



# ISLAM IN IRAN IX. THE DEPUTIES OF MAHDI

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According to Twelver Shi'ite tradition, the deputies of Mahdi (Ar. *al-nowwāb al-arba'a*) consist of the four intermediaries between the Hidden Imam and the faithful during his "Minor Occultation" (*al-Ġaybat al-ṣoġrā*), 874-941 (see [ĠAYBA](#)). In Imami sources, the *nowwāb* (lit. deputies, sing. *nā'eb*) were called *sofarā* (official mediators, sing. *safir*; first attested in No'māni [d. 956 or 971], pp. 113-15). After a period of intermediation, which lasted about 70 years, the Imam is believed to have severed links with his community in order to retreat into the 'Major Occultation' (*al-Ġaybat al-kobrā*) that is said to last until his final reappearance as *Mahdi* or the Guided One.

According to recent research (Arjomand; Klemm), Shi'ite traditional accounts about the activities of four successive *nowwāb* during the 'Minor Occultation' appear to be partially unsound. The concept of mediation reflects rather the crisis, or 'confusion' (*ḥayra*), of the Imami Shi'ites after the death of the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-'Askari, who died in prison in Sāmarrā', Iraq, in 873-74. The answer as to whether he left a son remains in dispute. Ḥasan 'Askari's death resulted in a series of differing opinions regarding the issue of succession to the Imamate. Just as after the deaths of the previous Imams,



followers of Imami Shi'ism once again splintered into various subgroups that held differing views regarding the identity of the new bearer of the Prophet's heritage as the legitimate leader of the Muslim community. One group, the later Twelver Shi'ites, adhered to the lineal continuation of the chain of Imams in the person of a young son of the deceased Imam al-'Askari who, as he could not be found nor seen anywhere, was assumed to have been sent into occultation after his father's death through divine providence. Shi'ite Traditions (Nowbakhti, pp. 84-91; Mofid, p. 345; for a Sunni heresiographical source see Aš'ari, *Maqālāt*, p. 30) give the name of the child as 'Moḥammad,' and his age at the time of his Occultation as around five years. However, the de facto absence of the Imam who, according to Shi'ite thought, had the elementary function of serving as 'God's Proof' (*Hojjat Allāh*) on Earth, plunged Imami Shi'ism into a deep theological and political crisis: How long would the occultation last? Could it last longer than a natural human lifetime? Could the Imam have died in occultation? How could his ever-increasing period of absence be plausibly explained? Was it certain that the Twelfth Imam would also be the last? Could the Imamate have ceased to continue? Moreover, who could be the authorized leader of the community in a period during which God had removed the proof of His guidance from Earth?

Several books and theological treatises of varying lengths on the issue of occultation appeared a few decades after the disappearance of the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan 'Askari (Arjomand, pp. 504 f.; Klemm, pp. 137 ff.). However, the principle of the hierarchic leadership of four successive deputies, who could provide convincing arguments in favor of the continued existence of a Twelfth Imam, is nowhere mentioned in the sources of that time. Most of the works dealing exclusively with the *ḡayba* are not extant (for those which did survive, see Nowbakhti and Qomi). The pre-eminent Persian traditionist, Moḥammad b. Ya'qub Kolayni (q.v.; var. Kolini, d. 941, in the last year of the Minor Occultation), for instance, whose monumental *al-Kāfi fi 'elm al-din* constitutes a collection of much older material of Shi'ite Traditions, presents Traditions which refer only vaguely to written decrees (*tawqī'āt*) sent from the Twelfth Imam to some pious men who had been active in the Imami community (Kolayni, I, pp. 517-25).

Among them, Abu 'Amr 'Oṭmān b. Sa'id 'Amri (or 'Omari, d. 880) and Abu Ja'far Moḥammad b. 'Oṭmān 'Amri (or 'Omari, d. 917) functioned as the first two official deputies of the Hidden Imam (see below). In Kolayni's *Kāfi*, they are recommended by the eleventh Imam to the Shi'ites as exceedingly loyal,



honest and trustworthy. Furthermore, Abu ‘Amr ‘Oṭmān claims to have seen al-‘Askari’s son with his own eyes. However, there appears to be no direct indication of his appointment as an intermediary (ibid., pp. 329-30, no. 1, p. 331 no. 4).

The notion of intermediation (*sefāra*) was either not known or not shared by eminent Imamite scholars or hadith compilers in the first decades of the absence of the Twelfth Imam. Instead, the *Ketāb al-tanbih* by Abu Sahl Nowbaḳti (written between 903 and 913 and partially preserved in Ebn Bābawayh’s *Ekmāl al-din* (pp. 88, 91), describes the worsening crisis at the time when, twenty years after the eleventh Imam’s death, nearly all his close companions had died. These men had claimed to be in contact with the Hidden Imam and had conveyed his orders to the Shi‘ites. But now, after their death, there were no more signs from the Imam, and the Shi‘ites had no more proof of his existence that they could have shown to skeptics and opponents. All they could do was to refer to the traditional analogies and predictions of the earlier Imams in order to justify the ever-increasing duration of the Occultation. There is no mention at all of a continuously functioning *sefāra*, as described by Shi‘ite authors who wrote decades after that time.

We first meet the notion of four successive deputies of the Twelfth Imam who represented him among the Shi‘ites, in the *ḡayba* books of Ebn Bābawayh (q.v.; d. 991-92) and Abu Ja‘far Moḥammad b. Ḥasan Ṭusi, known as Shaikh al-Ṭā‘efa (d. 1067). In their works, the information on the *sefāra* is a weighty argument in favor of the actual existence of the Hidden Imam. According to them, the first of the deputies was Abu ‘Amr ‘Oṭmān, also known as Sammān, “the butter dealer,” who secretly carried the money collected from Iraq’s suppressed Shi‘ite communities, hidden in a butter bag, to the caliphal residential town Sāmarrā’, where the Shi‘ites lived under the strict control of ‘Abbasid rulers. Abu ‘Amr ‘Oṭmān was considered a tried and trusted long-serving companion of the eleventh Imam Ḥasan al-‘Askari. The latter had conferred on him the leadership for the time after his death, which occurred in 873. As the head of the Shi‘ites in Sāmarrā’, he is said to have organized the funeral rites for the deceased Imam. Furthermore, he has been able to understand the mysteries surrounding the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam and even to come into contact with him in some way. It was incumbent on him to convey commandments from the Hidden Imam, and he was also the authority to be approached by the Shi‘ites with their requests, questions, and concerns if they wanted to receive an answer from the Mahdi. After the death of the first



deputy, in about 880, his exalted position was occupied by his son Abu Ja‘far Moḥammad b. Oṭmān ‘Amri (d. 917), who handed it down to Abu’l-Qāsem Ḥosayn b. Ruḥ Nowbaḳti (d. 938). The latter’s successor, Abu’l-Ḥosayn ‘Ali b. Moḥammad Somerri (for this spelling see Amir-Moezzi, p. 110; another, less frequent, variant is Semarri, see Halm, p. 37 n. 16), died in 941. Just before his death, he is said to have received a command from the Twelfth Imam not to designate any further successor, for the ‘complete *ḡayba* (*al-Ġaybat al-tāmma*) had begun. Thereupon the connection between the Imam and the Shi‘ites was severed (Ebn Bābawayh, 1970, pp. 466 ff.; Ṭusi, pp. 214 ff., 242).

Apart from this, Shi‘ite sources offer very little biographical information about the first two deputies, the father and son ‘Amri. Concerning them, we are told by Ṭusi that they were scions of the Bānu Asad, and that their *nesba*, ‘Amri or ‘Omari, referred to the grandfather of the first deputy ‘Oṭmān b. Sa‘id (Ṭusi, pp. 214-18). Further information on the two first *nowwāb* follows rather standardized patterns. The same is true with respect to the information provided on the fourth deputy Somerri, which is as vague as that on the ‘Amris.

The sources are far more transparent and varied on Abu’l-Qāsem Ḥosayn b. Ruḥ Nowbaḳti, a member of the Shi‘ite family Nowbaḳt, who had become famous as writers, poets, statesmen, and theologians. The Banu Nowbaḳt played a significant and influential role at the ‘Abbasid court (Eqbāl’s *Kānadān-e Nowbaḳti* is still the most comprehensive study on them). One of their ancestors had been the court astrologer of the second ‘Abbasid caliph al-Manṣur (r. 754-75). In the 10th century, especially during the caliphates of al-Moqtader (r. 908, 908-29, and 929-32) and al-Rāzi (r. 934-40), members of the clan served as state secretaries and viziers in the offices of the central administration in Baghdad. A relative of Ebn Ruḥ was the Shi‘ite author Abu Sahl Esmā‘il b. ‘Ali Nowbaḳti (851-923). As a high-ranking civil servant and poet, he is considered to have been the most prominent member of the family at that time. In the years following the beginning of the Major Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, Abu Sahl was the leader of the Twelver Shi‘ites in Baghdad, where many of their notables had moved to after the abandonment of Sāmarrā’ by the ‘Abbasids at the end of the 9th century. The titles of Abu Sahl’s theological and theoretical writings bear witness to disputes with the Mu‘tazilites and to his dissociation from certain Shi‘ite views on the Imamate that were at one time supported by some of the followers of the seventh Imam Musā al-Kāẓem (d. about 800) and the extremists (*ḡolāt*, q.v.). Furthermore, he



tried to find a theological solution to the issue of the Occultation, using rational arguments rather than Traditions (Arjomand, pp. 503 ff.).

According to Ebn Bābawayh and Ṭusi, Ebn Ruḥ Nowbakṭi was established as *safir*, i.e., official intermediary between the Hidden Imam and his community, in 917. Soon thereafter, he produced the first decree issued by the Twelfth Imam in occultation. The subject was the confirmation of the *safir* as new head of the hierarchy of the Shi'ites (Ṭusi, pp. 227 f.). Thus, communication with the Hidden Imam was reopened after decades of worsening crisis, evident before Ebn Ruḥ's designation, as described by Abu Sahl Nowbakṭi in *Ketāb al-tanbih*.

Ebn Ruḥ's term of office as deputy of the Twelfth Imam began during the caliphate of al-Moqtader, spanned that of al-Qāher, and ended during the reign of al-Rāzi. The attitude of their viziers toward the Twelver Shi'ites alternated between favor and disfavor. Temporarily, Ebn Ruḥ was forced underground for unknown reasons. He was only able to reappear when, in 923, al-Moqtader's vizier 'Ali b. Moḥammad b. Forāt, coming from a Shi'ite family himself, was generous towards him and supported him financially. This enabled Ebn Ruḥ to gain respect and continue his work undisturbed. He was also in favor with the next caliph, Rāzi. One of Ebn Ruḥ's relatives, Ḥosayn b. 'Ali Nowbakṭi, was even promoted to vizier for a short time (936-37). Other members of the clan held good positions at court (for details see Klemm, pp. 142 ff.). Shi'ite sources reveal Ebn Ruḥ's activities as *safir*, which are somewhat better known than those of his two predecessors, the 'Amris. It becomes clear that he was in contact with the theologians in the central Persian town of Qom, the stronghold of the traditionalist wing of Shi'ite scholarship. Letters from Qom, with petitions or questions to the Twelfth Imam, found their way to him in Baghdad, and he would reply on behalf of the Imam and sometimes even pronounced judgment in cases pertaining to Islamic law (Ṭusi, pp. 228 ff.). He also published several formal proclamations and decrees, usually on request, concerning law and worship (ibid. pp. 230-36). Although legal decisions were not pronounced exclusively by Ebn Ruḥ, he nevertheless sent a work on Islamic law to Qom for the guidance of the Shi'ite scholars there (ibid., p. 240). Ebn Ruḥ died on 19 June 938, and was buried in the Nowbakṭiya quarter in Baghdad (ibid., p. 238).

An analysis of the accounts of Ebn Ruḥ Nowbakṭi and their transmitters (see Klemm, pp. 147 ff.) leads one to assume that Ebn Ruḥ seems to have laid claim to recognition as the only deputy of the Twelfth Imam in his time. On the other hand, available information about the 'Amris suggests that they were forced



posthumously into the institution of ‘deputyship’ or *sefāra*, which, in order to be credible, had to begin as early as the death of the eleventh Imam. On a personal level, the two families were indeed close to each other, since Ebn ‘Amri’s daughter Omm Kolṭum was married to a Nowbakṭi, who was the secretary of Ebn Ruḥ. It is worth noting that a grandson of Omm Kolṭum, Ebn Barniya, can be identified as the chief source of information about the *sefāra* in the *ḡayba* books of Ebn Bābawayh and Ṭusi, where that institution and its four succeeding representatives are presented for the first time as a proof for the continuous guidance of the Hidden Imam after he was removed by God away from the believers into occultation.

It is therefore doubtful whether the institution of *sefāra* was founded and propagated by the Nowbakṭis themselves. At the time of Abu Sahl and Ebn Ruḥ, the Nowbakṭi family exercised a dominant influence over the Shi‘ite community and the ulema. Furthermore, it was only during the period of the “crisis management” of the Nowbakṭis that the *sefāra* had any effective control over the Shi‘ites. In Somerri’s time, this control collapsed again, since it was apparently not generally recognized. Ṭusi describes the prevailing consensus, according to which all those who laid claim to the *sefāra* after Somerri were “secret unbelievers and confused” (Ṭusi, p. 255). This had led some modern scholars to speak of the “failure” of the *sefāra* as a central hierarchic authority in Twelver Shi‘ism (Arjomand, pp. 508 f.).

Thus the death of Somerri in 941 marked the onset of the second, total *gayba*. Once again, perplexity and the sense of trial were deepened in the community and their leadership. Shi‘ite theologians and scholars, among them Mofid Šarif Mortazā, had to struggle until the 11th century, when they finally arrived at an explanation of the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam in rational theology.

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