

The Myth of the Shi'i Mahdi

by

Abu Muhammad al-Afriqi

The 15th of Sha‘baan is a very significant date, both to the Ahl as-Sunnah and the Shi‘ah. The Shi‘ah, however, have their own reason for ascribing significance to this night. To them it is the night of the birth of their twelfth Imam, the Hidden Mahdi.

Who is this Mahdi whose return to this world is so eagerly awaited by the Shi‘ah, and belief in whose existence in occultation forms such an integral aspect of the Shi‘i psyche? Before an adequate answer to this question may be given, there is a need to understand certain aspects concerning the Shi‘i doctrine of Imamah.

Background

The cornerstone of the Shi‘i faith is the belief that the spiritual and temporal leadership of this Ummah after the demise of Rasulullah *sallallahu ‘alayhi wasallam* is vested in the Imam, who is appointed, like the Nabi *sallallahu ‘alayhi wasallam* himself, by Allah, and who enjoys all the distinctions and privileges of the Nabi *sallallahu ‘alayhi wasallam*.

However, they believe that Imamah, unlike Nubuwwah, can never come to an end. In this regard there is a well-known Shi‘i hadith which says that “the world cannot exist without an Imam”, and another which goes that “if the earth were to be without an Imam for a single day it would sink.”

Thus, when it came to pass that the first of those whom they regard as their Imams— Sayyiduna Ali *radiyallahu ‘anhu*— left this world, a problem arose. Some of those who

regarded themselves as his followers claimed that he did not in fact die, but that he will return to establish justice. Others said that he was succeeded as Imam by his son Hasan, who was in turn succeeded by his brother Husayn.

When Husayn died there were some who claimed to follow their other brother Muhammad (known as Ibn al-Hanafiyyah) as their Imam. When he died his followers claimed that he was in reality alive, and that he will return in due time. Others amongst the Shi‘ah took Sayyiduna Husayn’s son, Ali, surnamed Zayn al-‘Abidin, as their Imam, and upon his death transferred their loyalties to his son, Muhammad al-Baqir.

When al-Baqir died there were once again elements from amongst the Shi‘ah who denied his death and claimed that he would return one day, while others took his son Ja‘far as-Sadiq as their Imam.

When he died there was mass confusion amongst the Shi‘ah: each of his sons Isma‘il, Abdullah, Muhammad, Zakariyya, Ishaq and Musa was claimed by various groups amongst the Shi‘ah to be their Imam. In addition to them there was a group who believed that Ja‘far did not really die, and that he would return one day.

More or less the same thing happened at the death of his son Musa. Some of the Shi‘ah denied his death, believing that he will return, and others decided to take as their new Imam one of his sons. Some of these chose his son Ahmad, while others chose his other son Ali ar-Rida.

After him they took as their Imam his son Muhammad al-Jawwad (or at-Taqi), and after him his son Ali al-Hadi (or an-Naqi). At the death of Ali al-Hadi they looked upon his son Hasan al-Askari as their new— and 11th— Imam.

The death of Hasan al-Askari

The above is a very brief synopsis of a tumultuous and confusing history— a history from which a dedicated researcher might extract some very revealing facts about the development of Shi‘ism.

However, that is not our concern at this moment. We have now arrived at the year 254 AH, the time when a major section of the Shi‘ah accepted as their Imam the 22-year old Hasan, son of Ali al-Hadi, and 10th lineal descendant of Sayyiduna Ali and Sayyidah Fatimah *radiyallahu ‘anhuma*. Six years later, in 260 AH, Hasan al-Askari, at the very

young age of 28, is lying on his deathbed, but unlike any of his forefathers *he leaves no offspring*, no one to whom the Shi‘ah might appropriate as their new Imam.

The Shi‘ah who had been regarding Hasan al-Askari as their Imam were thrown into mass disarray. Does this mean the end of the Imamah? The end of the Imamah would mean the end of Shi‘ism. Were they prepared for that?

The confusion that reigned amongst the Shi‘ah after the death of Hasan al-Askari is reflected by the Shi‘i writer Hasan ibn Musa an-Nawbakhti, who counts the emergence of altogether 14 sects amongst the followers of Hasan al-Askari, each one with a different view on the future of the Imamah and the identity of the next Imam. It must be noted that an-Nawbakhti was alive at the time all of this was taking place. Another Shi‘i writer, Sa‘d ibn Abdullah al-Qummi, who also lived during the same time, counts 15 sects, and a century later the historian al-Mas‘udi enumerates altogether 20 separate sects.

Trends

There were four major trends amongst these various sects:

(1) There were those who accepted the death of Hasan al-Askari as a fact, and accepted also the fact that he left no offspring. To them Imamah had thus come to an end, just like Nubuwwah came to an end with the death of Rasulullah ﷺ. However, there were some amongst them who kept hoping for the advent of a new Imam.

(2) The second trend was one to which the student of the history of “succession to the Imamah” would be much more used to. This was the tendency to deny the death of Hasan al-Askari, and to claim that he would return in the future to establish justice upon earth. We have seen this tendency emerge amongst the Shi‘ah at more than one critical juncture in the history of the Imamah of the Shi‘ah; it is therefore only logical to expect it to resurface at a moment as critical as the death of Hasan al-Askari.

(3) The third trend was to extend the chain of Imamah to Hasan’s brother Ja‘far.

(4) The fourth trend was the claim that Hasan al-Askari did in fact have a son. It is the fourth trend which ultimately became the view of the dominant

group in Shi‘ism.

The missing son

This trend was spearheaded by persons who had set themselves up as the representatives of the Imam, and who were in control of a network covering various parts of the Islamic empire— a network for the purpose of collecting money in the name of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt.

All followers of the Imams were obliged to pay one fifth of their income to the representatives of the Imams. (This is a practice which continues up to today.) At the head of this network was a man called Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-‘Amri. His manner of resolving the predicament was unique: Hasan al-Askari was dead, he admitted, but he was not childless. He had a 4-year old son, Muhammad, with whom no one but he— Uthman ibn Sa‘id— could have contact. And from that point onwards he would act as the representative (*wakeel*) of the Hidden Imam and collect money in his name.

To the fact that Hasan al-Askari’s own family were completely ignorant of the existence of any child of his, and that his estate had been divided between his brother Ja‘far and his mother, Uthman ibn Sa‘id and his ilk responded by denouncing Ja‘far as *al-Kadhhab* (the Liar).

In due time a fantastic story was brought into circulation about the union between Hasan al-Askari and a Roman slave-girl, who is variously named as Narjis, Sawsan or Mulaykah. She is mentioned as having been the daughter of Yusha‘ (Joshua), the Roman emperor, who is a direct descendant of the apostle Simon Peter. But history shows that there never was a Roman emperor of that name. The Roman emperor of the time was Basil I, and neither he nor any other emperor is known to have descended from Peter. The story goes on to tell of her capture by the Muslim army, how she eventually came to be sold to Hasan al-Askari, and of her supernatural pregnancy and the secret birth of the son of whom no one— aside from Uthman ibn Sa‘id and his clique— knew anything. Everything about the child is enveloped in a thick and impenetrable cloud of mystery.

The four representatives

Uthman ibn Sa‘id remained the “representative of the Hidden Imam” for a number of

years. In all that time he was the only link the Shi‘ah had with their Imam. During that time he supplied the Shi‘i community with *tawqi‘at*, or written communications, which he claimed was written to them by the Hidden Imam. Many of these communications, which are stilpreserved in books like at-Tusi’s *Kitab al-Ghaybah*, had to do with denouncing other claimants to the position of representatives, who had come to realise exactly how lucrative a position Uthman ibn Sa‘id had created for himself. The Shi‘i literature dealing with Uthman ibn Sa‘id’s tenure as representative is replete with references to money collected from the Shi‘i public.

When Uthman ibn Sa‘id died, his son Abu Ja‘far Muhammad produced a written communication from the Hidden Imam in which he himself is appointed the second representative, a position which he held for about 50 years. He too, like his father, had to deal with several rival claimants to his position, but the *tawqi‘at* which he regularly produced to denounce them and reinforce his own position ensured the removal of such obstacles and the continuation of support from a credulous Shi‘i public.

He was followed in this position by Abul Qasim ibn Rawh an-Nawbakhti, a scion of the powerful and influential Nawbakhti family of Baghdad. Before succeeding Muhammad ibn Uthman, Abul Qasim an-Nawbakhti was his chief aide in the collection of the one-fifth taxes from the Shi‘ah. Like his two predecessors, he too had to deal with rival claimants, one of whom, Muhammad ibn Ali ash-Shalmaghani used to be an accomplice of his. He is reported in Abu Ja‘far at-Tusi’s book *Kitab al-Ghaybah* as having stated: “We knew exactly what we were into with Abul Qasim ibn Rawh. We used to fight like dogs over this matter (of being representative).”

When Abul Qasim an-Nawbakhti died in 326 AH he bequeathed the position of representative to Abul Hasan as-Samarri. Where the first three representatives were shrewd manipulators, Abul Hasan as-Samarri proved to be a more conscientious person. During his three years as representative there was a sudden drop in *tawqi‘at*. Upon his deathbed he was asked who his successor would be, and answered that Allah would Himself fulfil the matter. Could this perhaps be seen as a refusal on his part to perpetuate a hoax that has gone on for too long? He also produced a *tawqi‘* in which the Imam declares that from that day till the day of his reappearance he will never again be seen, and that anyone who claims to see him in that time is a liar.

Thus, after more or less 70 years, the last “door of contact” with the Hidden Imam closed. The Shi‘ah term this period, in which there was contact with their Hidden Imam through his representatives-cum-tax-collectors, the Lesser Occultation (*al-Ghaybah as-Sughra*), and the period from the death of the last representative onwards the Greater Occultation (*al-Ghaybah al-Kubar*). The Greater Occultation has already continued for over a thousand years.

Activities of the representatives

When one reads the classical literature of the Shi‘ah in which the activities of the four representatives are outlined, one is struck by the constantly recurring theme of money. They are almost always mentioned in connection with receiving and collecting “the Imam’s money” from his loyal Shi‘i followers. There is a shocking lack of any activities of an academic or spiritual nature. Not a single one of the four is credited with having compiled any book, despite the fact that they were in exclusive communion with the last of the Imams, the sole repository of the legacy of Rasulullah *sallallahu ‘alayhi wasallam*.

When we look at the major sources upon which the Shi‘i faith is based, we find that most of them were written after the onset of the Greater Occultation. Those works, like *al-Kafi*, which was written during the latter decades of the Lesser Occultation, contain scarcely a reference to any of the four representatives as narrators from the Hidden Imam. Instead it is filled with thousands of reports which go back, via other channels, to the fifth and the sixth Imams. That is indeed strange, considering the fact that a man like Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-‘Amri is claimed to have been closely associated with the 10th, the 11th as well as the hidden 12th Imam, and also the fact that his son remained the Shi‘i community’s solitary link to that Imam for half a century. Would it not have been better and more authoritative for an author like al-Kulayni to report the hadith of his Imams from the Hidden Imam via his representatives who lived in Baghdad at the same time as he rather than to trace it all back to the fifth and sixth Imams through a myriad of doubtful channels?

But of course, he could not have done that, because the activities of those representatives did not have as much to do with authentically preserving the legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt as with the collection of wealth in their names.

In light of the fact that the Shi‘ah explain the necessity of Imamah in terms of the need for an infallible guide who serves as the repository of the legacy of Ahl al-Bayt, it appears extremely incongruous that this particular guide has left no sort of legacy of his own whereby the legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt can be known. Despite the fact that an infallible guide supposedly exists, it is upon fallible persons such as Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub al-Kulayni that the Shi‘ah must depend for that legacy.

The only bit of information that has come down to us regarding the Hidden Imam’s authentication of the hadith legacy of the Shi‘ah is what is recorded by Aqa Muhammad Baqir Khwansari in his book *Rawdat al-Jannat*. He writes that al-Kulayni’s book was

presented to the Hidden Imam who looked at it and declared, “*Hadha Kaafin li-Shi‘atina*” (This is enough for our Shi‘ah). This is incidentally how the book received its name.

A report such as this creates a huge problem. It appears to be a ratification of the contents of the book *al-Kafi* by the infallible Imam. Yet, 9 centuries later the Shi‘i muhaddith, Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, would declare in his commentary on *al-Kafi*, named *Mir‘at al-‘Uqul*, that 9,485 out of the 16,121 narrations in *al-Kafi* are unreliable. What did Majlisi know that the infallible Imam was so unaware of that he would authenticate a book, 60% of whose contents would later be discovered to be unreliable?

Evaluation

The Iraqi Shi‘i scholar, Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, finds proof for the existence of the Hidden Mahdi in what he calls “the experience of a community”. The existence of the Hidden Imam, he postulates, was experienced by the Shi‘i community as a whole in the written communications that the representatives used supplied them with.

The crux of this argument lies in the fact that an individual experience might be doubted, but never that of experience of an entire community. However, the glaring flaw in this line of reasoning is that it very conveniently overlooks the part of the representatives as the *individual* go-betweens.

The community never had the privilege of seeing or meeting the person they believed to be the author of the *tawqi‘at*. Their experience was limited to receiving what the representatives produced. Even the argument of a consistent handwriting in all the various *tawqi‘at* is at best melancholy. There is no way one can get away from the fact that the existence of the Hidden Imam rests upon *nothing other than acceptance of the words of the representatives*.

The activities of those representatives furthermore go a long way to show that they were much, much more inspired by the desire to possess than by pious sentiments of any kind.

So when the Shi‘ah commemorate the birth of their twelfth Imam on the 15th night of Sha‘ban, or when they seek to apply ahadith in Sunni sources which speak of twelve khalifas to their twelve Imams, then let us ask them on what basis do they accept the existence of the twelfth one?

History bears witness to the existence of eleven persons in that specific line of descent, but when we come to the twelfth one, all we have is claims made by persons whose activities in the name of their Hidden Imam give us all the reason in the world to suspect their honesty and integrity.

In Islam, issues of faith can never be based upon evidence of this kind.

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