



ĠAYBA

ĠAYBA (Pers. *ġaybat*, lit: absence), term used by the Shi'ites to refer to the occultation of the Hidden Imam. The notion of a concealed savior is not unknown in the Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature. In the *Similitudes of Enoch*, we read of "that Son of Man" who "became the Chosen One; he became concealed in the presence of (the Lord of the Spirits) prior to the creation of the world, and for eternity" (1 *Enoch*, 48.2, 6). In Islam, the idea of *ġayba* had its origin in the Kaysānīya, a chiliastic sect formed after the failure of Moḡtār's uprising in Kūfa, whose members had considered Moḡammad b. al-Ḥanafiya, a son of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb (q.v.), the Mahdi (q.v.). The Kaysānī poet, Koṭayyar 'Azza (d. 105/723), hailed him: "He is the Mahdi Ka'b al-Aḡbār [the learned authority on Jewish apocalypics, d. 34/654-55] had told us about." When Moḡammad died in 81/700, Koṭayyar affirmed that "he has vanished in the Raẓwā, not to be seen for a while, and with him is honey and water." (Mas'ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, III, p. 277). The Kaysānīs in general maintained that he was in concealment or occultation in the Raẓwā mountain west of Medina and would return as the Mahdi and Qā'em (on these terms, see ISLAM IN IRAN vii. THE CONCEPT OF MAHDI IN TWELVER SHI'ISM). When Moḡammad's son, Abū Hāšem, in turn died childless in 98/717-18, some of the Kaysānīya maintained that he was the Mahdi and the Qā'em, and was alive in concealment in the Raẓwā mountain. There may well be a connection between the notions of occultation and the Qā'em among the Kaysānīya whose original core consisted of thousands of newly-converted Persian clients (*mawālī*) under the leadership of Kaysān Abū 'Amra (Dīnavarī, pp. 290-94). The Persian *mawālī* were doubtless familiar with Zoroastrian apocalyptic beliefs that included the idea



of the awakening of the demon-slaying heroes such as Garšāsp (q.v.) from long sleep. A valuable Syriac text predating Islam foretells that the Antichrist (*dajjāl*) will beguile the Magi by telling them that Pašūtan, one of the Zoroastrian immortals, has awakened from his sleep, and that he is “the one standing (*qā'em*) before the Ohrmazd, your God, who has appeared on earth” (Bidez and Cumont, II, p. 115; the significance of the term *qā'em* is lost in the French translation on the following page). In any event, the idea of occultation was among the cluster of Kaysānī beliefs that entered Imami Shi'ism (Madelung, “Kaysānīya”).

The early spread of the Kaysānī idea of occultation is demonstrated by the report that a Jewish messianic leader active in Isfahan around the year 100/718-19, who is known as Rā'ī (the Shepherd) was believed to have gone into occultation (*ḡāyeb šod*) after the caliph's agents put him in prison in Damascus. When 'Abd-Allāh b. Mo'āwīa (q.v.), who had a large Kaysānī following and ruled Isfahan and Fārs for some three years from 747 to 749, died in the prison of Abū Moslem Ḳorāsānī (q.v.), his followers said he was alive and in occultation in the mountains of Isfahan. The tradition that falsely placed the Raẓwā mountain in Fārs (Ṭūsī, p. 103; Majlesī, LII, p. 153) may have originated at this time. Similarly when the Shepherd's better-known successor, Abū 'Isā Eshāq b. Ya'qūb Eṣfahānī (q.v.), was killed by the 'Abbasid forces in Ray a decade later, his followers claimed that he was in occultation in the mountains of Ray (Abu'l-Ma'ālī, p. 57; Friedlaender).

One of the important channels for the transmission of this belief into Imami Shi'ism was the forceful poetry of Esmā'īl b. Moḥammad b. Yazīd known as Sayyed Ḥemyarī (d. after 171/787), one of the Kaysānīs who became followers of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādeq. In the following verses, quoted in the Imami sources as a statement of their belief (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 35, n. 6-7; Shaikh Mofīd, p. 284), Ḥemyarī testifies: “That the one in authority (*walī al-amr*) and the Qā'em / For him [is decreed] an occultation (*ḡayba*); inevitably will he vanish / And may God bless him who enacts the occultation. / He will pause a while, then manifest his cause / And fill all the East and West with justice.” Here the notion of occultation can be seen to have acquired chiliastic connotations through its association with the manifestation or parousia (*ẓohūr*) of the apocalyptic Qā'em.

Another chiliastic movement, more significant for the reception of the idea of *ḡayba* in Imami Shi'ism than the Kaysānīya, was the Wāqefīya. The Wāqefīya (cessationists) were those followers of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem (d. 183/799) who



maintained that the imamate was suspended or had ceased with him. They refused to accept Imam Mūsā's death, and considered him the Mahdi and Qā'em who had gone into occultation. The Wāqefīya held that the Qā'em would have two occultations, a short one followed by a longer one extending to his rising, a belief whose origin can be traced to Mūsā al-Kāzem's two periods of imprisonment (Madelung, "al-Mahdī," p. 1236; Modarressi, p. 87). Some even saw his imprisonment as part of the occultation (Shaikh Mofīd, p. 303), assimilating it to Joseph's imprisonment which they also considered an occultation (Ebn Bābawayh, pp. 152-53). Books on the occultation by the Wāqefīya were especially important for introducing apocalyptic notions into Imami doctrine, as the leading figures in the movement, such as Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Abī Ḥamza Baṭā'enī, later rejoined the Imami fold under the eighth Imam, 'Alī al-Rezā (q.v.).

After the death of the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-'Askarī, in 260/873 two of the fourteen groups into which the Imami Shi'ism had split took up the ideas of the Wāqefīya. One splinter group among his followers argued that, as a childless Imam cannot die and leave the world devoid of proof (*ḥojja*) of God, Imam Ḥasan had not died but had gone into occultation. He was the Qā'em and the Mahdi, and would have two occultations (Kohlberg, p. 531). In the course of the next two decades, these neo-Waqifite ideas were adopted in modified form by the leadership of the nascent Imami hierarchy. 'Oṭmān b. Sa'īd 'Amrī (or 'Omarī) and his son, Abū Ja'far Moḥammad, who had been the agents of the tenth and eleventh Imams, remained in control of the seat of the Imam after the latter's death, and claimed to be acting on behalf of a son of Ḥasan al-'Askarī, who was in occultation. A number of decrees and rescripts purporting to emanate from the Imam in occultation were issued in the handwriting of Moḥammad b. 'Oṭmān over a period of two decades. When this communication ceased, the neo-Waqifite notion of the two occultation was drawn upon to explain the breakdown of communication between the Hidden Imam and the community. Moḥammad b. 'Oṭmān's close associate, Abū Sahl Nawbakṭī, adopted the idea of the two occultations for announcing the beginning of a new stage, namely the second and the harder occultation: "For him, there are two occultations, one of them harder than the other" (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 93; Arjomand, 1997, p. 9).

During the half-century of crisis following the death of the eleventh Imam, the nascent hierocracy was aided by the office-holding Imami aristocratic families, most notably the Nawbakṭīs under the leadership of Abū Sahl Esmā'īl



b. ‘Alī (237-311/851-923). Abū Sahl, in turn, appears to have acquired a dominant influence over the direction of the hierarchy (Eqbāl, pp. 96-116; Arjomand, 1996). Both hierocratic interests and the political orientation of the Imami elite required that the idea of *ġayba*, borrowed from the neo- Waqīfites in a desperate crisis, be detached from its chiliastic matrix. Abū Sahl Nawbakṭī and Ebn Qeba Rāzī (q.v.), an important early theologian who was an ex-Mu‘tazilite convert, took the lead in the modification and rationalization of the idea of *ġayba*. The Mu‘tazilite sympathies of Nawbakṭī and Ebn Qeba suggested that the idea could only be de-apocalypticized with the help of a theology of occultation. The strategy chosen by them was, accordingly, to find a theological solution that would conjoin the rational discussion of occultation with the nature of the imamate rather than adducing traditions to prove it. The rationale of the theological argument had the advantage of explaining occultation in terms of the nature of the imamate, and thereby establishing the necessity of occultation. The first theological tracts on the *ġayba* thus appeared some thirty years after the death of the eleventh Imam. In a series of polemical debates with the opponents of Imami Shi‘ism, Ebn Qeba insisted that the occultation of the Imam was the logical conclusion of the doctrine of imamate (Moddarresi, part II). In the *Ketāb al-tanbīh*, whose conclusion has been preserved (Ebn Bābawayh, pp. 89-93), Abū Sahl Nawbakṭī similarly argued that as the absence of a prophet does not invalidate either his religious teaching or his legal rulings, so the absence of the Imam does not impair the validity either of religion or of the law. The occultation of the Imam does not affect the validity of religion and law any more than does the absence of the prophet. A rescript purportedly issued by the Hidden Imam in the same period—most probably the last one to be issued in the 3rd/9th century, affirmed the central point of these theological arguments, namely, that occultation does not obviate the benefits of divine guidance of mankind through the imamate (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 485; tr., Arjomand, 1997, p. 4).

At the institutional level, too, serious efforts were made to enhance the hierocratic authority of the chief representative of the Hidden Imam. Moḥammad b. ‘Oṭmān ‘Amrī remained the director of the seat of the Imam for some forty five years until his death in 304/917. His authority, however, did not remain unchallenged. Sometime in the late 290s/early 910s, Ḥosayn b. Manṣūr Ḥallāj (q.v.), an Imami mystic and chiliast, was claiming to be in communication with the Hidden Imam and his agent (*wakīl*; Ṭūsī, p. 247). In 302/914-15, the alderman (*naqīb*) of the Shi‘ites in Baghdad turned over to Caliph al-Moqtader an impostor who was claiming to be the son of the



eleventh Imam returning from occultation (Klemm, pp. 141-42). The trouble with the pretenders at the time when the problem of succession to the aged ‘Amrī was imminent must have prompted the Imami leadership to think of means for strengthening the authority of the director of the holy seat. A new designation, *safīr* (intermediary), was probably put in circulation around this time in order to upgrade the office of the chief representative as the sole official intermediary between the Imam and the Shi‘ites. In any event, the opportunity to institutionalize the office of a sole intermediary with the Imam as *sefāra* first presented itself when Moḥammad b. ‘Oṭmān died. A relative of Abū Sahl, Abu’l-Qāsem Ḥosayn b. Rūḥ Nawbakṭī, was established as the official intermediary (*safīr*) at the seat of the Hidden Imam, which had moved from Samarra to Baghdad. Moḥammad b. ‘Oṭmān’s daughter, Omm Kolṭūm, testified that her father had designated Ebn Rūḥ as his intermediary (Ṭūsī, p. 227; Eqbāl, pp. 215-16). What is of greater importance than the new designation of the upgraded office was the decision of the Imami hierarchy to reopen official communication with the Hidden Imam after a quarter of a century. On 24 Šawwāl 305/9 April 918, the newly ensconced *safīr* produced the first new decree issued by the Hidden Imam (Ṭūsī, pp. 227-28; Eqbāl, p. 216). The subject of the decree, it is interesting to note, was the confirmation of Ebn Rūḥ as the new head of the hierarchy. The issuance of decrees emanating from the Hidden Imam was thus resumed. This policy, however, failed to curb rival claims to direct communication with the Imam, and Ebn Rūḥ’s own secretary, Moḥammad b. ‘Alī Šalmaḡānī, claimed to be the Hidden Imam’s gate (*bāb*, q.v.). At any rate, ‘Alī b. Moḥammad Sāmarrī, who succeeded Ebn Rūḥ in 326/938, did not consider the office of *sefāra* worth perpetuating. Six days before his death in 329/941, Sāmarrī, who had been the *safīr* for three years, reportedly produced the following decree from the Hidden Imam: “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. O, ‘Alī b. Moḥammad al-Sāmarrī □ you will die in six days. Settle your affairs, and leave no testament in favor of anyone to fill your office after your death. Indeed, the second [variant: the complete (*tāmma*)] occultation has occurred, and there will be no *parousia* except with God’s permission” (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 516 n. 1; Ṭūsī, p. 243).

The multiplication of extremist claimants to be the gate of the Hidden Imam, and the cessation of communication between the Imam’s holy seat and the Shi‘ite community for a second time (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 3), deepened the sense of desperation and hardship (*meḥna*) in what is commonly referred to as the era of perplexity (*ḡayra*). In the short run, the theoretical solution to the crisis of the imamate by Nawbakṭī and Ebn Qeba was not accompanied by a



practical solution to the crisis of hierocratic authority, and had little immediate effect on the morale of the Shi'ite community. In the long run, however, it was upon the foundations they had laid that the idea of occultation was detached from its original chiliastic context and transformed into a fixed component of the Shi'ite theodicy and theology. In the second half of the 4th/10th century, Ebn Bābawayh greatly developed the analogy between the *ġayba* of the Imam and the absence of the prophets, and the rationalist doctors of the 11th century, Shaikh Mofid (d. 413/1032), Šarīf Mortazā (d. 436/1044), and Shaikh Abū Ja'far Moḥammad Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), vigorously rebutted the charge that the occultation of the Imam meant the abeyance of the divine law, and recast the explanation of the *ġayba* within the framework of their Mu'tazilite-inspired nomocratic theology. *Ġayba* was no longer a cause for perplexity because, thanks to the divine law and grace (*loṭf*) the believer knew what to do in the absence of the Imam (Arjomand, 1997). However, Ṭūsī, who put forward the systematic theology of occultation as the introduction to his *Ketāb al-ġayba*, also retained many of the apocalyptic traditions as the traditional (*naqlī*) proof of the *ġayba*. These have, from time to time, provided a source of inspiration for chiliastic claimants to Mahdihood, such as Fażl-Allāh Esterābādī Ḥorūfī, Sayyed Moḥammad Nūrbakš, and Sayyed Moḥammad Moša'sa', who have announced the end of the *ġayba* by their own parousia (*zohūr*).

According to the official Shi'ite view, the *ġayba* of the twelfth Imam begins immediately upon the death of the eleventh Imam in 260/874, and the two occultations are reckoned as the lesser (*šoġrā*) and the greater (*kobrā*). The former is defined as the period 260-329/874-941, when the Hidden Imam communicated with the community through intermediaries. 'Oṭmān b. Sa'īd 'Amrī, Moḥammad b. 'Oṭmān 'Amrī, Ebn Rūḥ, and 'Alī b. Moḥammad Sāmarrī are recognized as the four official intermediaries, and the term *safīr* is applied to all of them. The greater occultation is defined by the cessation of regular communication with the Hidden Imam and is to last until the end of time and the latter's parousias as the Mahdi and Qā'em.



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