

IMAM *ABSCONDITUS* AND THE BEGINNINGS OF A THEOLOGY OF OCCULTATION: IMAMI SHI'ISM CIRCA 280–90 A.H./900 A.D.

SA'ID AMIR ARJOMAND

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

The last quarter of the ninth century is the most obscure in the history of Imami Shi'ism—bedeviled as it is by confused and tendentious documentation. Following the death of the eleventh Imam with no offspring, it represents a period of severe crisis and yet, within it, are found the beginnings of a number of far reaching doctrinal and institutional trends which shaped Shi'ism permanently. Two important documents are used as a window for viewing this critical period by focusing on the major rupture in the history of Shi'ism that marks its end: the cessation of communication between the Imam and his Shi'a and the formal acceptance of an Imam *absconditus*. From the historical point of view, this rupture is the decisive turning point that divides the historical Imamate from the era of occultation.

I

ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 1, 874/8 RABĪ' I, 260, the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, died. “He died and no offspring (*khalaf*) was seen after him.”¹ His followers splintered into fourteen or more groups. Two of these took up the ideas of the Wāqifiyya, the group of followers of the seventh Imam, Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799/183), which, after his death, considered the Imamate suspended in him, as he was the apocalyptic *qā'im* (redresser/riser) in occultation. The Wāqifiyya had also held that the *qā'im* would have two occultations, a short one followed by a longer one extending to his rising, a tenet whose origin can be traced to Mūsā al-Kāẓim's two periods of imprisonment.² One splinter group among Ḥasan's fol-

¹ Sa'īd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ashʿarī al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa'l-firaq*, ed. M. J. Mashkūr (Tehran, 1963), 102 (henceforth *MF*). In Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Kitāb firaq al-shi'a*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1931), 79 (henceforth *FSh*). The word *athar* (vestige) is used instead of *khalaf*.

² W. Madelung, “al-Mahdī,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (1986), 5: 1236; H. Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 87. Some even saw his imprisonment as part of the occultation (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Irshād* (Qumm: Baṣīrati, n.d.), 303; English tr. I. K. A. Howard, *Kitāb al-Irshād: The Book of Guidance* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 456, assimilating it to Joseph's imprisonment which they also considered an occultation. (Ibn Bābūya, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-niʿma fī ithbāt al-ghayba wa kashf al-ḥayra*, ed. ʿA. A. Ghaffārī (Tehran, 1975/1395), 152–53 (henceforth *Kamāl*).

lowers argued that, as a childless Imam cannot die and leave the world devoid of proof (*ḥujja*) of God, Ḥasan had not died but had gone into occultation. He was the *qā'im* and the *mahdī*, and would have two occultations.³ In the course of the next two decades, these neo-Wāqifite ideas were adopted in modified form by the leadership of the nascent Imami hierarchy.

Ḥasan b. ʿAlī had become the eleventh Imam by default, as his older brother and the successor-designate of the tenth Imam, Muḥammad, had predeceased their father. Some of the Imamis had refused to accept his Imamate and had instead chosen his younger brother, Jaʿfar. Probably the majority maintained that the eleventh Imam had died childless and, considering this proof that they had been mistaken in accepting his Imamate in the first place, became followers of his rival brother, Jaʿfar, who survived him by some two decades.⁴ ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-ʿAmrī, the eleventh Imam's chief agent, who, assisted by his son, Muḥammad, had been in charge of the seat of the Imam (*al-nāḥiya al-muqaddasa*) in Sāmarrāʾ since the time of the tenth Imam, refused to come to terms with Jaʿfar. Instead, the ʿAmris opted for an absent Imam

³ *FSh*, 79–80; *MF*, 106–7; *Kamāl*, 40; Kohlberg, “From Imamiyya to Ithnā-ʿashariyya,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 531. The second neo-Wāqifite splinter group had similar beliefs, except for maintaining that Ḥasan had died but would return to life as the *qā'im* and the *mahdī*. (*FSh*, 80–81; *MF*, 107.)

⁴ Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-zīna*, edited and published as a supplement to ʿAbd Allāh al-Sallūm al-Samarrāʾī, *al-Ghuluww wa'l-firaq al-ghāliya fī'l-ḥadāra al-islāmiyya* (Baghdad, 1972/1392), 291–93. See also Modarressi, 81, nn. 141–43.

whose name they refused to divulge “as the people believe that this lineage has come to an end.”⁵ Ḥafṣ b. Ḥamrī the elder died before long, and his son, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān, assumed the direction of the seat of the Imam for over forty years until his death in 917/304.⁶

This immediate assumption of control cannot have been accompanied by any theological argument. Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-Ḥamrī must simply have claimed to be acting on behalf of a son left behind by the eleventh Imam. This Imam in hiding was said to have been born circumcised, and Ibn al-Ḥamrī reports on the authority of the Imam’s aunt that his mother gave birth to him without bleeding “as is the way of the mothers of the Imams.”⁷ The chief agent produced several decrees, purporting to emanate from this hidden Imam, to excommunicate his opponents and rival contenders. At some point the Imam in hiding was said to have been four years old at the time of his father’s death, and Ibn al-Ḥamrī is reported to have insisted on his existence by swearing: “By God, the lord of this cause (*ṣāhib hādāʾl-amr*) is present every year during the Ḥajj season. He sees people and recognizes them, while they see him and do not recognize him.” Furthermore, the miracles of the Imam were said to become

manifest through the chief agent’s hand.⁸ In the long run, however, Ibn al-Ḥamrī and his associates, most notably the Nawbakhti family in Baghdad, also adopted a modified form of the neo-Wāqifite notion of occultation to explain the continued absence of the Imam.

At least some of the fiscal organization of the Imami community survived the eleventh Imam and the defections to his brother, and agents loyal to Ibn al-Ḥamrī in Sāmarrāʾ continued to collect *khums* on behalf of the hidden Imam. In the 860s and early 870s, decrees and letters of the tenth and eleventh Imams were sent regularly to various Imami communities in Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-Ḥamrī’s handwriting. After the death of the eleventh Imam, community leaders continued to receive letters and decrees from the seat of the hidden Imam in the same hand.⁹ This handwriting gradually came to be considered that of the Lord of the House, alternatively identified as the Lord of the Age, or the hidden Imam.¹⁰ A notable purpose of the earliest decrees of the hidden Imam was the cursing and excommunication of opponents of the chief agent, Ibn al-Ḥamrī.¹¹ Many of the decrees concern fiscal administration and the conveying of contributions to the seat of the Imam. Other major themes of the rescripts were pastoral care, cure of disease, provision of shrouds and ritual and legal advice.¹² The active supervision of the agents and the affairs of the community through this correspondence from the holy seat went on for some two decades. Then, probably in the mid-890s/early 280s, the bureau of the Imam suddenly

⁵ *Kamāl*, 442.

⁶ There is an unresolved problem with the elder Ḥamrī’s name. Our oldest source, Kashshī, reports it as “Ḥafṣ b. Ḥamr known as al-Ḥamrī,” adding that his son, Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān, was known as Ibn al-Ḥamrī. (Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl*, abridged by Muhammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī as *Ikhtiyār maʿrifat al-rijāl*, ed. H. Muṣṭafavī [Mashhad, 1970/1348], 530–31.) All subsequent sources, however, give the totally different name of ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd. The Shiʿite biographical science (*ʿilm al-rijāl*) has added the epithet *jammāl* (camel-driver) to Ḥafṣ b. Ḥamr’s name, but has not been able to solve this problem. Acknowledging the improbability of two sets of fathers and sons with the same last name having been the agents of the hidden Imam, Khūʿī is disposed to doubt the existence of any Ḥafṣ b. Ḥamr, let alone a son of his. (Abūʾl-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khūʿī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-ḥadīth*, vol. 6 [Najaf, 1983/1403], see n. 34, vol. 1 [1970], 144–47.) However, given the length of the obscure period in which the holy seat was apparently run by Ibn al-Ḥamrī (forty-five years by our count, fifty in some traditional reports) it could well be that other members of the Ḥamrī family, including some camel-driver, were involved not only in the fiscal administration of the Imami community but also in the chain of succession to the chief agency and wished to derive legitimacy from their relation to the elder Ḥamrī, the chief agent of the tenth and eleventh Imams.

⁷ *Kamāl*, 433.

⁸ *Kamāl*, 440; Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-ghayba*, ed. Āghā Buzurg al-Tihirānī (Najaf, 1965/1385), 221 (henceforth *Ghayba*).

⁹ *Ghayba*, 219–23; Modarressi, 93.

¹⁰ *Kamāl*, 483; *Ghayba*, 176.

¹¹ *Ghayba*, 244–45, mentions three such decrees. The first was issued against a certain Shariʿī, a disciple of the tenth and eleventh Imams who was reportedly the first to claim to be the gate (*bāb*) to the Hidden Imam. The other, better known claimant to the gatehood of the Imam of the age, Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Numayrī, was cursed by Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān, but apparently not by the hidden Imam himself. Two other opponents of Ibn al-Ḥamrī—Aḥmad b. Hilāl al-Karkhī, a disciple of the eleventh Imam who had acknowledged Ḥamrī the elder’s authority but refused to accept the succession of his son, and Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Balāl, an agent who claimed independent authorization by the hidden Imam and refused to hand over funds collected on his behalf—were subjects of two excommunication decrees emanating from the hidden Imam.

¹² *Kamāl*, 482–522.

ceased to issue decrees and letters, and its agents stopped collecting *khums* for remission to the holy seat. The cessation of all communication with the holy seat was tantamount to the Imam absconding, and introduced a major rupture in the history of Imami Shi'ism. A decade later, we witness the first sustained efforts to make sense of the Imam's absconding. This is done by systematically relating the absence of the Imam to the central notions of the Imamate and Prophecy as institutions for the divine guidance of mankind. In other words, a *theology* of occultation emerged in the years immediately following the cessation of communication with the Imam *absconditus*.

As has been shown elsewhere,¹³ the serious challenges to hierocratic authority in the early tenth/fourth century caused the announcement, in 918/305, that communication with the Imam had been resumed. This measure proved a disastrous failure and only aggravated the perplexity (*ḥayra*) of the Imami community (which has given the era its name) and the Imami hierarchy was compelled to reverse it with a declaration of complete occultation (*ghayba tāmma*) in 941/329. This meant a return to the search for a theological solution to the problem of the Imam *absconditus*. The beginnings made in the last decade of the ninth century thus proved invaluable to the rationalist doctors of the eleventh century, who were to develop a theology of occultation as a key element in making Imami Shi'ism into a doctrinally robust variant of Islam as a world religion of salvation.¹⁴ In short, the end of the historical Imamate and the theological response to it make the last decade of the ninth century a critical period in the history of Imami Shi'ism.

The two sections of this study are devoted to bringing two important documents from this period to light. The first is a rescript issued by the bureau of the Imam shortly after 894/281, which can be considered the last communication before the Imam *absconditus* is sealed off from the community of believers. The second is a tract that was written less than a decade later by a close associate of Ibn al-ʿAmrī and the leading figure among the Imami Shi'a in Baghdad, Abū Sahl Ismāʿīl b. ʿAlī al-Nawbakhtī (d. 923/311). Nawbakhtī's attempt to make sense of what is said to be the Imam's occultation by rational arguments can be taken as the earliest extant representation of the interpretation of occultation by the

Imami hierocracy. His position, it will be noted, was consonant with that of his contemporary, Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī, whose polemical tracts on occultation have recently been published by Modarressi.¹⁵

II

Of the decrees issued from the holy seat in the hand of the chief agent, Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-ʿAmrī, the most important, and probably the last, was a rescript issued in response to a set of questions by a certain Iṣḥāq b. Yaʿqūb at the closing decade of the ninth century (ca. 895/282).¹⁶ Nothing is known about Iṣḥāq b. Yaʿqūb from Shi'ite biographical sources. The connection implied between him and Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Mahzyār in the rescript, however, suggests that he may have been an agent in or near the Ahwāz area. Here is the text of the rescript, "written in the hand of our master, the Lord of the Age [variant, Lord of the House]":¹⁷

1. As for your enquiry, may God guide and confirm you, regarding those from our family and our cousins who deny me, know that there is no kinship between God and any individual, and he who denies me is disassociated from me, and his way is the way of the son of Noah. As for the way of my uncle Jaʿfar and his son[s], it is the way of Joseph's brothers.
2. As for beer, its drinking is forbidden, but there is no evil in parsnip wine (*shalmāb*).
3. As for your contributions, we accept them only to cleanse you. Let whoever wishes send them and whoever wishes stop. What God has given me is better than what He has given you.
4. The *parousia* (*zuhūr*) is a deliverance; its announcement is with God alone; those who appoint a time (for it) are lying.
5. He who assumes Ḥusayn was not killed is guilty of infidelity, falsehood and error.
6. As for new occurrences, refer in their regard to the transmitters of our Tradition; they are my proofs upon you, and I am the Proof of God upon them.

¹⁵ Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation*, part two.

¹⁶ This approximate dating is based on the reference to Jaʿfar and his son.

¹⁷ The text of the decree is taken from *Kamāl*, 483–85. The version given in *Ghayba*, 176–78, is virtually identical. It gives, however, "Lord of the House" (*ṣāhib al-dār*) instead of "Lord of the Age" (*ṣāhib al-zamān*). I have numbered the paragraphs for the purpose of discussion.

¹³ S. A. Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: a Sociohistorical Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28.3 (1996).

¹⁴ See S. A. Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology: The Shi'ite Doctrine of Occultation and the Transition from Chiliasm to Law," *Journal of Religion* 76.4 (1996).

7. As for Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-ʿAmrī—God is pleased with him and with his father before him—he is trusted by me and his writing (*kitāb*) is my writing.
8. As for Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Mahzyār al-Ahwāzī, may God reform his heart for him and remove his doubt.
9. As for the contributions you have sent us, we accept only what is clean and pure; the earning of a (female) singer is forbidden.
10. As for Muḥammad b. Shādhān b. Naʿīm, indeed, he is a man of our Shiʿa of the Household [of the Prophet].
11. As for the mutilated¹⁸ Abū'l-Khaṭṭāb, Muḥammad b. Abī Zaynab, he is accursed, and his companions are accursed. Do not associate with people of their discourse; I dissociate myself from them and my fathers—peace be upon them—are dissociated from them.
12. As for those who are in possession of our properties, if they consider any of it theirs and eat of it, they are verily eating fire.¹⁹
13. As for the *khums*, it is indeed made lawful for our Shiʿa [to keep]; I have exempted them from it until the time of *parousia* so that their birth should remain clean and not illegitimate.
14. As for the repentance of those who had shown doubt in the religion of God concerning their contribution to us, let those who asked for the return of their goods have them back; we have no need of gifts from those who doubt.
15. As for the cause of what has occurred in the matter of occultation (*ghayba*), God Most High has verily said: “O, those who believe, question not concerning things which, if they were revealed to you, would vex you” (Qurʾān 5:101). There has not been a single one of any forefathers—peace be upon them—who has not borne the allegiance (*bayʿa*) to the despot (*tāghiya*) of his time on his neck; I will indeed rise when, at the time of my uprising, there is no allegiance to any of the despots upon my neck.
16. As for the way of benefiting from me during my occultation, it is like benefiting from the sun when it is hidden from the eyes by clouds. Indeed I am the security (*amān*) of the people of the earth, as the stars are security to the people of the skies. So close the gate of questions in what does not con-

cern you. Do not burden yourself with knowing what is beyond your duty.²⁰ Increase your prayer for the expedition of deliverance (*faraj*); in this, indeed, is your deliverance.

This document is remarkable for encapsulating the life of the Shiʿite community during the decades following the death of the eleventh Imam. Paragraph 1 touches on the most critical issue for the survival of the sect, namely the rival claim to the Imamate by the eleventh Imam’s brother, Jaʿfar, from whom the hidden Imam dissociates himself. As was pointed out, Jaʿfar’s following was at first very substantial. Even the merchant of fat (*sammān*), as the elder ʿAmrī was sometimes referred to on account of his profession, is reported to have been in the entourage of Jaʿfar on the day of the death of the eleventh Imam.²¹ The break, however, must have come soon thereafter. The ʿAmrīs and a branch of the Imam’s family bitterly opposed Jaʿfar and resented his sharing in the eleventh Imam’s estate with the latter’s mother.²² They must have been responsible for producing traditions according to which the whole crisis of succession had been foretold by the fourth and the tenth Imam, both of whom had called the false pretender “Jaʿfar the liar (*kadhkhāb*),”²³ a designation used in the subsequent Imami literature. The reference to Jaʿfar *and his son* suggests that the rescript was written after his death, most probably in 894–95/281,²⁴ and the succession of his son, ʿAlī, as the Imam of his followers, the Jaʿfariyya.

Two of the paragraphs concern the agents of the holy seat in important Shiʿite centers. Muḥammad b. Shādhān b. Naʿīm, confirmed in paragraph 10, was the Imam’s agent (*wakīl*) in Nishāpūr. He appears to have succeeded Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbduh, who had been the agent of the eleventh Imam and had remained loyal to the ʿAmrīs. One of the early decrees issued for the hidden Imam by the central bureau had aimed at rallying the community in Nishāpūr behind him, and at assuring the transmission of collected taxes.²⁵ Nishāpūr was subordinate to the region

²⁰ This injunction reinforces the suggestion of the Qurʾānic verse cited in the previous paragraph that the believers cease to be inquisitive about the matter of occultation.

²¹ *Kamāl*, 475.

²² Modarressi, 77–84.

²³ *Kamāl*, 319–20.

²⁴ Jaʿfar was still alive according to a tradition dated Shaʿbān 278/Nov.–Dec. 891 (*Kamāl*, 40–42). The year 271/884–85 has been given in a source, but 281/894–95 is the most likely date for Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī’s death, as he is said to have died at the age of forty-five (Modarressi, 83, n. 161.)

²⁵ Kashshī, 575–80.

¹⁸ By having had his nose cut off.

¹⁹ The fire of hell.

of Qumm and Rayy in fiscal administration,²⁶ and Muḥammad b. Shādhān b. Na^cim transmitted contributions collected on behalf of the *qā'im* to his superior in the fiscal hierarchy, Muḥammad b. Ja^cfar al-Asadī, the agent in Qumm.²⁷ Ibn al-^cAmrī must have had considerable organizational skill and must have concentrated his efforts on winning over the fiscal agents, and/or retaining their loyalty. One tradition names over twenty agents (*wukalā'*) in various districts, including two Nawbakhtīs.²⁸

The exact identity of the agent mentioned in paragraph 8 is more problematic, as was evidently his loyalty to the holy seat. Before considering these problematic aspects, however, it should be pointed out that the term doubt (*shakk*) occurs very frequently in the documents of this period, and is often coupled with perplexity (*ḥayra*) of the believers about the Imamate. A number of traditions transmitted in Qumm and Nishāpūr use the terms perplexity (*ḥayra*) and occultation (*ghayba*) synonymously.²⁹ In dating one report, Kulaynī uses the term perplexity (*ḥayra*) instead of occultation (*ghayba*) to indicate the beginning of the period.³⁰ In fact, this whole period is often referred to as the era of perplexity. With the adoption of the neo-Wāqifite idea of occultation and pending the development of a distinctively Imami theology of occultation, the hierarchy could counter perplexity only with the promise of *parousia* and deliverance. To this end, Ibn al-^cAmrī reported that his father had heard the eleventh Imam say that his successor was

my son, Muḥammad. . . . For him there is an occultation during which the ignorant are perplexed . . . and the predictors of the Hour lie until he rises; and it is as if I [already] see the white banners flying above his head in Kūfa.³¹

Paragraph 8, however, is far more specific and speaks of the doubt of one particular individual. The man in question is identified as Muḥammad, the son of ^cAlī b. Mahzyār, an old agent of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh Imams in Ahwāz, who had taken over his father's office. He is said to be having doubts, presumably not accepting the authority of the holy seat. But the central hierarchy was evidently hopeful of winning him back. The old

agent in Ahwāz, ^cAlī b. Mahzyār, who had been a prominent figure under the late Imams, is on record for transmitting a tradition in support of occultation and the absent Imam,³² and is commended in the decrees emanating from the latter.³³ His brother, Ibrāhīm, had also been a disciple of the ninth and tenth Imams, and, as we shall see, is said to have been dear to the hidden Imam.³⁴ This Muḥammad b. ^cAlī b. Mahzyār al-Ahwāzī must be the same person as the Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Mahzyār al-Ahwāzī who is mentioned in several other traditions. If Muḥammad's father was in fact Ibrāhīm, he would be ^cAlī b. Mahzyār's nephew; he would have been confirmed in his uncle's office. Accepting this identification, another tradition helps us infer that the conciliatory tone of the rescript was indicative of an imminent reconciliation and Ibn Mahzyār's acknowledgment of the authority of the holy seat. According to this tradition, Ibn Mahzyār had had doubts about the existence of an Imam and had traveled to Baghdad with funds collected by his father on behalf of the Imam. His doubt had been overcome when a miraculous note from the bureau of the Imam described the collected funds and contributions in precise detail. When he handed over the funds, the hidden Imam issued a decree appointing him to his father's (or uncle's) office.³⁵ Furthermore, we can arrive at an approximate

³² ^cAlī b. Mahzyār reported that he had asked the tenth Imam about the time of deliverance (*faraḡ*) and that the latter replied: "Expect deliverance when your lord (*ṣāhib*) becomes absent from the realm of the tyrants." (^cAlī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Bābūya, *al-Imāma wa'l-tabṣīra min al-ḥayra*, ed. M. R. al-Ḥusaynī (Beirut, 1987), 234, no. 83; *Kamāl*, 380–81, nos. 2–3). This response seemed to be echoed later in the answer given by the holy seat in the name of the lord (*ṣāhib al-amr*) himself to the same inquiry by another agent of the tenth Imam, Ayyūb b. Nūḥ (*Kamāl*, 381, no. 4).

³³ Najashī, *Rijāl*, 253.

³⁴ See Khū^cī, *Mu^cjam*, vol. 1 (1970/1390), 166–70, for a discussion of the contradictory traditions in this regard.

³⁵ *Kamāl*, 487; *Ghayba*, 170–71. It should also be noted that the earlier version of the tradition recorded by Kashshī (*Rijāl*, 531–32) mentions no doubt on the part of the young nephew of ^cAlī b. Mahzyār, who is identified as Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, and places the episode during the chief agency of ^cAmrī the elder. According to this earlier version, Muḥammad had been taught the secret sign (*alāma*) whereby he could recognize the agent acting for the hidden Imam. ^cAmrī the elder showed him the sign, in addition to describing in detail the collected funds he had brought from Ahwāz. Ibn al-^cAmrī is simply mentioned as the agent for the district of Baghdad. This earlier version indicates that Ibn Mahzyār had carried collected funds for his uncle

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 579.

²⁷ *Kamāl*, 442, 485–86, 509.

²⁸ *Kamāl*, 442–43.

²⁹ *Kamāl*, 287–89, 304.

³⁰ Muḥammad b. Ya^cqūb al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī, *Uṣūl al-kāfī*, ed. J. Mustafavī (Tehran, n.d.), 2:470.

³¹ *Kamāl*, 409. The one problematic feature of this tradition is the naming of the hidden Imam. See below.

date for the rescript as a different tradition relates that, in 893–94/280, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ahwāzī came to Ibn al-ʿAmrī and recognized his supreme authority as his father’s successor.³⁶ Together with the probable date of succession of Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī suggested by paragraph 1, this last reference points to the mid-890s/early 280s as the date of issuance of this rescript, which is consistent with Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī’s testimony that the rupture of communications from the seat of the Imam came more than twenty years after the death of the eleventh Imam.³⁷

One particular set of traditions on the Mahzyār family, though very confusing, can nevertheless throw some light on the nature of Ibn Mahzyār’s doubt before reconciliation with Ibn al-ʿAmrī at the holy seat. According to these traditions, either Ibrāhīm or his son ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm b. Mahzyār met the hidden Imam secretly in a valley near Mecca.³⁸ One very interesting feature of these traditions is that the hidden Imam, who is presented as the *qāʾim* and is named Muḥammad, is not the only child of the eleventh Imam but also has a younger brother, Mūsā, in his company.³⁹ More pertinent to our subject is the unmistakable chiliastic tone of these traditions which runs counter to the view of occultation adumbrated in the last paragraph of the rescript, and was to be developed into a theology of occultation under the sponsorship of the hierarchy. As Ibn Mahzyār leaves the meeting with the *qāʾim*, he is told to prepare the brethren for the uprising and to look for the “signs of the *parousia*” (*imārāt al-zuhūr*).⁴⁰ When he asks about the time of the uprising, in one version, the *qāʾim* tells Ibn Mahzyār the year of

or father as the fiscal agent of the Ahwāz district to ʿAmrī the elder, almost certainly during the Imamate of Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. The later version suggests that he began to doubt the existence of an Imam, and to withhold transmission of the collected *khums*, when the eleventh Imam died and Ibn al-ʿAmrī became the head of the bureau at the holy seat in succession to his father.

³⁶ *Ghayba*, 220.

³⁷ See below, section III.

³⁸ According to one tradition in the edition of the *Kamāl* we have used (pp. 465–70), which is also reported with some variation in Ṭūsī’s *Ghayba* (pp. 160–63), Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Mahzyār is the narrator. Another edition of *Kamāl al-Dīn* (ed. Āyatullah Kamaraʿī [Tehran, 1960/1378], 2: 140–44), however, names Ibrāhīm b. Mahzyār in the same tradition. In any event, in both editions of the *Kamāl* (pp. 445–51; Kamaraʿī ed., vol. 2, pp. 120–26) the same basic story of the meeting is earlier related from Ibrāhīm b. Mahzyār.

³⁹ *Kamāl*, 447, 467. This jarring feature is omitted by Ṭūsī in the *Ghayba*.

⁴⁰ *Kamāl*, 451.

the appearance of Behemoth (*dābbat al-arḍ*) who carries the staff of Moses and the seal of Solomon, and herds the people into the place of Resurrection (*maḥshar*).⁴¹ According to another version, he is simply told “the Hour has drawn near: the moon is split.” (Qurʾān 54:1)⁴² The association of Ibn Mahzyār with this apocalyptic tradition may explain his doubt concerning the authority of the Imami hierarchy. He is shown to share the chiliastic tendency among the Imami Shiʿa whom the hierarchy had to discipline in the absence of the Imam, as the historical Imams themselves had had to do in their presence. Acceptance of the authority of the holy seat by Ibn Mahzyār in the closing decade of the ninth century must have meant his giving up the chiliastic position and acceptance of routine hierocratic authority during the inevitable absence of the Imam.

No similar speculation is needed for asserting that the object of three of the rulings in the document is the containment of chiliasm. Paragraph 11 is a condemnation of the founder of the extremist sect of the Khaṭṭābiyya, who had been massacred with his followers by the ʿAbbasid governor of Kūfa, ʿIsā b. Mūsā, in 756/138;⁴³ moreover, paragraph 4 contains a categorical rejection of all claims to knowing the appointed time of *parousia*. The affirmation of the death of the Imam Ḥusayn (in 680/61) in paragraph 5 suggests that some people might have considered him in occultation and expected his manifestation. Modarressi has argued that the period of crisis of the Imamate witnessed the polarization of the Shiʿite positions on the nature of the Imamate. An extremist position, whose proponents became known as the Mufawwiḍa, considered the Imams supernatural beings to whom God had delegated (*fawwaḍa*) His powers of creation and command. The moderate position countered that the Imams were authoritative teachers in religion and law, but did not have the knowledge of the unseen; and many moderates did not even accept the “official” principle of the infallibility of the Imam.⁴⁴ The Mufawwiḍa tended to deduce from God’s delegation of His powers to the Imams that the latter, especially ʿAlī and Husayn, had not died, presumably also deducing, from the same belief, their return (*rafʿa*). The rescript indicates that the nascent hierocratic leadership at the seat of the Imam discouraged the Mufawwiḍa extremist tendencies in the name of the hidden Imam.

Paragraph 2 conveys the resolution of a very concrete question in dietary law of the kind other rescripts had

⁴¹ *Ghayba*, 162.

⁴² *Kamāl*, 470.

⁴³ Kashshī, 290–308.

⁴⁴ *Crisis and Consolidation*, ch. 2.

often addressed. In paragraph 9, the Imam spurns the gift of a woman singer as impure. Fiscal concerns are the subject of four of the rulings. Paragraph 3 justifies taxation by the Imam who has the power of making the contributions of his Shi'a a means of purification. Paragraph 12 shows the difficulty of controlling fiscal agents and preventing them from appropriating collected funds, and paragraph 14 gives evidence of the doubts of some believers about continuing the payment of religious dues in the absence of the Imam. Paragraph 13 grants the Shi'a a major fiscal concession. The primary aim seems to be to retain the loyalty of the Shi'ite community by removing a major financial burden, but the measure would also incidentally undercut the agents who were collecting funds for themselves. Be that as it may, the indefinite rebating of the *khums* was the important correlative of the cessation of communication with the Imam. It is significant that its suspension until the reappearance of the *qā'im* remained in effect in Shi'ite law for some centuries.

Two items in the rescript are concerned with hierocratic authority. Paragraph 6 refers the believers to the transmitters of the traditions of the Imams in emergent matters. The ruling was a very important step in legitimizing the authority of the nascent hierocracy. Although its full development required a more elaborate framework of theology and jurisprudence than was then in place, the ruling was pregnant with implications, and did form the basis of the juristic authority of the Shi'ite *ulamā'* in later periods. Paragraph 7 is the confirmation of the authority of Ibn al-*Amrī*, the chief agent at the holy seat, as the head of the Imami hierarchy. His letters are validated as those of the hidden Imam.

The final paragraphs of the rescript explain the occultation of the Imam. Paragraphs 15 and 16 both seek to dissuade the believers from probing into the vexing questions of occultation.⁴⁵ Paragraph 15 contains the remarkable admission that the previous Imams could not rise against the Caliphs because of their oaths of allegiance, and promises that the hidden Imam will rise against a ruler to whom he owes no allegiance.⁴⁶ Last, but not least,

⁴⁵ Curiosity was to be discouraged and secrecy reaffirmed during subsequent crises, such as the one caused by claimants to direct communication with the hidden Imam in the ninth century (*Ghayba*, 197).

⁴⁶ The assertion that only the *qā'im* could rise because (unlike the other Imams) he does not bear the allegiance to anyone on his neck is conspicuous in the traditions adduced to explain "the cause of occultation" in *Kamāl* (479–80; see also pp. 303, 316, 322–23).

paragraph 16 compares the hidden Imam to the sun when hidden under clouds. We are thus given the first central element of the future Shi'ite theology of occultation—namely, that the benefits of the Imamate as the continuous divine guidance of mankind obtain despite the absence of the Imam.

III

The cessation of communication with the seat of the Imam must have intensified discussion of the nature of the concealment of the Imam *absconditus*, and acted as a stimulus toward making sense of it not as a contingency but in theological terms—that is, with reference to God's will and design for mankind. In three polemical tracts that Modarressi dates to the 890s/280s, Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī, an ex-Mu'tazilite convert to Imami Shi'ism, about whom our information is very scant, developed the position that the occultation of the Imam was the logical conclusion of the doctrine of the Imamate,⁴⁷ thus placing the discussion of the existence and occultation of "the son of Ḥasan b. 'Alī" firmly in the theoretical context of a theology of Imamate. Ibn Qiba maintained that "the only need for an Imam is for religion and the establishment of the rule of divine law (*ḥukm al-sharī'a*)."⁴⁸ In sharp opposition to the Mufawwiḍa extremists, Ibn Qiba considered the Imams authoritative teachers in religion and law, who did *not*, however, have the knowledge of the unseen.⁴⁹ They are the proofs of God and of divine guidance of mankind, and therefore must exist. He does state that the Imamate is established by widely transmitted (and therefore authoritative) traditions,⁵⁰ but his main argument in support of occultation is not traditional but rational and theological. The occultation of "the son of Ḥasan b. 'Alī," he argues, does not obviate the divine guidance of mankind any more than the absence of a prophet in every community and every age.⁵¹

Among the proofs that Ḥasan b. 'Alī did designate [a successor] are the following: that the truth of his Imamate was explicitly established; . . . and that the Shi'ites have quoted from proven authorities that an Imam does not pass away without designating another Imam, as did the Messenger of God. . . . This is because people in every

⁴⁷ Modarressi, 125.

⁴⁸ *Naqd kitāb al-ishhād*, in Modarressi, text, p. 178; tr., p. 212.

⁴⁹ This latter idea was, however, rejected in the course of the subsequent development of Shi'ism.

⁵⁰ *Naqd*, text, p. 185; tr., p. 221.

⁵¹ *Mas'ala fi'l-imāma* in Modarressi, text, p. 138; tr., p. 143.

age need someone whose transmission [of traditions] is constant and consistent . . . ; someone who is not negligent and does not err, and is learned so that he may inform the people of what they do not know, and who is just, so that he may judge by truth.⁵²

Ibn Qiba then resorts to an analogy with prophecy to establish that such a person need not be present, but may well be in occultation. If occultation were not part of the divine order of things,

why did God Most High not send many times more prophets than He has sent? Why did He not send to every community a prophet or in every age a prophet until the Hour? Why did He not clarify the meaning of the Qur^ʿān beyond any doubt, but instead left it open to different interpretations?⁵³

More or less at the same time as Ibn Qiba was debating his opponents in Rayy, closer to the center of the Imami hierocracy in Baghdād, Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī, about whom we are much better informed, composed his *Kitāb al-tanbih*, whose conclusion has been preserved. Abū Sahl, who was the head of the Persian aristocratic Nawbakhtī family, played a critical role in this darkest era of Imami Shiʿism both at the practical and intellectual levels.⁵⁴ At the intellectual level, he took the initiative in making occultation a central ingredient of the beliefs about the Imamate which, according to Iqbāl, he was the first to cast into the framework of systematic theology.⁵⁵ Writing in Baghdād in 903/290 or shortly thereafter, Nawbakhtī affirms the Imami belief in

the explicit designation (*naṣṣ*) of ʿAlī from the Prophet [and then of Imam after Imam] until al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī [the eleventh Imam], and then of the absent Imam (*al-ghāʾib al-imām*) after him. Indeed, the disciples of his father al-Ḥasan, all of them trustworthy, have testified to his Imamate, and to the fact that he went into hiding (*ghāba*) as the ruler had been looking for him conspicuously and had sent agents to his abodes and house for two years.⁵⁶

Abū Sahl's reference here is to the episode in which Ṣayqal (or Ṣaqīl), a slave-girl, was kept under surveillance

by the Caliph for two years to test the allegations that she was pregnant by Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. The surveillance was ordered as a result of the legal suit brought by the eleventh Imam's mother, Ḥudayth.⁵⁷ Ṣayqal did not deliver and the surveillance ended. She then moved to the house of a Nawbakhtī and was maintained as the mother of the hidden Imam for over twenty years.⁵⁸

An important concern of Abū Sahl was to uphold and strengthen the authority of the ʿAmrīs as the successive intermediaries between the hidden Imam and Shiʿite community. He mentions an individual who had served the eleventh Imam and his son without discontinuity, and who had died after leaving a testament in favor of "a man from the Shiʿa under cover" to take over his office:⁵⁹

Ḥasan [the eleventh Imam] appointed a group of trusted men from those who reported traditions from him concerning the permissible and the forbidden, and who conveyed the letters of his Shiʿa and their donations to him and brought out the answers when they were under cover. . . . When he passed away, they all agreed that he had appointed a son who is the Imam, and they ordered the people not to ask about his name. . . . The epistles of his [Ḥasan's] son who succeeded after him, containing orders and prohibitions, were issued in the hands of the trusted men of his father for over twenty years. Then communication was broken, and most of Ḥasan's men, who were witnesses in the matter of the Imamate after him, passed away and only one man among them remained. They were all in agreement on the probity and trustworthiness of this man. He ordered the people to secrecy, so that they would divulge nothing in the matter of the Imamate. Then all communication was broken.⁶⁰

The order not to name the Imam is affirmed in several rescripts purportedly issued by the hidden Imam himself at his bureau.⁶¹ This order must have been reaffirmed several times, as reflected in the appearance of traditions attributed to the first, sixth, eighth, and eleventh Imams which forbid the naming of the *qāʾim*.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid., 107–8; Modarressi, 78–83.

⁵⁸ Iqbāl, 108, 245.

⁵⁹ *Kamāl*, 90.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 92–93, emphasis added.

⁶¹ *Kāfi*, 2: 126, no. 2; *Kamāl*, 482–83, 509, also p. 511.

⁶² Kulaynī, 2: 126–27; *Kamāl*, 648. The tradition attributed to the sixth Imam goes so far as to declare anyone who names the lord of the cause an infidel. It was presumably fabricated alongside a rescript which considered searching for the hidden Imam as complicity in the possible shedding of his blood and thus as infidelity (*Kamāl*, 509).

⁵² Ibid., text, p. 135; tr., p. 139, somewhat modified.

⁵³ Ibid., 138; tr., p. 143, somewhat modified.

⁵⁴ For his practical contribution, see Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate," section III.

⁵⁵ ʿA. Iqbāl, *Khāndān-i Nawbakhtī* (Tehran, 1932/1311), ch. 6.

⁵⁶ Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī, *Tanbih* as reproduced in *Kamāl*, 89–90.

Alongside this prohibition, Abū Sahl affirms the authority of Ibn al-ʿAmrī as the sole surviving member of the inner circle of the eleventh Imam after the cessation of communication with the latter's absconded son.

Nawbakhtī's main objective in this treatise, however, was not practical but theoretical. Abū Sahl had been asked whether the absence of the Imam for thirty years is not tantamount to the removal of the Imamate from the world. The removal of the Imamate means the removal of the Proof of God from the world, and the collapse of the sacred laws (*sharāʿi*) which are left without a guardian. But this would be impossible because proof exists in the hidden Imam, and his deputy (*bāb*) and intermediary are well known. There are precedents in this matter in the form of the disappearance of prophets.⁶³

The Proof [of God] is standing, established and necessary even if he does not issue legal opinions, and does not explain [texts]. . . . Even if a prophet or an Imam does not engage in explaining, teaching, and the issuing of legal opinions, his prophethood or Imamate or proof are not invalidated. . . . This is how it is permissible for the Imam to remain under cover for a long time when he is afraid; and God's Proof is not thereby invalidated.⁶⁴

Here, Abū Sahl states concisely 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. In any event, Abū Sahl adds, the juridical needs of the Shiʿa are fulfilled by the hidden Imam through those who have access to him, can present the faithful's questions and get the Imam's answers. This is important because "the traditions (*sunan*) of all the Imams is in science; they are asked questions about what is permissible and what is forbidden, and they give concordant answers."⁶⁵

In this passage, we have the affirmation of religio-legal science as basic to the function of the Imamate and "the traditions of all the Imams." Abū Sahl clearly implies that the tradition continues under a hidden Imam. He was also asked, if "the son of Ḥasan does not appear in complete manifestation to the elite and the common people, how can we know his existence in the world?" His answer pointed firmly toward rational theology:

The matter of religion in its entirety is known through reasoning. We know God through rational proofs and do not see Him. Nor does anyone who has seen Him report to us. We know the Prophet and his existence in the world through reports, and we know his prophecy and truth through reasoning. And we know that he appointed ʿAlī b. ʿAbī Ṭālib his successor. . . . From this, it is necessary that the Imam should not pass away until he had appointed one of his children to succeed him as the Imam. If the Imamate of Ḥasan is valid, if his death is established, and it is recorded that he appointed an Imam from his children, then we have the required proof.⁶⁶

To explain the breakdown of communication between the hidden Imam and the community, Abū Sahl adopts the chiliastic neo-Wāqifite notion of the two occultations:

For him, there are two occultations, one of them harder than the other.⁶⁷

This idea allows Nawbakhtī to announce the beginning of a new stage, that is, the second and the harder occultation in Imami Shiʿism.

The Wāqifiyya, whose idea is thus appropriated without acknowledgment, are immediately put down. Abū Sahl brags that the claim of the Imami Shiʿa regarding the occultation of the Imam is not as implausible as that of the Wāqifiyya, whose Imam had died 105 years before:

There is nothing contrary to the senses, nothing impossible or contrary to reason and outside of the ordinary in this claim of ours—namely, the occultation of the Imam. There is at this time a man among his trusted Shiʿa under cover who claims to be the gate (*bāb*) to him, and the intermediary who takes his command and prohibition from him to his Shiʿa, and the length of the period of occultation for the one who is absent is not out of the ordinary. The acceptance of the traditions predicting the occultation requires belief in the Imamate of the son of Ḥasan . . . , since the traditions that have been transmitted on the occultation are well known and widely attested (*mutawātir*), and the Shiʿa expected it and hoped for it, and we hope after it for the rising of the redresser (*qāʾim*) to truth and to the expression of justice.⁶⁸

This bravado proved difficult to sustain as time went on, and in his latest view, Abū Sahl may well have despaired

⁶³ *Kamāl*, 90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 93–94.

of elaborating rational arguments and declared the son of Ḥasan dead in occultation.⁶⁹ But the future was not with his later despair but rather with his earlier hope in the power of rational theology.

IV

For decades, the Wāqifite identification of the *qā'im* with the *mahdī* had been resisted by the mainstream Imami Shi'ā, prompting an inquisitive believer to ask the ninth Imam, Muḥammad al-Jawād, if the *qā'im* was in fact the *mahdī* or someone else.⁷⁰ The *mahdī* traditions had sprung up from the historical experience of the anti-Caliph 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr during the second civil war,⁷¹ and acquired apocalyptic significance by the time of the 'Abbasid revolution and the rebellion of Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh, the Nafs al-Zakiyya, in 762/148.⁷² The corpus of Imami Shi'ite traditions, by contrast, still overwhelmingly referred to the *qā'im*. Many of the Wāqifite leaders, notably Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Abī Hamza al-Batā'īnī, who had originally considered the seventh Imam, Mūsā al-Kāzim, the *qā'im-mahdī* and is the transmitter of many apocalyptic traditions on the occultation, eventually returned to the Imami fold under the eighth Imam, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā.⁷³ Madelung and Halm have noted the importance of the Wāqifiyya in the transmission of the apocalyptic traditions.⁷⁴ But it may well be that the floodgates for reception of the *mahdī* traditions were opened after the death of the eleventh Imam by the refusal of Ibn al-'Amrī and the agents loyal to him to recognize the Imamate of Ja'far and their opting for an absent Imam.⁷⁵ In any event, many of the

mahdī traditions were eventually absorbed into the collections of Imami traditions, being assimilated to or compounded with the *qā'im* traditions.⁷⁶ Among these were traditions about the *qā'im* that had been circulated by the followers of the Nafs al-Zakiyya, the most notable being the one attributed to the Prophet: "The name of the [divinely] guided redresser (*al-qā'im al-mahdī*) is my name, and his father's name, the name of my father."⁷⁷

The definitive identification of the *qā'im* and the *mahdī* was undoubtedly facilitated by the adoption of the neo-Wāqifite position by the Imami hierarchy by the beginning of the tenth century. The *mahdī* traditions were selectively accepted, and with them came a name for the absent Imam. This step, however, involved one major difficulty, and the later architects of the theory of occultation may well have regretted it. Many of the *mahdī* traditions, including the one produced for the Nafs al-Zakiyya, give the *mahdī* and his father the same name as the Prophet and his father. Naming the absent Imam "Muḥammad" was not problematic, but renaming his father was not feasible. The Kaysānī *mahdī* tradition, tailored for Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, was easier to adopt since it specified only Muḥammad's name and *kunya*.⁷⁸ This tradition separated the naming from the known facts about the eleventh Imam, and is in fact the one conveniently adopted by the Shaykh al-Mufid.⁷⁹ As we have seen, the naming of the hidden Imam was prohibited, and

the eleventh Imam, gives some illustrations of later insertions of the term *mahdī* into the *qā'im* traditions.

⁶⁹ This penetration was acknowledged by the medieval doctors such as Shaykh al-Ṭūsī. For example, among the 109 transmitters of the earliest canonical Shi'ite collection, *The Four Hundred Principles*, whose names are listed by Kohlberg, nine are well known chiliasts. (E. Kohlberg, "Al-Uṣūl al-Arba'umī'a," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 149. For a list of other unorthodox transmitters, see Modarressi, 22, n. 26.

⁷⁰ *MF*, 76 (= *FSh*, 54). The fuller version is a widely attested tradition, attributed to the Prophet on the authority of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd, which the Shaykh al-Ṭūsī cites as follows: "Even if there remains for the world but one single day, God will lengthen it until he sends a man from the people of my House, whose name will be the same as mine, and the name of his father will be that of my father. He will fill the world with justice as it is filled with oppression" (*Ghayba*, 112).

⁷¹ W. al-Qādī, *al-Kaysāniyya fi'l-ta'rikh wa'l-adab* (Beirut, 1974), 122.

⁷² *Irshād*, 346; English tr., p. 524. Shaykh al-Mufid also cites the better known tradition reported by the Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (n. 68 above) but simply leaves out the inconvenient "and his father's name will be that of my father" (*ibid.*, 346; English tr., p. 525).

⁶⁹ For this hypothesis, see Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate," section III.

⁷⁰ *Kamāl*, 377; Modarressi, 91. According to another tradition, the sixth Imam had been asked if the *qā'im* would be one of the Imams, and had replied that he would be an Imam and the son of an Imam (*Kamāl*, 224).

⁷¹ W. Madelung, "'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdī," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40.4 (1981): 291–305.

⁷² G. van Vloten, "Zur Abbasidengeschichte," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 52 (1898): 218–26; 'A. al-Dūrī, "Al-Fikrat al-mahdiyya bayn al-da'wat al-'abbāsiyya wa'l-'aṣr al-'abbāsi al-awwal," in *Studia Arabica & Islamica: Festschrift for Ihsān 'Abbās*, ed. W. al-Qādī (Beirut, 1981), 123–32.

⁷³ *Ghayba*, 34–48.

⁷⁴ Madelung, "al-Mahdī," 1236; H. Halm, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt, 1988), 38–39.

⁷⁵ Modarressi (p. 89, n. 194), who considers the introduction of the idea of the *mahdī* to have taken place after the death of

Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī⁸⁰ and Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī used the formula, “the son of Ḥasan b. ʿAlī,” instead of a name in their writings around 900/290. A prayer for the hidden Imam, which was said to have been composed by ʿAmrī and issued for ritual use by the holy seat, does not name him either.⁸¹ In the tenth century, however, we come across an interesting set of traditions related by Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī (d. 940–41/328–29) in which the name of the hidden Imam is transcribed as MḤMD.⁸² This is the earliest documented name of any sort for the hidden Imam, “the son of Ḥasan b. ʿAlī,” made into the *qāʾim* and the *mahdī*.⁸³ A generation later, Ibn Bābūya reported the MḤMD form⁸⁴ and the form lingered on into the subsequent centuries.⁸⁵ As Amir-Moezzi points

out, according to one numerological procedure, the two M’s in MḤMD cancel each other out in order to produce the number 12 as the added value of Ḥ and D.⁸⁶ We know the Imami traditionists of the era of perplexity sought assurance for the existence of the hidden Imam in the number twelve.⁸⁷ Numerology may have thus reinforced the suggestion of the *mahdī* traditions; in any event, the name of the Imam in occultation became fixed as Muḥammad. However, the chief theologians of the occultation, from the Shaykh al-Ṣadūq Ibn Bābūya to the Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, preferred the formula, “the son of Ḥasan,” for referring to the absent Imam, and avoided naming him insofar as possible.

V

⁸⁰ The name “Muḥammad” was inserted by a later copyist into the manuscript used as the basis of the edited version (Modarressi, 136; tr., p. 141). Professor Modarressi has kindly informed me that the other manuscript copies he has since consulted do not contain this later insertion.

⁸¹ He is referred to as *al-ḥujja al-qāʾim al-mahdī* (*Kamāl*, 512). This prayer is not the same as the one reported in *Ghayba*, 169–70.

⁸² Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 2: 119. Abūʿl-Mufaḍḍal al-Shaybānī also relates a tradition on the authority of Kulaynī according to which, when his concubine was pregnant, the eleventh Imam predicted that the offspring would be male “and his name is MḤMD, and he is the *qāʾim* after me” (Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut, 1983/1403), 51: 161, no. 13). This very tradition is reported (or copied) by another student of Kulaynī but with “Muḥammad” written out in full (*Kamāl*, 408).

⁸³ At this juncture, Kohlberg’s assertion that ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 919) names the twelfth Imam should be corrected. (E. Kohlberg, “From Imamiyya to Ithnā-ʿashariyya,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 [1976]: 523.) The twelfth Imam is not named in the cited text, but is referred to anonymously as “the legatee (*waṣīyy*) of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī, the *qāʾim*.” (*Tafsīr al-Qummī*, ed. Ṭayyib al-Mūsawī al-Jazāʾirī [Qumm, 1967–68/1387], 2:45). In a later view attributed to Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī, the son of Ḥasan is named Muḥammad, but only to assert that he had died. (See Arjomand, “Crisis of the Imamate, Section III.)

⁸⁴ *Kamāl*, 334 (= Karamaʿī ed., 2: 103), 430. In some manuscripts, the MḤMD form also appears in another tradition. (Kamaraʿī ed., 2: 96).

⁸⁵ It is found in one manuscript of the Shaykh al-Mufīd’s eleventh-century creed, where he names “the awaited *qāʾim* and *mahdī*, MḤMD b. al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī.” (*Muṣannaḥāt al-shaykh al-mufīd* [Tehran, 1992/1413], vol. 4: *Nukat al-Ftiqādiyya*, p. 44, n. 7.) Later copyists must have written out the letters continuously as “Muḥammad.” The version “MḤMD *mahdī*” is repeated twice in a thirteenth-/seventh-century Persian work. (ʿAbd al-

The issue of the relation between history and theology can be broached in this final section. The earliest theological arguments for occultation by Rāzī and Nawbakhtī were grounded too well in the inconvenient historical circumstances of their births for immediate (cosmo-)logical self-sufficiency. This can be illustrated by examining an argument formulated by Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī as proof of the existence of an Imam in occultation that was destined to be incorporated into the Shiʿite theology of occultation. To establish the existence of an Imam in occultation, Ibn Qiba assumes the truth of the doctrine of the Imamate, which asserts that the Imam is the Proof of God (*ḥujjat allāh*)—or rather, of his continued guidance of mankind, and therefore, there must be an Imam after the prophets. Furthermore, he modifies the condition in the doctrine—namely, that the Imamate is made valid by the explicit designation (*naṣṣ*) of the previous Imam—into the assertion that an Imam does not pass away without explicitly designating a successor.⁸⁸ This argument is then buttressed by the testimony of the hidden Imam’s designation by the inner circle, as with the

⁸⁶ Azīz b. Muḥammad Nasafī, *Kashf al-haqāyiq*, ed. A. Mahdavi-Dāmghānī (Tehran, 1965/1344), 82.)

⁸⁷ M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le Guide divin dans le Shiʿisme originel* (Paris: Verdier, 1992), 259, 263–64.

⁸⁸ ʿAlī b. Bābūya, *al-Imāma*, 142, 151; Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Jaʿfar al-Nuʿmānī, *Kitāb al-ghayba* (Beirut, 1983), 60–62.

⁸⁸ *Masʿala*, in Modarressi, p. 135; tr. p. 139. Rāzī’s traditionalist contemporary, ʿAlī b. Bābūya, was moving in the same direction by adducing a tradition in which the seventh Imam affirms that the designation of a successor by an Imam before his death is “a duty imposed by God” (*fariḍatun min allāh*) (*al-Imāma*, p. 165, no. 17). Ibn Qiba wishes to go further and argue that such designation is a rational necessity.

previous Imams,⁸⁹ and by the fact that the close associates of the Imam “communicate his existence, and his commands and prohibitions.”⁹⁰

He then tries to find a common ground between himself and the followers of Ja‘far “the liar” to prove the point:

Ḥasan passed away and, according to both us and you, there must necessarily be a man from the offspring of Ḥasan through whom the proof of God can be established; then Ḥasan must have had a living son by absolute necessity (*bi'l-iḏtirār*).⁹¹

The major premise of this argument is that God must appoint an Imam (a universal category) for the guidance of the believers. If an Imam is not present, it follows that he must be absent. But Ibn Qiba wants to go further, and uses the requirement of designation by a predecessor in order to validate the Imamate of particular Imams to prove that the Imam in occultation is a particular person, the son of Ḥasan b. ʿAlī, whose very existence is in dispute. Here he converts the condition of explicit designation into a (cosmo-)logical necessity to “prove,” simultaneously, that contrary to appearances, Ḥasan *must* by necessity have designated a son, and that the necessity of this designation entails the existence of a particular son in the material world. This specious argument was to be incorporated into the Imami Shi‘ite canon.⁹²

It is interesting that Ibn Qiba quotes his opponent’s response concerning a Shi‘ite elder’s mocking characterization of the proponents of the circular argument as the *Lābuddiyya* (the must-inevitably-be-so folk), those who have no recourse and supportive argument except to say “that this person, who cannot be found anywhere in the world, must inevitably exist.”⁹³ Rhetoric apart, however, Ibn Qiba was not able to rebut the charge, nor to overcome the fallacy of an argument that was both logically redundant (for establishing the reality of the Imam as a universal category) but also necessary (for establishing the contingent fact of the birth and existence of a particular individual).

As time went on and this contingent historical fact receded in memory, however, the secondary fallacious argument proving the existence of the “son of Ḥasan” as the twelfth Imam lost its practical relevance. This freed the major premise of the theory of occultation from the burden of establishing a contingent fact as self-evident. The major premise had all the (cosmo-)logical power that was needed. The proposition, “the earth cannot be devoid of the Proof of God,”⁹⁴ means that an Imam is necessary for the divine guidance and salvation of mankind; and it follows logically that, if none is present, the Imam must be absent. The particular Imam *absconditus*, the cause of so much immediate bafflement and perplexity, would become the universal hidden Imam by God’s design. The occultation, once instituted and theologically justified, had to last to the end of time.

⁸⁹ *Mas‘ala*, 136; tr., pp. 140–41.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 136; tr., p. 140.

⁹¹ *Al-Naqd ʿalā ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. Bashshār fi’l-ghayba* in Modarressi, 151; tr., p. 162, somewhat modified.

⁹² The Shaykh al-Ṭūsi reconstructs this argument by using the concept of infallibility (*ʿiṣma*), another element of the Imami

doctrine of the Imamate, instead of designation (*naṣṣ*). See Arjomand, “Consolation of Theology,” section III.

⁹³ *Naqd*, 148; tr., pp. 157–58.

⁹⁴ Predictably, ʿAlī b. Bābūya (*al-imāma*, ch. 3) and his son the Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (*Kamāl*, ch. 33) each devote a key chapter to this fundamental Shi‘ite tenet.