



ḤOJJAT

ḤOJJAT (Ar. *ḥojja*, “proof or argument”), a term used as: (1) a line of argument in the course of debate; (2) designation of the Shiʿite Imams or their most essential spiritual function as “proofs of God”; (3) an epithet specifically applied to the Twelfth Imam, Ḥaẓrat-e Hojjat; and (4) a high official in the hierarchy of Ismaʿili missionary activities (*daʿwa*; see [DĀʿI](#)).

Usage in debate. Ḥojja is not necessarily an irrefutable proof or even a correct one, but rather a line of argument used to advance one viewpoint against another in the course of debate. The Arabic term is Koranic in origin and is used to refer both to the false and self-serving arguments the unbelievers may advance against God or his prophets (Qurʾān 42:16, 25), and to the arguments of God or his prophets against such unbelievers (Qurʾān 6:83). The Qurʾān tells us, however, that God’s is the decisive proof or argument (*ḥojja bāleḡa*) that silences all others (Qurʾān 6:149). This term is also sometimes used in theology (*kalām*) and philosophy to mean argument or proof, but it does not seem to have a uniform or technical definition in either of these disciplines (Gardet, pp. 543-44).

Usage in Shiʿism. Ḥojjat does possess a specific, technical meaning in the Shiʿite tradition, especially in Imami Shiʿism, where it refers to that single individual in any given era of human history who represents God’s “proof “ to humanity. Such an individual is either a prophet or the imam/legatee of the prophet, and Imami doctrine holds that there is always one such *ḥojjat* in existence at all times (e.g., Kolayni, I, pp. 232-35). This doctrine demonstrates a unity of function, at a certain level, between the prophets and imams—an idea present



in other aspects of Shi'ite thought—and reflected the fundamental Shi'ite principle that the ultimate mediator between God and humanity must be a person, rather than a text. Shi'ites argue that the Qur'ān cannot stand alone as God's "proof" to mankind, because it is itself "silent" and can offer no decisive resolution to conflicting interpretations of its words (Kolayni, I, pp. 222-27, 301). They further contended that 'Ali was the most authoritative and knowledgeable of all interpreters of the Qur'ān, having learned the interpretation from Moḥammad himself, and that he and his progeny (to whom he entrusted this knowledge) are therefore the true "proofs of God" (Kolayni, I, pp. 304-5).

In Shi'ite Hadith and doctrinal literature, "ḥojjat" is commonly used either as a title for the Shi'ite Imams or as a term designating their most essential spiritual function. The Imams were considered the "proofs of God" in a number of interrelated senses: 1) they made manifest the will of an otherwise unknowable God, and resolved disputes regarding variant interpretations of the Qur'ān and issues of religious law or doctrine; 2) their continuous existence in one form or another meant that human beings could not argue that they had no access to divine guidance, and so they served as God's decisive argument (*ḥojja bāleḡa*) against the excuses of the unbelievers; 3) acceptance of their authority and guidance was a decisive criterion or "proof" of true belief, and in this capacity, the Imams would also serve as "witnesses" against human beings on the Day of Resurrection. The Imam's status as the very "proof of God to mankind" was also an argument for his supernaturally comprehensive knowledge and infallibility (*eṣma*).

The notion of the Imam as "*ḥojjat Allāh*" seems to have assumed particular importance after the disappearance or occultation (*ḡayba*) of the Twelfth Imam. The eleventh Imam in Imami tradition, Imam Ḥasan Askari, died in 260/873 without the majority of his followers being aware that he had any offspring. Imami Shi'ite doctrine came to hold that al-'Askari had indeed fathered a son, but that this son was placed in hiding immediately after his birth to protect him from his many enemies, and that he would return at some point in the future. This explanation was greeted with profound skepticism by leading figures both within and outside of the Imami community, and Imami scholars were called upon to defend this belief against numerous and varied opponents. The Shi'ite principle that the world is never without a "Proof of God" to mankind became an essential premise of their argument for the existence of the hidden Imam. An early Shi'ite heresiographical work written



during the minor occultation, for example, lists thirteen different views regarding the existence and identification of a twelfth Imam, six of them citing traditions about the necessary presence of a *ḥojjat Allāh* at all times as a basis for their particular position (Nawbakhti, pp. 79-93). The Shi'ite traditionist Kolayni, compiling his canonical collection of Imami Hadith at the end of the minor occultation, entitled his section on the imamate the "*Ketāb al-ḥojja*," and opens it with an account of a theological debate regarding the necessity of the Imam as the "proof of God" (Kolayni, I, pp. 221-28). Traditions about the necessity of a continual *ḥojjat* also figure prominently in a number of theological treatises written by Imami authorities in the early period of the major occultation (see Ebn Bābawayh; Ebn Abu Zaynab; Mofid; and Ṭusi).

The epithet of the Twelfth Imam. The title "ḥojjat" came also to be an epithet specifically applied to the Twelfth Imam (see MAHDI; Kolayni, I, pp. 391-92). Although the Twelfth Imam was to remain the Ḥojjat-Allāh throughout the period of occultation, there is a tradition attributed to him in which he instructs the community to seek religious guidance from the transmitters of Shi'ite Hadith, identifying them as the collective *ḥojjat* for the Shi'ite community, while he (the Imam) remains the *ḥojjat* for these scholars (Ebn Bābawayh, p. 451; Ṭusi, p. 245). In the absence of the Imam, this tradition was an important basis for the religious authority of Shi'ite scholars, who were considered *ḥojjat* in the limited sense of being competent legal authorities, qualified to render judgements regarding the interpretation and application of the teachings of the Imams to new situations; and in the 19th century, the title "Ḥojjat al-Eslām" (q.v.) began to be ascribed to certain prominent Shi'ite jurists (see Matini, p. 576). In the late 18th and 19th centuries, a more comprehensive view of the powers delegated to the Imami Shi'ite scholars by the Twelfth Imam was favored by some jurists, and the tradition designating Shi'ite Hadith transmitters as a *ḥojjat* for the community was cited by Ayatollah Khomeini in defense of his notion of the comprehensive (religious and political) authority of the jurist (*welāyat-e faqih*; see Komeyni, tr., pp. 27-266). On the contrary, another charismatic Shi'ite scholar, Shaikh Maḥmud Ḥalabi (q.v.) who founded the Ḥojjatiya Association (q.v.) in the mid-20th century, strongly opposed the assumption of political power by Imami Shi'ite scholars on religious grounds. It should be noted that the quietist interpretation of Ḥojjatiya is akin to the pre-millenarian world-view, whereas the revolutionary activism of Khomeini is based on post-millenarian ideas (see [HOJJATIYA](#)).

In Isma'ili tradition. Ḥojjat is also an important technical term in the Isma'ili



Shi'ite tradition, where it most commonly referred to a group of individuals (usually said to be 12 in number) who oversaw the Isma'ili propaganda campaign (*da'wa*) in the various regions of the Islamic world. The *hojjat* was a high official in the hierarchy of Ismā'ili missionary activities (*da'wa*), with knowledge of the esoteric teachings of the movement and the authority to instruct others in these areas. He supervised the large network of *dā'is* (propagandists) and reported directly to the Imam himself, or to a higher official known as the *bāb* (gate). At the famous Ismā'ili stronghold of Alamut in northwestern Iran, Ḥasan Ṣabbāh (q.v.) claimed the title of *hojjat* for himself, imbuing it with greater authority than it had in other branches of Isma'ilism, and turning it into a synonym for the very manifestation of the hidden (Isma'ili) Imam, himself.

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