



ISLAM IN IRAN VII. THE CONCEPT OF MAHDI IN TWELVER SHI'ISM

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Mahdism in Twelver Shi'ism inherited many of its elements from previous religious trends. Without necessarily going back to Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, and Christianity, to which generally eschatology, messianism, and the apocalyptic in Islam owe many of their doctrines and elements (Darmesteter, introduction; Margoliouth, pp. 125-28), one can think of numerous Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite sects that existed prior to the definitive transition from earlier Imamism to Twelver Shi'ism in the first half of the 10th century (Kohlberg 1976, *passim*). In the study that follows, a descriptive introduction to the doctrines will be accompanied by an overview of the contribution of these borrowed elements in order to better appreciate the historical development and evolution of the articles of faith.

Hesitation and progressive development of Mahdism. According to the traditional date most often retained, Imam Ḥasan 'Askari (q.v.), the eleventh Imam, died in 874. His death, like that of previous Imams, gave rise to a period of turbulence among the faithful, but this time the crisis seemed even more



serious and the Imamis did not themselves hesitate to call the decades that were to follow “the period of perplexity” or “confusion” (*ḥayra*; Modarressi, introduction). The mysterious fate of the presumed son of the eleventh Imam led to several schisms with notable doctrinal variances. Some groups claimed that his son died at a very young age, others that he had lived until a certain age and then died, and still others simply denied his very existence, believing that Ḥasan ‘Askari never had a son. Only a small minority supported the idea that the son of the eleventh imam was alive, that he was in “occultation,” and that he was to reappear as *mahdi* (Ar. “the Guided One”) at “the end of time” (*ākher al-zamān*). This idea was gradually adopted by all Imamis, who thus became known as “Twelvers” (Nowbakhti, pp. 90 ff.; Aṣ‘ari Qomi, pp. 102 ff.: Kohlberg, 1976, *passim*; Sachedina 1981, pp. 42-55; Hussain, pp. 56-67). Sources from this period, reflect, in their particular manner, the hesitation and crisis believers experienced. A close study of these sources indeed seems to show that profound uncertainties and serious lacunae existed regarding a substantial number of important doctrinal elements that became articles of faith. First, the definitive number of Imams and even the notion of “occultation” (*ḡayba*, q.v.): Abu Ja‘far Barqī (d. 887 or 893), in his *Ketāb al-maḥāsen*, contributes no information regarding these two points. In the first chapter, dedicated to different interpretations of numbers, he takes into account the numbers 3 to 10, but says nothing about the number 12 (Barqī, I, pp. 3-13). A few decades later, Ebn Bābuya (Ebn Bābawayh, q.v.; 923-91), known as Shaikh Ṣaduq, in his *Ketāb al-keṣāl*, reported many traditions regarding the number 12, some among them about twelve Imams (Ebn Bābuya, 1950, II, pp. 264-329). Barqī’s contemporary, Ṣaffār Qomi (d. 902-3) in his *Baṣā‘er al-darajāt* (pp. 280, 319-20, 372) mentions only five traditions from a total of almost 2,000 regarding the notion that the Imams were to be twelve in number, and he reports nothing about the occultation. The oldest text of certain authenticity that we have, in which a complete list of the twelve Imams is found, seems to be the *Tafsīr* by ‘Alī b. Ebrāhīm Qomi (d. ca. 919; Qomi, II, p. 44), a work written some years after what would finally be termed the “Minor Occultation” (see below).

It is only from Kolayni’s (d. 940-41) hadith collection onwards that traditions regarding the definitive number of Imams, and the occultation of the twelfth Imam became more frequent. Even so, a study of chains of transmission (*esnād*) of these traditions, not only in Kolayni, but also in the two voluminous monographs by his famous successors, namely *Ketāb al-ḡayba* by Ebn Abi Zaynab No‘māni (d. ca. 956 or 971), and *Kamāl al-dīn* by Ebn Bābuya (see



bibliography), reveal that elements of older books on the *ḡayba* belonging to other Shi'ite trends had been appropriated in the service of the cause, and were adapted to Twelver Shi'ite doctrines (Hussain, pp. 2-6; Amir-Moezzi, 1996, esp. pp. 115 ff.). As examples, one can cite the following names of transmitters: Ebrāhīm b. Šāleḥ Anmāṭi, disciple of the fifth Imam, Moḥammad Bāqer, authored a book on the occultation and considered the latter as the hidden Mahdi (Najāši, pp. 12, 19; Ṭusi, 1972, p. 14). Among the Wāqefis of the seventh Imam Musā Kāẓem (i.e., those who ended the lineage of the Imams at the latter and considered him as the Mahdi), were 'Alī b. Ḥasan Ṭāṭari Ṭā'i and Ḥasan b. Moḥammad b. Somā'a, both authors of works on the *ḡayba* (Najāši, pp. 193 and 39 respectively; Ṭusi 1972, pp. 216-17 on the first mentioned author). Another "Sevener" transmitter (Wāqefi or Isma'ili?), Moḥammad b. Moṭannā Ḥāẓrami (fl. 9th cent.), author of a *Ketāb* that is part of the "400 original texts" (*al-oṣul al-arba'ome'a*) of the Imamis, reports a tradition by Ja'far Šādeq according to which the number of Imams is limited to seven, with the final one to be the Mahdi (*al-oṣul al-arba'ome'a*, fol. 53b; regarding this collection see Kohlberg, 1987). Ḥasan b. 'Alī Baṭā'eni Kufi, like his father, served as Wāqefi of the eighth Imam 'Alī al-Rezā (q.v.). He was the author of a work bearing the title *Ketāb al-Ḡayba* (Ṭehrāni, XVI, p. 76, no. 382). Abu Sa'id 'Oṣfuri (d. 864), a contemporary of the tenth and eleventh Imams is the author of another *Ketāb* from the "400 original texts" in which he speaks of eleven Imams (though avoiding naming them), with the last to be the Mahdi (*al-oṣul al-arba'ome'a*, fol. 10a ff.; also *Ketāb Abu Sa'id al-'Oṣfuri*, p. 34). The book, already mentioned by the Imami Šaffār Qomi, even contains two traditions that seem to indicate that the Imams will be seven in number (Šaffār, pp. 146, 150).

One also encounters signs of hesitation and grasping for ideas concerning the nature and modalities of the occultation. Different theories appear to have co-existed in the decades following the death of the eleventh Imam. One discerns a trace of this in reports regarding a character as influential as Abu Sahl Nowbakṭi (d. 923), who would have played a determining role in the establishment of a definitive form of the theology of occultation (Eqbāl, s.v.; Arjomand 1996a and 1996b). Indeed, the sources attribute two different conceptions of the occultation to him. According to the first, cited by Ebn Bābuya, based on *Ketāb al-tanbih wa'l-emāma*, a work by Abu Sahl now apparently lost, the Hidden Imam "exists in the world by his spiritual substance thanks to a subsisting essence" (*mawjud al-'ayn fi'l-'ālam wa ṭābet al-dāt*: Ebn Bābuya 1985, I, pp. 90 ff.). According to a second theory reported by Ebn Nadim (d. 990; see also [AL-FEHREST](#)), Abu Sahl is said to have maintained



that the twelfth Imam died, but secretly left behind a son as a successor to him; the lineage of Imams would thus be perpetuated in occultation from father to son until the final Imam manifests himself publicly as the Mahdi (Ebn al-Nadim, p. 225). Eventually, none of the theories were sustained, but here one recognizes tentative efforts (undoubtedly among the oldest) to rationalize the concept of occultation. During the same period, Abu Ja'far Ebn Qebba (d. before 931) wrote some texts with the same objective, such as his *Mas'ala fi'l-emāma* and *al-Naqẓ 'alā Abi'l-Ḥasan 'Ali b. Aḥmad b. Baššār fi'l-ḡayba* (both edited in Modarressi, 1993). The rationalizing theorization of the concept of occultation continued in full force with Shaikh Mofid (d. 1022) and his disciples, Šarīf Mortaẓā (d. 1044), Mo-ḥammad b. 'Ali Karājaki (d. 1057), and Shaikh Abu Ja'far Ṭusi, known as Šayḵ al-Ṭā'efa (d. 1067), thinkers who explicitly had recourse to dialectical demonstration drawing notably from some older Mu'tazilite principles (Sachedina 1981, pp. 108 ff.; see bibliography).

Other uncertainties and contradictions concern the notion of the “double occultations” and belief in the “delegation” (*niāba*, *sefāra*, *wekāla*) and the “four delegates or deputies” (*nowwāb* / *sofarā' arba'a*) of the Hidden Imam. We shall consider them further on.

All this tends to show that during this period the Imami community underwent what one might consider a serious identity crisis. This “time of confusion” is one of groping in the dark, of research, development, and the more or less painful establishment of doctrines related to the authority and legitimacy of the twelfth Imam. These doctrines were faced with, and overcame, much resistance before eventually standing as articles of faith. The transition from Imami Shi'ism to Twelver Shi'ism was certainly not achieved seamlessly (Kohlberg, 1976). In the introduction of his *Ketāb al-Ḡayba*, Ebn Abi Zaynab No'māni laments the fact that a large majority of his co-religionists still did not know the identity of the Hidden Imam, or even go so far as to contest his existence (No'māni, pp. 18-32). Ebn Bābuya makes a similar observation when he says that he was inundated by questions from the Shi'ites of Khorasan regarding the identity of the Hidden Imam and this, in fact, was what prompted him to write his *Kamāl al-dīn* (Ebn Bābuya 1985, I, pp. 2 ff.). In this confused atmosphere in which schisms were growing in number (Sachedina, 1981, pp. 42 ff.) and adversarial movements, particularly the Isma'ilis, justifiably benefited from the situation, propaganda intensified and as a consequence the Twelver Shi'ite trend saw a large number of its faithful,



including some notable personalities, abandon its ranks (Halm, 1981, *passim*). The main preoccupation of Twelver Shi'ite thinkers at this time was to demonstrate the actual existence of the son of Imam Ḥasan al-ʿAskari, and to establish his legitimate authority as the Hidden Imam. This objective was attained thanks to the sustained efforts of a certain number of thinkers and transmitters of traditions, some of whom have already been cited: Nowbakhti, Abu Jaʿfar Ebn Qebba, Kolayni, Noʿmāni, and especially Ebn Bābuya and his masterly *Kamāl al-dīn*, the principal architect of the canonization of elements relating to the Hidden Imam, his occultation, and status as eschatological Savior (Amir-Moezzi, 1996, pp. 122 ff.). Still, one can list some authors and their works that were decisive in the definitive establishment of doctrines regarding the Mahdi of the Twelvers: the father of Ṣaduq, ʿAlī b. Ḥosayn Ebn Bābuya (d. 940) and his book, *al-Emāma waʾl-tabṣera men al-ḥayra*; Ebn Quluya (Ebn Qulawayh, q.v., d. 979) and his *Kāmel al-ziārāt*; Ḳazzāz Rāzi (2nd half of 10th cent.) and his *Kefāyat al-aṭar*; and Ebn ʿAyyāš Jawhari (d. 1011) and his *Moqtaṣab al-aṭar* (see bibliography). Consequently, when Shaikh Ṭusi (d. 1067) wrote his *Ketāb al-Ġayba*, a substantial monograph on the subject, articles of faith regarding the Mahdi of the Twelver Imamis appeared already well established: that the son of the eleventh Imam is indeed the twelfth and final Imam; that he had two occultations: during the first and much shorter one, he communicated with believers through the intermediary of four delegates. During the second, which is to last until the end of time, he remains providentially living in his physical body in order to return to save the world as Mahdi. We shall now examine these points in greater detail.

Birth and occultation of the Mahdi. What precisely do traditional accounts of the Mahdi relate? Versions that would eventually be considered “orthodox” began to emerge in the first half of the 10th century and only attained their definitive form in the following century. For what follows, we base our information mainly on the works of authors such as Noʿmāni, Ebn Bābuya (1985), and Shaikh Ṭusi (1965), to cite only the most important monographs on the subject.

The eschatological Savior of Imamism is presented as Abuʾl-Qāsem Moḥammad b. Ḥasan al-ʿAskari, twelfth and last among the Imams. He therefore bears the same name and *konya* as the Prophet, thus fulfilling the hadith that probably goes back to ʿAṣem b. Bahdala (d. 744-45) from Kufa. It undoubtedly owes its origin to Moḳtār’s rebellion in favor of Moḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiya, son of ʿAlī, who, once when he was described as Mahdi, declared



that his privilege consisted in bearing the same name and *konya* as the Prophet (Ebn Sa'd, V, p. 68; Madelung, "al-Mahdī," p. 1223a). However, it was inadvisable to call the Mahdi by his name, according to a ban attributed to many among the imams (*al-nahy 'an al-esm/al-man' 'an al-tasmiya*), the aim of which was to protect the Savior (commissioned to put an end to injustice) from the threat posed by the 'Abbasid court (Kolayni, n.d., II, pp. 126 ff.; No'māni, chap. 16; Ebn Bābuya, 1985, I, pp. 333 ff., 370; II, p. 648; Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp. 257-59). This also reflected uncertainties that weighed upon the identity of the Mahdi. The latter is thus called by any one of his surnames: *mahdi* (the Guided One), *montazar* (the Awaited One), *ṣāḥeb al-zamān* (Lord of the Time), *al-ḡā'eb* (the Occulted/Hidden One), *ḥojjat Allāh* (Proof of God), *ṣāḥeb al-amr* (Lord of the Cause), *baqiyat Allāh* (Remainder of God) and, most often, *qā'em* (a complex term meaning among other things: the standing, one who stands up, one who rises, the resurrector). The latter title, which among the Imamīs gradually replaced that of Mahdi, was employed in Shi'ite circles to designate the Imam who "stood up" to fight against unjust and illegitimate power. In this sense, it contrasted with *qā'ed*, literally "the seated one," a term designating previous imams who did not participate in rebellious movements against Umayyad and 'Abbasid rule (Nowbakti, pp. 90 ff.; Aṣṣ-ari Qomi, pp. 102 ff.; Sachedina, 1981, s.v.; Madelung, "Kā'im Āl Muḥammad").

According to some accounts, his mother, to whom various names are given (Narjis, Rayḥāna, Sawsan, Maryam), was a black slave of Nubian origin (the first three names, being those of flowers and plants, and often given to female slaves, seems to confirm this version); according to other accounts, undoubtedly legendary and hagiographic, she was the grand-daughter of the Byzantine emperor, himself a disciple of the Apostle Simon. According to this version, the Byzantine princess was captured by Muslim troops and sold as a slave in Baghdad to a man belonging to the entourage of the tenth Imam, 'Alī al-Naqī (see 'ALI AL-HĀDĪ) who then came to Sāmarrā' and offered the girl to Ḥakima, the latter's sister. Even before her captivity, the princess had a dream vision of Mary, mother of Jesus, as well as of Fāṭema (q.v.), daughter of the Prophet Moḥammad, both of whom had asked her to convert to Islam and let herself be captured by the Muslim armies as she was destined for a glorious life. In Sāmarrā', the tenth Imam, having by clairvoyance recognized in her the future mother of the Mahdi, gave her in marriage to his son Ḥasan, the future eleventh Imam. Signs of the mother's pregnancy as well as the birth of the child were miraculously concealed, since the 'Abbasids sought to eliminate an expected child whom persistent rumors described as a Savior. The date most



often cited for his birth is 15 Ša'bān 256/18th July 870 (one of the most important Imami festivals). The father showed the newborn to some forty intimate disciples, and then the child was hidden. According to many accounts, the eleventh imam is said to have adopted a two-fold tactic to guarantee the child's security. First, apart from his intimate circle, the Imam kept the birth of the child secret, going so far as to designate his mother, Ḥodayṭ, as his sole heir. Now, it is known that according to Imami law, under some conditions the inheritance belongs to the mother of the deceased when the latter does not leave behind a child. Secondly, Imam Ḥasan al-'Askari had recourse to a ruse to cloud the issue and distract attention. Some time before his death in 874, he allowed a rumor to spread that his servant Ṣaqil was pregnant with his child. Informants of the caliph al-Mo'tamed (r. 870-92) closely observed the activities of the Imam, who was kept under surveillance in the military camp at Sāmarrā'. When, following a serious illness, the Imam's death seemed inevitable, the caliph dispatched his trusted men to the site. After the eleventh Imam died, his servant was arrested for observation. During the year that followed, she showed no signs of pregnancy and was released and promptly forgotten. The caliph and his entourage were then convinced that the deceased eleventh Imam left behind no descendants. According to Imami authors, divine providence had been accomplished. The twelfth Imam, the awaited Savior, was thus saved and grew up in hiding (for these accounts and a critical analysis of them, see Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pt. IV-1 and IV-2). This "gilded legend" meets the obvious hagiographic requirements, but at the same time it reflects the uncertainties that continued to be felt in Imami circles regarding the very existence of a child of Imam Ḥasan al-'Askari. This led, as we have seen, to a number of schisms. It is certainly no accident that the sources present "the concealed birth" as one of the distinctive signs of the Savior (No'māni, chap. 10, no. 7, p. 244; Ebn Bābuya, 1985, I, chap. 32, no. 2, p. 325).

Not unlike previous imams, the Mahdi had a birth and childhood bathed in the miraculous. Supernatural signs, divine lights, and celestial messengers accompanied him from his very birth. From his early childhood on, he demonstrated initiatory knowledge and manifested supernormal powers. Our sources regularly relate that even while in hiding, the young twelfth Imam was visited by initiated adepts of his father, and the latter never missed an occasion to reveal to his followers that his son was indeed the *qā'em*. Upon the death of his father in 260/874, the twelfth Imam entered his first occultation while still a child, later termed the Minor Occultation (*al-ḡaybat al-ṣoḡrā*), which lasted 70 lunar years, i.e., until 329/940. During this period, the Hidden



Imam is said to have communicated with his believers through four intermediary delegates or representatives: (1) Abu 'Amr 'Oṭmān b. Sa'id 'Amri/'Omari; (2) Abu Ja'far Moḥammad 'Amri/'Omari, son of the above; (3) Abu'l-Qāsem Ḥosayn b. Ruḥ, from the influential family of the Banu Nowbakṭ; and (4) Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali b. Moḥammad Semmari (regarding these representatives and the sources see Ali, pp. 197 ff.; Hussain, chap. IV-VII; on the vocalization of the fourth name, usually erroneously pronounced Samarri, see Halm, 1988, chap. 4, s.v.).

The most important activities of these “representatives” would have included ensuring that canonical precepts were respected by the believers, the collection and distribution of taxes, delivering questions of a religious nature to the Hidden Imam, making his responses known in public and, finally, performing miracles to convince those believers who were prey to perplexity and confusion. Ebn Bābuya dedicates several pages of his *Kamāl al-din* to enumerating and describing the supernatural powers of the representatives, perceived by the faithful to be the result of direct initiation by the Hidden Imam (Ebn Bābuya, 1985, II, pp. 486-520; Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pp. 272-75).

According to official tradition, in 329/940, the fourth and last delegate received a final letter signed by the Hidden Imam in which he declared that henceforth and “until the end of time,” no one will see him or be his representative, and that whosoever declares otherwise is no less than an imposter. This important document, apparently reported for the first time by Ebn Bābuya in his *Kamāl al-din* (II, chap. 45, no. 44, p. 516), heralds the second, or Major Occultation (*al-ḡaybat al-kobrā*), which according to Twelver Shi'ite doctrine still continues and will last until the eschatological return of the Mahdi (regarding this letter, reports concerning it in ancient sources, and translations of it into Western languages, see Amir-Moezzi 1996, pp. 122-23 and n. 51). Thus, for more than a thousand years the Imamis have lived in a period of Major Occultation of the Hidden Imam. Imami tradition cites four principal reasons to prove the necessity of the occultation: safeguarding the life of the Hidden Imam; independence with regard to temporal powers which, according to some traditions, will all be unjust until the return of the Mahdi; testing believers in order to measure the degree of their faith; and finally, a secret reason not to be revealed until the end of time (Kolayni, n.d., II, pp. 127-45; No'māni, chap. 10; Ebn Bābuya, 1985, chap. 44; idem, 1966, chap. 179; Ebn 'Ayyāš, pp. 34-36; Ṭusi 1965, pp. 73 ff. pp. 109-11, 214-15). It must be emphasized that the concept of two occultations, the first shorter than the second, originated in the beliefs



of the Wāqefis of the seventh Imam Musā al-Kāẓem. For them, these two occultations constituted a distinctive sign of the Mahdi, obviously here alluding to the two periods of imprisonment of the seventh Imam, the first of a shorter period under the caliphate of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-85), and the second, lasting until the death of the Imam, ordered by Hārūn al-Rašid (r. 786-809; Madelung, “al-Mahdī,” p. 1226b). This Wāqefi origin also seems at issue in a hadith, preserved by the Twelver Shi‘ite corpus, that mentions the imprisonment of the Savior (No‘māni, p. 288; Ebn Bābuya, 1985, II, p. 548; Ṭusi, 1965, p. 181). As a corollary to the preceding concept, belief in the delegation of four official representatives of the Hidden Imam during the first occultation seems to have started to take form long after the proclamation of major occultation, most likely in the second half of the 10th century. As we have seen, Barqī and Ṣaffār do not even deal with the theme of occultation. With two authors from the end of the 9th century, namely Nowbakti in his *Feraq al-šī‘a*, and Aš‘ari Qomi in his *Maqālāt*, there is still no mention of any representative. The same is true of No‘māni, who wrote in the first half of the next century. During the same period, Kolayni in his *Kāfī*, and Kašši in his *Rejāl*, provide names of several “representatives” (for example the two ‘Amri/‘Omari, Ebrāhīm b. Mahziyār, Marzbāni Ḥāreṭi, Ḥājez b. Yazid, etc.), but never speak of an official list of four individuals (Kolayni, n.d., II, pp. 449 ff.; Kašši, s.v.). In her well-documented study, V. Klemm convincingly demonstrates that Ḥosayn b. Ruḥ Nowbakti (d. 938), the “third” *nā‘eb*, would have been the first to claim to be the only representative of the Hidden Imam, and as a consequence, the supreme leader of the community in the absence of the latter. According to Klemm, the dogma of delegation to the Hidden Imam by a sole representative seems to have been invented and spread by the powerful Nowbakti family in Baghdad. The two previous claimants, the two ‘Amri/‘Omaris, were no doubt elevated to the status of sole representative posthumously to prove to believers the continuity of this institution since the presumed beginning of the occultation (Klemm, *passim*). This conception of the *niāba* was far from being accepted without hesitation or resistance, and one has to wait almost half a century until the *Kamāl al-din* by Ebn Bābuya has it take its more or less definitive canonical form for the first time. “More or less,” indeed, since even Ebn Bābuya, who provides the list of “four representatives,” speaks of other trusted men of the Hidden Imam in different cities (Ebn Bābuya, 1985, II, pp. 432, 442).

Let us end this section by recalling an interesting phenomenon at the time of the occultation that increases devotion to the Hidden Imam and strengthens



faith in his invisible presence: accounts of meetings with the Mahdi. Hagiographic literature dedicated to the twelfth Imam has always accorded a special place to accounts of meetings with the Mahdi. It covers a period of almost one thousand years, ranging from some decades after the occultation with, for example, Kolayni, until the contemporary period with monographs by Mirzā Ḥosayn Ṭabarsi/Ṭabresi Nuri (d. 1902), which are veritable encyclopedias of this genre, and *Behār al-anwār* by 'Allāma Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1699-1700: see bibliography). Regarding encounters during the Major Occultation, henceforth a question arises to which some Imami thinkers have responded: how to consider accounts of meetings during the Major Occultation authentic when in his final letter to his last representative the Imam declares any encounter to be impossible until the end of time? It is important to note that Ebn Bābuya, who reports this letter in his *Kamāl al-dīn*, does not hesitate to relate in the same work some accounts of meetings with the Hidden Imam after his Major Occultation. From the very beginning, ocular vision of the imam, to which the letter refers, seems to have been understood not in a general sense, but as a condition of the Hidden Imam's representative. Thus, what is declared impossible during the major occultation (thus until the end of time) is not an encounter with the Hidden Imam as such, but laying claim to the *niāba* of the latter by citing a meeting with the Hidden Imam as grounds. A believer may be granted the privilege of meeting the Imam, but if following this he declares himself to be the "representative" of the Imam due to the encounter, he is considered (according to terms of the letter) no less than a liar and impostor (Šarīf Mortazā, n.d., pp. 233 ff.; Ebn Ṭāwūs, 1931, pp. 34, 48, 73-75; Majlesi, LII, p. 151; Ṭabarsi/Ṭabresi Nuri, 1991, chap. 8, pp. 559 ff.).

These encounters may occur anywhere, but certain sites seem to be more propitious: Mecca; beside the Imams' mausoleums; the Cave (*sardāb*) in Sāmarrā' where the Hidden Imam is said to have begun his occultation; the mosque of Sahla in Najaf, and the sanctuary of Jamkarān, not far from Qom (Amir-Moezzi, 1997, first part). Typologically, one can distinguish three categories of narratives of encounters, based on the principal dimension promoted: a humanitarian dimension in which the great generosity of the Hidden Imam towards his believers and his concern for their well-being are emphasized; an initiatory dimension in which the Imam teaches his believers prayers, transmits spiritual knowledge, and bears secrets etc.; and finally, an eschatological dimension, presented mainly by late mystical sources, in which the encounter prompts a believer's individual spiritual resurrection (Amir-



Moezzi, 1996, *passim*, esp. pp. 127-35; see also Corbin, 1963-64, pp. 67 ff., and *idem*, 1972, book VII, esp. pp. 346-67).

The end of time and rising of the Mahdi. These subjects have been discussed at length in the article dedicated to Twelver Shi'ite eschatology (Amir-Moezzi, 1998). Here we mostly summarize this work, contributing additional information where necessary. The “end of time” or, in other words, the date of the final advent of the Hidden Imam, is unknown and believers are urged to await deliverance (*faraj*) patiently and piously. The future coming of the Savior is the most frequently cited subject in predictions made by the Prophet, Fāṭema, and the Imams: entire lengthy chapters are dedicated to the topic in the sources. This coming is heralded by a number of signs (*‘alāmāt*). The universal signs are the widespread invasion of the earth by Evil, the overcoming of knowledge by ignorance, and the loss of a sense of the sacred and all that links man to God and his neighbors. These, in some measure, require the manifestation (*zohur*) and the rising (*koruj*, *qiām*) of the Qā'em, or else humanity will be overwhelmed by darkness. Furthermore, there are certain specific signs among which five recur more regularly and are hence justifiably called the “five signs”: (1) the coming of Sofyāni, the enemy of the Qā'em, who will command an army in battle against the latter (Madelung, 1986, *passim*, and 2000); (2) the advent of Yamāni, who appears in the Yemen to preach support for the Qā'em; (3) the Cry/Scream (*ṣayḥa*, *nedā'*) of supernatural origin, coming from the sky and calling man to defend the Imam's cause; (4) the swallowing (*kasf*) of an army composed of the Imam's enemies in a desert often located between Mecca and Medina, according to a hadith most likely propagated by 'Abd-Allāh b. Zobayr during his war propaganda against the Umayyad caliph Yazid (r. 680-83), during the latter's campaign against Mecca and Medina, popularized by the traditionist of Basra, Qatāda (d. 773-74; see Madelung, 1981, pp. 293-95); and (5) the assassination by the Meccans of the messenger to the Qā'em, often called Nafs or al-Nafs al-Zakiya (echoing the messianic rebellion and death in 762 of the Hasanid Moḥammad b. 'Abd-Allāh, surnamed al-Nafs al-Zakiya).

The Mahdi thus becomes manifest, all the while having miraculously maintained his youth. He fights and definitively uproots Evil and pervasive ignorance, re-establishing the world to its original pure state (Amir-Moezzi, 2000, *passim*). For this to occur, he must first avenge the assassination of Imam Ḥosayn in order that the majority of Muslims be purged of the most villainous crime that it ever committed. Moreover, according to the



eschatological doctrine of *raj'a* (q.v.), a certain number of past saints, victims of their community's injustice, and their persecutors come back to life in order that the good may take revenge on the evil ones. The Savior will thus not only re-establish Islam, but all religions, to their purity and original integrity, making "submission to God" (Ar. *eslām*) the universal religion. He will also bring wisdom to mankind by revealing the esoteric secrets of sacred Scriptures (Amir-Moezzi, 1992, pt. IV-3).

In this final battle against the forces of Evil, the Qā'em is obviously not alone. First, he will be accompanied by certain important characters from the sacred history of humanity; thus, according to different hadiths one finds various prophets of the past such as Jesus and the Prophet Moḥammad, and various Imams, most often 'Ali and/or Ḥosayn. In this war, the Mahdi commands an army in which, apart from the masses of oppressed who enlist depending on the progress of his victories, three kinds of "warriors" are present: (1) angels, especially the 313 angels that accompanied the 313 fighters from Badr, the site of a battle of the Prophet against the Meccans; (2) a terrifying celestial entity named Fear (*roḥ*; see [ESCHATOLOGY iii. IMAMI SHI'ISM](#)) who marches at the head of the Mahdi's army and terrifies his enemies; and (3) most importantly, 313 Companions of the Qā'em forming his militia (*jayš*), a term whose letters also add up to the value of 313. These are specially initiated disciples bearing secret knowledge and possessing miraculous powers. The Savior will no doubt triumph, and the entire world will be brought to submission. Forces of injustice and ignorance will once and for all be exterminated, the earth embellished with justice and wisdom, and humanity revived by knowledge. The Mahdi thus prepares the world for the ultimate trial of the final resurrection of the Last Judgment. According to some traditions, he will reign upon the earth for some time (7, 9, 19 . . . years), after which occurs the death of all humanity just prior to the Judgment. Other traditions report that after the death of the Qā'em, the government of the world will remain in the hands of the initiated for a certain period before the Day of Resurrection.

Influence and consequences. Unlike in Sunnism, where belief in the Mahdi, although present, never became an essential article of faith, in Shi'ism in general, and Twelver Imamism in particular, it is made a constitutive dogma of its religious doctrine, its dualist vision of the world and more specifically, its conception of *ma'ād*, "place of return" or the hereafter (see [SHI'ITE DOCTRINE](#)). During the course of time, Imami panegyric as well as hagiographic literature dedicated to the Hidden Imam tried hard to



demonstrate that the figure of the Mahdi, present in Sunni hadith, referred to the twelfth Imam (Madelung, “al-Mahdī”). Imami arguments gained momentum during the 13th century when some great Sunni scholars contributed their support to the Imami dogma of identifying the Mahdi with the twelfth Imam: the two Syrian Shafi‘ite scholars Moḥammad b. Yusof Ganji in his *Bayān fī aḵbār šāḥeb al-zamān*, composed in 1250-51, and Kamāl-al-Dīn Moḥammad ‘Adawī Naṣībī in his *Maṭāleb al-so‘ul*, completed in 1252, and the renowned Sebṭ Ebn al-Jawzī (d. 1256) in his *Taḍkerat al-ḵawāṣṣ* (see bibliography). Given the dates of these authors and their works, coinciding with the arrival of the Mongols, the end of Sunni caliphal power and the increasing political influence of the Imamīs, one wonders if this doctrinal reversal was not dictated by a certain opportunism. One might note in this respect that Moḥammad b. Yusof Ganji was assassinated in Damascus in 1260 for having collaborated with the Mongol conquerors. In any case, it is from this period onward that one notices, from time to time, some learned Sunnis rallying to Imami Mahdism. The phenomenon is also noticeable among Sunni mystics. Already in the 11th century, Abu Bakr Bayhaqī had denounced the consent of some Sufīs concerning the identification of the Mahdi with the last Imam of the Twelvers (Madelung, “al-Mahdī”). Setting aside the influence of Imamism upon the eschatological hagiology of Ebn al-‘Arabi (q.v.; Elmore, pp. 111-40), one can cite the disciple of the latter, Sa‘d-al-Dīn Ḥammuya in his *Farā‘ed al-semṭayn*, the Egyptian ‘Abd-al-Wahhāb Ša‘rānī in *al-Yawāqit wa’l-jawāher* (1551) or, more recently, the Naqṣbandī master from Balkh, Solaymān Qonduzī (d. 1877) in his *Yanābī’ al-mawadda* (see bibliography). Finally, let us note that some doctrinal issues regarding the person of the twelfth Imam, his occultation, his final advent, his companions, and accounts of encounters with him have been interpreted in terms of spiritual and esoteric hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*) in the Imami mystical schools and texts, particularly among the Šayḵīs and Ne‘mat-Allāhīs (Amir-Moezzi 2001, 2003).

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