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

By Saïd Amir Arjomand

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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 Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (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 Fāṭḥiyya, 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 Husayni 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

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Imami Shiism encountered. Arjomand gives a succinct yet comprehensive summary of the controversies and disputes that occurred between the tenure of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and the death of ‘Ali b. Muḥammad al-Sumari, 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 Imami 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 Ja‘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 Ja‘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 ‘Ali to be lashed.7 The article also cites ‘Ali b. Yaqtin’s employment in the Abbasid government as further evidence that posits the Shiites’ closeness to the authorities, but ‘Ali b. Yaqtin kept his Imami 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 Imami 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. Ṣadūq would later compare the prolonging of the Mahdi’s occultation to Moses’ forty-day isolation in his Kamāl al-Dīn.11

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4 Kulaynī, Uṣūl al-Kāfī, 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
8 Tabarsi, I‘lam al-Wara, Volume 2, pp. 21 http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m025/28/no2874.html
9 Arjomand, pp. 492
11 Ṣadūq, Kamāl al-Dīn, pp. 16 http://www.yasoob.com/books/htm1/m012/10/no1004.html
Additionally, Qurtubi wrote in his *tafsīr* that al-Khīḍr 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-Kāẓīm (d. 183/799) claimed to the “apocalyptic Qā’īm”, saying that “many traditions [existed] proving that he was the Qā’īm, the Mahdi.” While it is certain that some of Mūsā al-Kāẓīm’s followers would claim that he was the occulted Mahdi after his death, 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. Other traditions indicate that all of the Imāms would be Qā’īms, and so it would seem that this title would not be exclusive to the eschatological Mahdi. One report attributed to Mūsā al-Kāẓīm preserved in Ṭūsī’s *Kitab al-Ghayba* implies that his death would be fabricated, but the report is narrated by ‘Alī b. Abī Hamza, the founder of the Wāqīfī sect. The Wāqīfīyya 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-Kāẓīm, but one cannot ascertain whether his imprisonment preceded the concept.

Arjomand makes several exaggerated claims. He writes, “‘Ali 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.” This is in reference to an anecdote recorded in *al-Kāfī* in which a Ḥusayni relative of ‘Alī ar-Riḍā was surprised by Muḥammad al-Jawād’s dark complexion. 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”. This prominent witness was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Isā, 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 Shi‘ite community also indicates that no anxiety was expressed regarding his age.

Another inflated claim is that al-Ḥaḍī b. Shādhān (d. 260 AH), an Imāmi theologian and companion of the later Imāms, “in fact challenged the authority of the eleventh Imām” and became “one of his...
outspoken critics” due to his lack of religious knowledge. 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. Questioning the position of a representative is not the same as challenging the authority of Hasan al-ʿAskari (d. 260) himself. After al-Faḍl b. Shādhān’s death, Ḥasan al-ʿAskari reportedly said, “May Allah have mercy on Faḍl.” Arjomand further mentions doubts about the “moral character” of Hasan al-Askari without providing examples. While the Imām claimed to have incurred more doubt than his forefathers, 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-ʿUsfūrī (d. 250 AH), saying, “According to the tradition cited by ʿUsfūrī … there would be eleven (sic) Imāms.” The book actually records four traditions that say that these eleven sons would be the descendants of Muḥammad and ʿAlī, calling the full group of thirteen men the stabilizing knobs, pegs, and mountains of the Earth. 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 (sufaraʾ) 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, 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 Ḥaṣan al-Askarī who supported the claim that her nephew was indeed succeeded by an occulted Imām.

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 Imāmī 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.

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24 Ibid, pp. 501
27 Arjomand, pp. 501
28 Ibid, pp. 501
29 Ibid, pp. 500
30 Al-ʿUsfūrī, al-Uṣūl al-Sitta ʿAṣbar, 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