

Lesson 49: The Twelfth Imām (Muhammad al-Mahdi)

Name: *Muhammad.*

Agnomen: *Abul Qāsim.*

Title: *Al-Mahdi, al-Qā'im, al-Hujja, Sāhib al-Amr.*

Father: *Hasan bin 'Ali.*

Mother: *Narjis (also known as Susan, Sayqa).*

Birth: *15th Sha'bān 255 AH in Samarra, Iraq.*

Living in Occultation & will appear before the end of time.

1. Birth & Early Life

Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (a.s.) was born on 15th Sha'bān 255 A.H. (868 CE) in Samarra to Narjis, the wife of the eleventh Imam. Lady Narjis's lineage goes back to Sham'ān, one of the disciples of Prophet 'Isa (a.s.); and she was highly respected by Hakima, the sister of Imam an-Naqi and leader of the Hashimite ladies.

Since the reports about the anticipated birth of Mahdi, the Messiah who will put an end to injustice and tyranny was widespread, the 'Abbāsids were closely watching the family of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.). The situation was not unlike the days prior to the birth of Prophet Musa (a.s.) when Pharoah had ordered that the male children of the Israelites be killed. Just as Musa's birth was concealed from the public by Allāh's power, Muhammad al-Mahdi's birth was also concealed from the public.

For five years, Imam al-Mahdi lived under the loving care of his father. He was seen only by some family members and a few selected companions of his father. This was all done to protect him from the 'Abbāsīd agents. Some of those who had seen the Imam during this period are mentioned below:

1. Lady Hakima, aunt of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.).

2. Nasīm, the servant of Imam al-‘Askari.
3. Muhammad bin ‘Uthmān al-‘Amri.
4. Husayn bin al-Hasan al-‘Alawi.
5. Ja‘far bin Muhammad bin Mūlik and his group.
6. Ahmad bin Ishāq.

Here we shall only narrate the event in which Ahmad bin Ishāq saw Imam al-Mahdi. Ahmad, a prominent Shi‘a of the time, once visited Imam Hasan al-‘Askari (a.s.) and wanted to ask him about his successor. Before Ahmad asked his question, the Imam said, “O Ahmad! From the day He created Adam, Allāh has not left the earth without a representative (*hujjat*), nor will He leave it without a representative till the day of judgement. It is because of the *hujjat* that Allāh averts the chastisement from the people, sends down the rain and brings forth the blessings from the earth.”

Ahmad: “O son of the Prophet! Who is the successor and the Imam after you?”

Imam Hasan al-‘Askari immediately went inside the house and returned with a three year old child in his hands, and said, “O Ahmad bin Ishāq, if you were not honourable in the sight of Allāh and His representatives, I would not have shown this son of mine to you. His name and agnomen is the same as that of the Prophet; he is the one who will fill the earth with justice and equality just as it would be filled with injustice and tyranny.

“O Ahmad, his example is that of Khizr and Dhul Qarnayn [who are believed by Muslims to be still living]. By Allāh, he will go into Occultation in such a manner that none will gain salvation except the one whom Allāh blesses with the belief in his imamate...”

2. The Imamāt & Ghaybat

After the martyrdom of Imam Hasan al-‘Askari in 260 A.H., the imamate of Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (may Allāh hasten his appearance) began. His imamate is divided into two parts: 1. The first 69 years which is known as the period of “*al-Ghaybatu ‘s-Sughra* — the Minor Occultation”. 2. The period after 329 A.H. which is known as “*al-Ghaybatu ‘l-Kubra* — the Major Occultation”.

The imamate of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) began with Occultation (*ghaybat*) which has continued till the present time. However, during the first 69 years, the Shi‘as could get in touch with the Imam only through his specially appointed agents; whereas after 329 A.H., no such agents were appointed. To explain the difference in the intensity of the Occultation, the first period is described as “minor, lesser, *sughra* or *qasira*,” whereas the second period is described as “major, greater, *kubra* or *tawila*.”

If the Occultation had taken its “major” form from day one, the Shi‘a community could not have adjusted

to the situation easily; there would have been great chaos and confusion. The gradual intensification in the Occultation made the Shi'as used to the idea of not dealing with the Imam directly. [1](#)

3. The Ghaybat Sughra

During the Ghaybat Sughra, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) had appointed four special agents, one after another, as a link between himself and his Shi'as. Of course, there were other agents also but with limited jurisdiction or limited duties.

The four special agents were as follows:

1. 'Uthmān bin Sa'ād al-'Amri, known as Abu Amr.
2. Muhammad bin 'Uthmān bin Sa'ād, known as Abu Ja'far.
3. Husayn bin Rawh an-Nawbakhti, known as Abul Qāsim.
4. 'Ali bin Muhammad Samary, known as Abul Hasan.

'Uthmān bin Sa'ād was also a prominent companion and agent of Imam 'Ali an-Naqi (a.s.) and Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.). He was resident of Samarra. In order to hide his link and work with Imam Hasan al-'Askari from government informers, 'Uthmān bin Sa'ād changed his profession—he became a vendor selling cooking oil on a cart. When the government's surveillance on the Imam's house made it almost impossible for the Shi'as to visit him freely, 'Uthmān would put the letters and religious dues from the Shi'as in the oil containers and take them to the Imam's house under the pretext of delivering cooking oil!

Ahmad bin Ishāq narrates that Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) told him that 'Uthmān bin Sa'ād was "trustworthy, and reliable in the eyes of the past Imam as well as myself in my life as well as after my death. Whatever he says to you is from me, and whatever he brings to you is from me."

When 'Uthmān bin Sa'ād died, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) wrote a letter of condolence to his son, Muhammad bin 'Uthmān, as follows: "We belong to Allāh, and to Him we shall return. Your father lived a graceful life and died as an honourable man. May Allāh shower His mercy on him and join him with his Masters. He was diligent in his work for the Masters, and worked hard in what pleased the Almighty and the Imams. May Allāh shower His grace on him and forgive his faults."

Muhammad bin 'Uthmān was the second special agent of the period of Minor Occultation. 'Abdullāh bin Ja'far al-Himyari says that when 'Uthmān died, we received a letter from the Imam, in the same handwriting that we recognized from his previous communications, stating that Muhammad bin 'Uthmān was appointed in the place of his late father as the new special agent of the Imam.

'Abdullāh bin Ja'far once asked Muhammad bin 'Uthmān, "Have you seen the Master of Affairs (Ṣaḥib

al-Amr)?" He answered, "Yes; my last meeting with him was by the holy House of Allāh (i.e., Ka'ba) where I heard him praying, 'O Allāh! Fulfill for me what You have promised me.'..."

Muhammad bin 'Uthmān also said that Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) is present every year at the hajj ceremonies; he sees the people and recognizes them, they also see him but do not recognize him.

Husayn bin Rawh was the third special agent of the Imam. He was greatly respected by all Muslims; he closely worked with 'Uthmān bin Sa'īd.

A few days before his death, Muhammad bin Uthmān had introduced Husayn bin Rawh to the elders of the Shi'a community as the next special agent of the Imam. Ja'far bin Ahmad al-Qummi was the closest of all companions to Muhammad bin 'Uthmān, and many Shi'as thought that he might succeed Muhammad as the next special agent. At the time of Muhammad's death, Ja'far was sitting by the head of his bed while Husayn bin Rawh was sitting by his feet. (In that cultural context, sitting by the head was a more honourable position.) Muhammad bin 'Uthmān turned his face towards Ja'far and said, "I have been ordered to hand over the affairs to Abul Qāsim Husayn bin Rawh." When Ja'far heard this, he stood up, went to Husayn, took hold of his hand and made him sit by the head of the bed while he himself sat at the feet of Muhammad.

In a letter dated 6th Shawwāl 305, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) wrote about Husayn bin Rawh: "We know him; may Allāh acquaint him with all that is good for him, and may He help him. We are aware of his letter and have confidence and trust in him. He has a position in our eyes which pleases him; and may Allāh add to His blessings upon him for He is indeed the Master and has power over everything. All praise is for Allāh who has no partner, and blessings and peace of Allāh upon His messenger, Muhammad, and his progeny."

When Abu Sahl an-Nawbakhti, a prominent Shi'a theologian of the time, was asked as to why he was superceded by Husayn bin Rawh in attaining the position of the special agency of the Imam, he replied: "They (i.e., the Imams) know better as to whom should represent them. I am a person who debates against the opponent with temperment. If I had been the special deputy of the Imam and had been aware of Imam's whereabouts —just as Husayn bin Rawh is aware of it— I might have disclosed it in the heat of debate [if cornered to disclose the Imam's whereabouts]. But Abul Qāsim [Husayn bin Rawh] is such that if the Imam was hiding under his robes, he would not lift it even if he is cut into pieces by sharp knives."

Husayn bin Rawh served in this position for 21 years till his death in 326 A.H. in Baghdad.

'Ali bin Muhammad as-Samary became the fourth special deputy of the Imam. His deputyship was comparatively short. He died in 329 A.H. Before his death, when some prominent Shi'as asked about the next special deputy, he replied, "I have not been ordered to appoint anyone after me."

Six days before the death of as-Samary, he received the following letter from Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.):

“O ‘Ali bin Muhammad as-Samary. May Allāh reward your brethren in observing grief for you. You shall leave this world after six days. Finalize your affairs and do not appoint anyone as your successor.

Indeed, the Major Occultation has begun. There will be no appearance for me until Allāh the Almighty commands me; and that will be after a long time, after the hearts have hardened and the world is filled with injustice.

Shortly, some persons will claim to have seen me [and claim the status of special deputyship]. Beware that whoever makes such a claim before the appearance of Sufyāni and the Sayha is a liar and a fraud. And there is no power and strength except with Allāh, the High, the Great.”

4. The Ghaybat Kubra

Unlike the Ghaybat Sughra where the Shi‘as could communicate with their Imam through the special deputies, in the Ghaybat Kubra, there is no special deputy. The Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) will appear from the Occultation whenever Allāh allows him to do so in order to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, and to eradicate injustice and tyranny once and for all.

During the Ghaybat Kubra, those Shi‘as who do not have the expertise to derive the laws from the Qur’an and the *sunna* of the Infallibles, should follow the guidance provided by those who are experts. A person known as Ishāq bin ‘Ammār asked in a letter to Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) about the guidance during the Ghaybat Kubra. The holy Imam wrote: “And as for the newly occurring circumstances [which have not been mentioned in the Qur’an and *sunna*], refer to those who narrate our ahādīth for they are my hujjat upon you as I am Allāh’s hujjat upon them.” (To refresh your memory, see the lesson on *Ijtihād*, *Taqīd* & *Ihtiyāt*.)

5. Appearance of al-Mahdi

As mentioned above, even Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) himself is waiting for Allah’s permission for his appearance. This means that no one knows the time of the appearance of the Imam. We have clear ahādīth stating that those who speak about the time when the Imam will make his appearance are to be declared as liars. In the letter mentioned earlier, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) wrote, “As for the appearance of deliverance [by me], it’s mentioning is with Almighty Allāh and those who fix the time are liars.”

However, there are many ahādīth which describe the signs before the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi. Some of these signs are as follows:

1. Injustice, tyranny, and sinful acts will become very common all over the world.
2. Appearance of Sufyāni and the destruction of his army. Sufyāni has been described as a Syrian by the name of ‘Uthmān bin ‘Anbasa from the descendants of Yazid bin Mu‘āwiyah.

3. An uprising will take place by a Hasani sayyid in Iran. He will form a just Islamic government and call people towards Islam. He will be in Kufa when the news of Imam al-Mahdi's appearance in Mecca will spread world-wide. The Hasani sayyid will come to Mecca and pledge allegiance to Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.).

4. Soon after the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi in Mecca, a heavenly sound will be heard all over the world which will introduce Imam al-Mahdi to all people.

5. Descent of Prophet 'Isa (a.s.) from heaven to the city of Damascus. He will pray behind Imam al-Mahdi.

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After a very long Occultation, on Allāh's command, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) will make his appearance known at the Holy Mosque in Mecca and start his mission of establishing the Kingdom of God on the earth.

Three hundred and thirteen people will pledge allegiance to him, and then he will move towards Medina. From Medina, al-Mahdi will proceed to Kufa, Iraq. After that Prophet 'Isa will descend in Damascus and join Imam al-Mahdi.

The headquarters of Imam al-Mahdi will be Kufa from where he will rule over the whole world. During the Imam's reign, the blessings of Allāh will be abundant; there will be no poverty; peace and security will be the rule of the day.

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*O Allāh, send your blessings upon Muhammad & his progeny.
O Allāh, be the Master, the Guardian, the Guide and the Eye
for your vicegerent, the Hujjat, son of Hasan al-'Askari,
at this hour, and at every hour
until You establish him on the earth for a long time.*

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This lesson has been written and compiled by Sayyid M. Rizvi by using the *Pishway-e Duwazdahum: Hazrat Imam Hujjat ibn al-Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.)* by Dar Rah-e Haq, Qum.

The main source has been extensively edited in order to fit the requirements of our course. Also, for the sake of brevity, we have not included the references quoted by our source.

Question Paper on Lesson 49

Question 1: [20 points]

True or False:

- (a) Imam al-Mahdi was born on 15 Sha'bān 260 AH.
- (b) Lady Hakima was the aunt of Imam Hasan al-'Askari.
- (c) Ghaybat Sughra was for 96 years.
- (d) Husayn bin Rawh was the 1st special agent of Imam al-Mahdi.
- (e) The Imam informed 'Ali as-Samary of his death six days before his actual death.
- (f) People thought that Ja'far bin Ahmad would become the 3rd special agent of Imam al-Mahdi.
- (g) "Qasira" means lesser or shorter.
- (h) Sufyani will appear after the coming of Prophet 'Isa.
- (i) A Hasani sayyid will appear in Karbala.
- (j) Prophet 'Isa will descend in Mecca.

Question 2: [10 points]

Why was the birth of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) concealed from the people?

Question 3: [20 points]

Why did the total occultation not start from day one of the imamate of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)?

1. For this explanation of the shorter and longer occultation, see the introduction by Sayyid S. Akhtar Rizvi to Ibn Shadhān, The Return of al-Mahdi.

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