imamate and the Institution of
Occultation in Twelver Shiism"

By Saïd Amir Arjomand

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Article Review: “The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi‘ism”

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Article: “The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of the Occultation in Twelver Shi‘ism.” By Saïd Amir Arjomand, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Nov., 1996), pp. 491-515.

Crises of succession in the institution of Imāmate were the prime source of division in the early Shiite community, and their affects have remained definitive till this day. The doctrine of Imāmate “evolved gradually” during the first Islamic century and was given a “definitive shape” by the death of Jā‘far b. Muḥammad al-Şādiq (d. 148 AH).¹ The Shiite Imāms and their acolytes established the foundation of this institution amidst unremitting persecution and political upheaval. Perhaps the most mysterious element of this doctrine is its culminating concept of occultation. The disappearance and seclusion of the final Imām, or the Mahdi, was a belief that was upheld by many Shiite sects in Islam’s formative period, including the Kaysāniyya, the Nawusiyya, the Faṭḥiyya, the Mubārakiyya, the Wāqifa, and the Imāmiyya.

While there were disagreements on the identity of the Mahdi, all of the aforementioned groups upheld a number of important beliefs in common. They all believed that there would be one immaculate Ḥusayni Imām at all times – selected by his predecessor – whose knowledge would be perfect and whose absolute obedience would be mandated. These groups also believed that the Imāmate would end with the Mahdi, who would fill the world with justice and peace in the End Times after a period of occultation. Nascent views on Imāmate, occultation, and messianism were also present among Zaydis.²

Saïd Amir Arjomand, a Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York and the founder of the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies, wrote a piece for the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in 1996 called “The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi‘ism”. This article presents a detailed history of the crises

¹ Etan Kohlberg, *From Imāmiyya to Ithna Ashariyya*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, vol. 39, (Cambridge University Press: 1976) pp.521

² S. Hussain M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam* (Oxford University Press: 2011), pp. 186

Imāmi Shiism encountered. Arjomand gives a succinct yet comprehensive summary of the controversies and disputes that occurred between the tenure of Jā‘far al-Ṣādiq and the death of ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sumārī, the final ambassador of the twelfth Imām.

The article borrows mainly from modern works of the same genre; namely Hossein Modarressi’s *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi’ite Islam*. Arjomand relies on Modarressi’s use of primary sources to illustrate a scathing and skeptical timeline of the hurdles in the development of Imāmi theology. The article lacks a coherent thesis, and instead focuses on these various difficulties and ironies in chronological order. While it is a convenient outline of events, the article is mostly an array of sporadic details, many of which are only half true.

Arjomand infers that Jā‘far al-Ṣādiq and his followers enjoyed warm relations with the Caliph al-Manṣūr and the Abbasids,³ but al-Manṣūr ordered the torching of Jā‘far al-Ṣādiq’s house,⁴ sent spies to his followers in Medina,⁵ and would even be accused of poisoning the Imām. Although Arjomand says that Abbasids such as al-Mutawakkil were “too weak and too pre-occupied” to worry about non-militant Alids,⁶ al-Mutawakkil was so paranoid of the Alids that he ordered those who narrated the virtues of ‘Alī to be lashed.⁷ The article also cites ‘Alī b. Yaqtīn’s employment in the Abbasid government as further evidence that posits the Shiites’ closeness to the authorities, but ‘Alī b. Yaqtīn kept his Imāmi faith a secret from them.⁸ The Shiites certainly had much more in common with their Hashemite Abbasid rulers than with their Umayyad predecessors, but their relationship with the Abbasids was still marred by distrust, rebellions, detainments, and executions. The fickle Abbasid affinity towards their Imāmi Shiite kinsmen was merely of occasional convenience.

The article says that the “idea of occultation had its origin in the chiliastic Kaysāniyya sect”.⁹ While the Kaysāniyya were the first Shiite political movement to apply this doctrine to a personality, the concept is potentially much older. Immediately after the death of the Prophet (d. 11 AH), Umar b. al-Khattab claimed that Muḥammad had not died, but was still alive, and that he had “gone to his Lord as Moses went and remained hidden from his people for forty days.”¹⁰ Although this is normally perceived to be Umar’s emotional reaction to the death of the Prophet, it is nonetheless a strange response that may have had theological implications. Sadūq would later compare the prolonging of the Mahdī’s occultation to Moses’ forty-day isolation in his *Kamāl al-Dīn*.¹¹

³ Arjomand, *The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi’ism*, International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 28 (Cambridge University Press: 1996) pp. 492.

⁴ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, Volume 1, pp. 473 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0979.html>

⁵ Ibid, pp. 351 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0979.html>

⁶ Arjomand, pp. 499

⁷ Dhahabi, *Siyar al-A‘lam an-Nubula*, 13th Tabaqa, Nasr b. ‘Alī

https://library.islamweb.net/NewLibrary/display_book.php?bk_no=6&ID=7&idfrom=530&idto=1308&bookid=6&star tno=13

⁸ Ṭabarsī, *I‘lam al-Wara*, Volume 2, pp. 21 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m025/28/no2874.html>

⁹ Arjomand, pp. 492

¹⁰ Ismail K. Poonawala, *The History of Tabari*, vol. 9, (State University of New York Press:1990) pp. 185-186

¹¹ Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn*, pp. 16 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/10/no1004.html>

Additionally, Qurtubī wrote in his *tafsīr* that al-Khiḍr and Elijah were still alive in seclusion, making occasional appearance to pious men and women. The occultation of the Davidic Messiah also appears in Sefer Zerubbabel, a Jewish apocalyptic vision written in Palestine between 9/630 and 16/637.

Arjomand argues that Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 183/799) claimed to be the “apocalyptic Qā’im”¹², saying that “many traditions [existed] proving that he was the Qā’im, the Mahdi”.¹³ While it is certain that some of Mūsā al-Kāẓim’s followers would claim that he was the occulted Mahdi after his death,¹⁴ no extant tradition attributed to him contains this claim. During his lifetime, his followers would talk of the Mahdi as a different man that was to come.¹⁵ Other traditions indicate that all of the Imāms would be Qā’ims, and so it would seem that this title would not be exclusive to the eschatological Mahdi.¹⁶ One report attributed to Mūsā al-Kāẓim preserved in Ṭūsī’s *Kitāb al-Ghayba* implies that his death would be fabricated,¹⁷ but the report is narrated by ‘Alī b. Abī Hamza, the founder of the Wāqifi sect. The Wāqifiyya would mostly fizzle out and rejoin the Imāmiyya by the fourth Islamic century. Similarly, the author ties the concept of dual occultation to the two prison sentences served by Mūsā al-Kāẓim,¹⁸ but one cannot ascertain whether his imprisonment preceded the concept.

Arjomand makes several exaggerated claims. He writes, “‘Alī ar-Riḍā was succeeded by a child of seven who was rumored to have been adopted and not his natural son. Thus began the crisis of Imāmate.”¹⁹ This is in reference to an anecdote recorded in *al-Kāfi* in which a Ḥusayni relative of ‘Alī al-Riḍā was surprised by Muḥammad al-Jawād’s dark complexion.²⁰ In the same narration, it was confirmed that Muḥammad al-Jawād’s mother was Nubian, thereby dispelling the alleged rumor. Beyond this report, there is no evidence that this incident was of much significance. Thereafter, the article notes that the designation of Muḥammad al-Jawād’s successor ‘Alī al-Hādī (d. 254 AH) was “reported by a servant but contested by a prominent witness present”.²¹ This prominent witness was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Isā,²² who would become an important follower of ‘Alī al-Hādī. In this instance, however, he merely denied having overheard the designation from the corridor to prevent others from thinking that he was eavesdropping. By the end of the narration, he confesses that he had indeed heard it. The unanimous acceptance of a second child Imām by the Imāmi Shiite community also indicates that no anxiety was expressed regarding his age.

Another inflated claim is that al-Faḍl b. Shādhān (d. 260 AH), an Imāmi theologian and companion of the later Imāms, “in fact challenged the authority of the eleventh Imām”²³ and became “one of his

¹² Arjomand, pp. 494

¹³ Ibid, pp. 510

¹⁴ Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, pp. 26 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m013/11/no1187.html>

¹⁵ Himyarī, *Qurb al-Isnād*, pp. 317 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0975.html>

¹⁶ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, Volume 1, pp. 536 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0979.html>

¹⁷ Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, pp. 56 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m013/11/no1187.html>

¹⁸ Arjomand, *The Crisis of the Imāmate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi’ism*, International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 28 (Cambridge University Press: 1996) pp. 494

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 496

²⁰ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, Volume 1, pp. 322 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m013/11/no1187.html>

²¹ Arjomand, pp. 497

²² Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, Volume 1, pp. 324 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m013/11/no1187.html>

²³ Arjomand, pp. 498

outspoken critics” due to his lack of religious knowledge.²⁴ This claim comes from a report in al-Kashi’s *Rijāl*, in which al-Faḍl b. Shādhān challenges the legitimacy of the eleventh Imām’s tax collector due to his residing with a group of *ghulāt* in Nishapūr.²⁵ Questioning the position of a representative is not the same as challenging the authority of Ḥasan al-‘Askari (d. 260) himself. After al-Faḍl b. Shādhān’s death, Ḥasan al-‘Askari reportedly said, “May Allah have mercy on Faḍl.”²⁶ Arjomand further mentions doubts about the “moral character” of Hasan al-Askari without providing examples.²⁷ While the Imām claimed to have incurred more doubt than his forefathers,²⁸ this may be due to the expectation that his older brother would be the Imām, and the lack of any apparent children.

Arjomand mentions the book of al-‘Uṣfūrī (d. 250 AH), saying, “According to the tradition cited by ‘Uṣfūrī ... there would be eleven (*sic*) Imāms”.²⁹ The book actually records four traditions that say that these eleven sons would be the descendants of Muḥammad and ‘Alī, calling the full group of thirteen men the stabilizing knobs, pegs, and mountains of the Earth.³⁰ This source is indeed remarkable, considering that its author died ten years before the minor occultation.

The article provides valuable information on the minor occultation and the lives of the ambassadors (*sufara*) of the twelfth Imām. It is the author’s view that the institution of ambassadorship was retrospectively applied to the first two ambassadors sometime after their tenures,³¹ but he fails to provide evidence for this claim. Edmund Hayes explores more of the challenges of this institution in his dissertation “The Envoys of the Hidden Imām”. Lastly, Arjomand does not address the testimony of Ḥakīmah bint Muḥammad, the aunt of Ḥasan al-Askari who supported the claim that her nephew was indeed succeeded by an occulted Imām.³²

While Arjomand highlights some important crises encountered by the Imāms and their followers, Modarressi does this in more detail and with more precision. A discerning reader cannot help but feel overwhelmed by a swarm of disjointed facts and tenuous claims, wishing that the article would instead focus on developed ideas. The evolution of Imāmi Shiite theology is undoubtedly a hot topic in a time of global curiosity about Islamic history. Because of this, it must be investigated with clarity and accuracy.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 501

²⁵ Al-Khū’ī, *Mu‘jam Rijāl al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 14, pp. 315 <https://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m020/23/no2372.html>

²⁶ Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār Ma‘rifat al-Rijāl*, vol. 2, pp. 818 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m020/23/no2322.html>

²⁷ Arjomand, pp. 501

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 501

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 500

³⁰ Al-‘Uṣfūrī, *al-Uṣūl al-Sitta ‘Ashar*, pp. 15 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/09/no0970.html>

³¹ Arjomand, pp. 508

³² Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn*, pp. 507 <http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/10/no1004.html>