

Lesson 50: Guidance in Occultation & the Message of Shi'ism

1. Importance of Belief in al-Mahdi

The Occultation of the Imam is a time of trial for the believers. But belief in Imam al-Mahdi is very essential for salvation. Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) said, "I see that after me differences will appear among you concerning the Imam after me. Whoso accepts the Imams after the Prophet of God but denies my son is like the person who accepts all the prophets but denies the prophethood of Muhammad, the Prophet of God, upon whom be peace and blessing. And whoso denies [Muhammad] the Prophet of God is like one who has denied all the prophets of God, for to obey the last of us is like obeying the first and to deny the last of us is like denying the first. But beware! Verily for my son there is an occultation during which all people will fall into doubt except those whom Allāh protects."

2. The Question of Long Life

The opponents of the Shi'ism protest that according to the beliefs of this school the Hidden Imam should by now be nearly twelve centuries old, whereas this is impossible for any human being.

In answer it must be said that the protest is based only on the unlikelihood of such an occurrence, not its impossibility. Of course such a long lifetime or a life of a longer period is unlikely. But those who study the hadiths of the Holy Prophet and the Imams will see that they refer to this life as one possessing miraculous qualities. Miracles are certainly not impossible nor can they be negated through scientific arguments. It can never be proved that the causes and agents that are functioning in the world are solely those that we see and know and that other causes which we do not know or whose effects and actions we have not seen nor understood do not exist. It is in this way possible that in one or several members of mankind there can be operating certain causes and agents which bestow upon them a very long life of a thousand or several thousand years. Medicine has not even lost hope of discovering a way to achieve very long life spans. In any case such protests from "peoples of the Book" such as Jews, Christians and

Muslims are most strange for they accept the miracles of the prophets of God according to their own sacred scriptures.

3. The Spiritual Guidance of al-Mahdi

The opponents of Shi'ism also protest that, although Shi'ism considers the Imam necessary in order to expound the injunctions and verities of religion and to guide the people, the occultation of the Imam is the negation of this very purpose, for an Imam in occultation who cannot be reached by mankind cannot be in any way beneficial or effective. The opponents say that if God wills to bring forth an Imam to reform mankind He is able to create him at the necessary moment and does not need to create him thousands of years earlier.

In answer it must be said that such people have not really understood the meaning of the Imam, for the duty of the Imam is not only the formal explanation of the religious sciences and exoteric guidance of the people. In the same way that he has the duty of guiding men outwardly, the Imam also bears the function of *wilāyat* and the esoteric guidance of men. It is he who directs man's spiritual life and orients the inner aspect of human action toward God. Clearly, his physical presence or absence has no effect in this matter. The Imam watches over men inwardly and is in communion with the soul and spirit of men even if he be hidden from their physical eyes. His existence is always necessary even if the time has not as yet arrived for his outward appearance and the universal reconstruction that he is to bring about.

4. The Spiritual Message of Shi'ism

The message of Shi'ism to the world can be summarized in one sentence: "To know God." Or in other words, it is to instruct man to follow the path of Divine revelation and the knowledge of God in order to gain felicity and salvation. And this message is contained in the very phrase with which the Holy Prophet commenced his prophetic mission when he said, "Oh men! Know God in His Oneness (and acknowledge Him) so that you will gain salvation."

As a summary explanation of this message we will add that man is attached by nature to many goals in this worldly life and to material pleasures. He loves tasty food and drink, fashionable dress, attractive palaces and surroundings, a beautiful and pleasing wife, sincere friends and great wealth. And in another direction he is attracted to political power, position, reputation, the extension of his rule and dominion and the destruction of anything that is opposed to his wishes.

But in his inner and primordial, God-given nature man understands that all these are means created for man, but man is not created for these things. These things should be subservient to man and follow him and not vice versa. To consider the stomach and the region below it as a final end of life is the logic of cattle and sheep. To tear up, cut and destroy others is the logic of the tiger, the wolf and the fox.

The logic inherent in human existence is the attainment of wisdom and nothing else. This logic based

upon wisdom (with the power which it possesses to discern between reality and the unreal), guides us toward the truth and not toward things our emotions demand or toward passions, selfishness and egoism. This logic considers man as a part of the totality of creation without any separate independence or the possibility of a rebellious self-centeredness. In contrast to the current belief that man is the master of creation and tames rebellious nature and conquers it to force it to obey his wishes and desires, we find that in reality man himself is an instrument in the hand of Universal Nature and is ruled and commanded by it.

This logic based upon wisdom invites man to concentrate more closely upon the apprehension he has of the existence of this world until it becomes clear to him that the world of existence and all that is in it does not issue from itself but rather from an Infinite Source. He will then know that all this beauty and ugliness, all these creatures of the earth and the heavens, which appear outwardly as independent realities, gain reality only through another Reality and are manifested only in Its Light, not by themselves and through themselves. In the same way that the “realities” as well as the power and grandeur of yesterday have no greater value than tales and legends of today, so are the “realities” of today no more as “reality” tomorrow.

In the last analysis, everything in itself is no more than a tale and a dream. Only God is Reality in the absolute sense, the One Who does not perish. Under the protection of His Being, everything gains existence and becomes manifested through the Light of His Essence.

If man becomes endowed with such vision and power of apprehension, then the tent of his separative existence will fall down before his eyes like a bubble on the surface of water. He will see with his eyes that the world and all that is in it depend upon an Infinite Being who possesses life, power, knowledge and every perfection to an infinite degree. Man and every other being in the world are like so many windows which display according to their capacity the world of eternity which transcends them and lies beyond them.

It is at this moment that man takes from himself and all creatures the quality of independence and primacy and returns these qualities to their Owner. He detaches himself from all things to attach himself solely to the One God. Before His Majesty and Grandeur he does nothing but bow in humility. Only then does he become guided and directed by God so that whatever he knows he knows in God. Through Divine guidance he becomes adorned with moral and spiritual virtue and pure actions which are the same as Islam itself, the submission to God, the religion that is in the primordial nature of things.

This is the highest degree of human perfection and the station of the perfect man (the Universal Man; *insān-e kāmil*), namely the Imam who has reached this rank through Divine grace. Furthermore, those who have reached this station through the practice of spiritual methods, with the different ranks and stations that they possess, are the true followers of the Imam. Thus it becomes clear that the knowledge of God and of the Imam are inseparable in the same way that the knowledge of God is inextricably connected to the knowledge of oneself. For he who knows his own symbolic existence has already come

to know the true existence which belongs solely to God who is independent and without need of anything whatsoever.

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This lesson is entirely based on *Shi'a Islam* of Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i.

Question Paper on Lesson 50

Question 1: [20 points]

Give two examples from the past prophets who lived and/or are still living for relatively longer than normal lifespan during our time.

Question 2: [10 points]

What system of guidance did the Imams devise for guiding their followers on the formal explanation of religious matters during the time of Occultation?

Question 3: [20 points]

Briefly describe in one paragraph the spiritual message of Shi'ism.

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