

Preparing the Shi'a for the Age of Occultation

Part 1

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The doctrine of “Mahdi” has a long history among Muslims, especially Shi'ites. Muslims have been familiar with the matter through Prophetic and Imams' hadiths. Islamic sources contain many hadiths in which the Holy Prophet (S) and the Imams (A) have reported on the happening of the occultation and its relating issues. Sheikh Tusi narrated the matter that: “...frequent and widespread reports have been received from [Imam] Mahdi's fathers (A) long before (the happening of) occultation about his Imamate. Reports confirming that there will be an occultation for the Master of this affair (Sahib-u hadha'l Amr) and addressing what will happen, indicating that there will be two occultations for him, one of which will be longer than the other....”¹

There is also a great number of hadiths quoted about it from the Holy Prophet (S) and Imams (A) in sources such as Sheikh Saduq's *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah* and also in B. Abi Zaynab Nu'mani's *Al-Ghaybah*. There are also many hadiths about this issue in Sunni sources. Based on these hadiths, as researchers have also mentioned, it can be claimed that the doctrine of Mahdi (A) has been one of the well-known, common and undeniable issues. Therefore, Shi'ites would enter the “age of occultation” with a long-enough preparation and 260 years of history.

The Shi'ites' knowledge of the doctrine of Mahdi did not only concern the heart of the matter but also included its features and details. To illustrate this fact, we will now review some of the hadiths from the Holy Prophet (S) and Imams (A) about this matter. It should be mentioned that everything in this chapter is only based on the contents of the three major Shi'ites' books which are Nu'mani's *Al-Ghaybah*, Sheikh Tusi's *Al-Ghaybah* and Sheikh Saduq's *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah*. For further hadiths, dear readers are recommended to refer to other Shi'a and also Sunni sources concerning Imam Mahdi's (A).

1. The Holy Prophet (S)

‘Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Abbas quotes the Holy Prophet (S) as saying:

Allah, the Exalted, cast a glance at the earth and chose me as His prophet, then another time showed grace [toward us] and chose ‘Ali as Imam and ordered me to choose him as my brother, the waliy (guardian), the designated successor, the aider and the caliph [after me]; so, ‘Ali is in bond with me and he is the husband of my daughter and father of my two grandchildren: Hasan and Husayn.

Then, know that Allah has presented us as clear proofs to His servants and from Husayn’s blood has appointed Imams who will be the upholders of my command and keep their followership of me and the ninth of them will be the Upriser of my household, [the promised] Mahdi for my ummah. He will be the most similar to me in looks, speech and actions and will appear after a prolonged occultation and a distracting confusion [of my ummah]. He will disclose and unveil the divine command and reveal the divine religion. He will be supported by Allah’s help and His angels and will fill the earth with justice after it is filled with oppression and injustice.”^{[2](#)}

2. Imam Ali (A)

‘Abd al-‘Azim Hasani reported from Imam Jawad (A) who quoted from his fathers (A), [originally] from Imam ‘Ali (A) that:

There will be a long [period of] occultation for the Upriser of us; and I see my Shi‘ites like a flock of sheep looking for their shepherd but they cannot find him during [the period of] occultation of the Upriser. Then, know that who could remain on the path of the religion and does not become hardhearted during occultation of the Upriser, then he will be the one with me standing at my level.

Then Imam Ali (A) continued: “Surely comes the time when the Upriser of us rises. He owes no one an allegiance and therefore his birth will be hidden and he will be absent [from eyes].”^{[3](#)}

3. Lady Fatimah (A)

In a hadith reported in different sources, Jabir b. ‘Abdullah Ansari reported about a book, he saw in the hands of Lady Fatimah (S.A) shining wonderfully; in which there were names of the Twelve Imams (A) together with their mothers’ names and the last name had been the name of the Upriser (A) of the Household (A).^{[4](#)}

4. Imam Hasan Mujtaba (A)

Abu Sa‘id reported that after Imam Hasan’s (A) peace treaty with Mu‘awiyah was signed, people went to Imam (A) and, some of them criticized him. So, he (A) stated:

Woe to you! You do not know what I did! What I did for my followers is better than whatever sun has been shining at when rising or setting. Do you not know that I am your Imam to be obeyed and one of the two masters of the youths in paradise?

“Yes!” they answered. [Then] Imam (A) stated:

Do not you know that when Khidr punctured the ship and later killed a child, Moses became angry, for the philosophy of that was hidden from him, while before God, that [Khi5

5. Imam Husayn (A)

‘Abd al-Rahman b. Hajjaj narrated from Imam Sadiq (A) who reported from his fathers quoting Imam Husayn (A) as saying:

The ninth [Imam] of my descendants will have a sign of Joseph, the prophet and a sign of Moses b. ‘Imran; the Upriser of us, the Household (A), whose task will be assigned by God overnight.[6](#)

A man from Hamdan reported that he heard from Husayn b. ‘Ali (A):

The Upriser of this ummah is the ninth [Imam] of my descendents and he has the occultation; the one whose heritage will be shared while he will be alive.

6. Imam Sajjad (A)

Abu Khalid Kabuli reported: I went to my master Imam Sajjad (A) and said: ‘O’ My master! Please, inform me of those, God has made their obedience obligatory for us!’ He (A) stated:

The ones God has made their obedience obligatory and has chosen them Imams for people are the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, and his two sons, Hasan and Husayn (A). Now I am given this position.

At this moment, the Imam became silent. Abu Khalid said: I stated: ‘O! My master! It is quoted from the Commander of the Faithful (A) that, earth will not be empty of God’s Proof (hujjah)! Who will be the God’s Proof and Imam after you?’ He stated:

My son, Muhammad and after him [his son] Ja‘far!’ Then he (A) mentioned a hadith from the holy Prophet (S) that stated: ‘when my [grand] son, Ja‘far is born; name him Sadiq, for the fifth of his descendants whose name will be Ja‘far will claim imamate. Then, he will be Ja‘far Kadhhab (in Arabic, the liar) the slanderer before God; and he is who is going to tear divine veil (disclose divine secrets) during the occultation of the Waliy of God (A)’.

Then Imam Sajjad (A) bitterly wept and stated:

I see Ja'far [Kadhdhab] invoking the illegitimate rulers of his time to question the order of the Waliy of God.... The occultation of the Waliy of God, the Twelfth of the successors after the Holy Prophet, will be prolonged. O' Aba Khalid! Surely, the people living at the age of his occultation are who believe in his Imamate and wait for his reappearance. They are better than people of all other ages, and because of their abundance of knowledge and wisdom, the occultation is like a true vision for them; and God will give them the same position as that of those who fought for His sake in the presence of the Holy Prophet. They will surely be the faithful believers, true Shi'ites and the inviters to the Right path.

Then he (A) stated: 'Waiting for the relief is among the best of reliefs.'⁷

7. Imam Baqir (A)

Hadiths quoted from Imam Baqir (A) and Imam Sadiq (A) about Imam Mahdi (A), his occultation, his reappearance, the signs of his reappearance and happenings after his reappearance are very significant, since they have mentioned the heart of the issue as well as some of the characteristics of occultation. Here are some hadiths to prove this claim.

Ibrahim b. 'Umar Kanasi said that he heard from Imam Baqir (A):

Surely, there are two occultations for the Master of the Affair (Sahib-u hadha'l Amr; and the Upriser will rise while he owes no one an allegiance.⁸

Abu Basir quoted from Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Baqir (A) who stated:

There will come nine Imams after Imam Husayn, the ninth of whom will be the Upriser from among them.

Jabir Ju'fi quoted Imam Baqir (A) as saying:

There will come an age to people whose Imam will be absent. Then, blessed are those who keep on our command. Surely, their least award is that God address them that: 'O' My male and female servants! You came to believe in My secret and affirmed My concealment; then glad tidings be to you having My best of awards. You are My male and female servants! I accept from you and forgive you and through you I send My blessings to My servants and it is because of you that I ward off disaster from My servants....⁹

8. Imam Sadiq (A)

Imam Sadiq's (A) hadiths about this matter are much more than those received from Imam Baqir (A). There are more characteristics and details mentioned in Imam Sadiq's (A) hadiths. For example, Safwan b. Mihran quoted Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Sadiq (A) as saying:

Whoever professes to all Imams but disclaims Imam Mahdi is like the one who professes to all the

prophets but disclaims Muhammad (S).

Someone asked: “O’ the son of Allah’s Apostle! Which one of your sons is [the promised] Mahdi (A)?”
He (A) answered:

The fifth Imam after the seventh Imam. He will become hidden from you and you are not permitted to pronounce his name. [10](#)

In some Hadiths, Imam Sadiq (A) warned Shi’ites about denial of [Imam] Mahdi (A) during the age of occultation, and by this means, he (A) prepared Shi’ites more and more for the advent of occultation. Abu Basir, quotes Imam Sadiq (A) as saying:

If your master [Imam] happens to be absent, never deny him. [11](#)

‘Ubayd b. Zurareh reports that he heard Imam Sadiq (A) saying:

People will lose their Imam, then he will attend to hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and sees them, but they do not see him. [12](#)

In some hadiths, Imam Sadiq (A) informed about two occultations, one minor and one major. In his Al-Ghaybah, after quoting some of these hadiths, Nu‘mani writes:

The hadiths about two occultations are authentic, and God revealed the truthfulness of Imams’ words, for two kinds of occultation have actually occurred. In the first occultation, when there were deputies between Imam and people, the healings would be processed through their hands and by whom the answers to questions were given. But the second occultation is the one, during which there are no [specifically appointed] deputies or agents.... [13](#)

9. Imam Kadhim (A)

Relying on his own chain of authorities, Muhammad b. Ya‘qūb Kulayni quoted from ‘Ali b. Ja‘far who quoted from his brother Imam Kadhim (A) who stated:

When the fifth Imam after the seventh is absent, be careful about your religion, for there will be an occultation for the Master of this Affair during which, believers in his imamate give up from this faith; and this is a trial [for them] by God ... [14](#)

Dawūd b. Kathir Riqqi said: “I asked Abu al-Hasan Mūsā b. Ja‘far (A) about the Master of this Affair. He (A) answered:

He [Mahdi] will be rejected (by people) and isolated and absent from his household and he is the only son of his father. [15](#)

10. Imam Ridha (A)

‘Abd al-Salam b. Salih Hirawi said: I heard from Di‘bil b. ‘Ali Khuza‘i who said that: ‘I recited an ode to my master, Imam Ridha (A), which started as:

Schools of teaching Qur‘an before, therein no recitation now
Descending place of revelation once, no reflection now until I came to these two verses:

No doubt, once an Imam (A) comes

In the Name of Allah, in His Benisons

Reveals all the Truth, all the False

who gives all's own rewards.

At this point, Imam cried bitterly. Then he (A) raised his head and stated:

O’ Khuza‘i! It was the Holy Spirit who ran these two verses on your tongue! Do you know who is that Imam (you mentioned him and his reappearance), and when will he reappear?

I said: ‘No! My Master! It is just that I have heard an Imam of your descendants will rise who will eliminate corruption from the world and fill it with justice.’ Imam Ridha (A) then stated:

‘O, Di‘bil! The Imam after me is Muhammad, my son, and the Imam after him is his son, ‘Ali, and after ‘Ali, his son, Hasan and after him, his son is hujjat [the Proof], the Expected Upriser, who will be expected [to come] after his occultation and will be obeyed at the time of his reappearance.

If one day remains to the end of the world, surely, God would prolong that day until he comes and fills the earth with justice after it is filled with oppression. But to know the time of his uprising is among the news of the time.

That surely, my father quoted from his father who quoted from his fathers, from the holy Prophet (S) that someone asked him: O, the Apostle of God! When will the Upriser will rise from among your descendants? He (S) stated: “It is similar to the Resurrection, about which, Allah has mentioned:

‘...none except Him shall manifest it at its time. It will weigh heavy on the heavens and the earth. It will not overtake you but suddenly’ (7: 187).”^{[16](#)}

11. Imam Jawad (A)

‘Abd al-‘Azim Hasani said: “I came before my master, Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Jawad, and wanted to ask him about the Upriser if it is him (A) or someone else. So he (A) started speech and stated:

O' Abu al-Qasim! For sure, the Upriser of us is Mahdi; it is obligatory for people to expect him during the age of his occultation and to obey him at the time of his reappearance. He will be the great grandson of my son and swear by God that appointed Muhammad (S) as the Prophet and designated us especially for imamate, if one day remains to the end of the world, surely, God would prolong that day until he comes and fills the earth with justice after it is filled with oppression. And God will assign his task overnight as he assigned his task for Moses, His Interlocutor, overnight and that was when he went to light a fire for his family and when he returned he was a messenger and a prophet.

Then, Imam Jawad (A) stated: "The best act of our followers is to expect the relief." [17](#)

12. Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A)

As it became clear in the past sections, preparation of Shi'ites for entering the age of occultation, promotion of necessary thoughts for them to accept the issue of occultation, the distance from the infallible Imam and deprivation from direct contact with him were all part of a process which started from the age of the Holy Prophet (S) and continued progressively during the ages of each of the Shi'ite Imams (A).

But when we reach the age of Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A), we face a new period, during which, additional measures were adopted and the preparation for entering the Shi'ite for the age of occultation was culminated. Generally, Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari's (A) measures can be summarized as follows. Their first action was the same as the Prophet's (S) and other Imams' in informing and prophesying about [Imam] Mahdi (A) and the facts about his occultation, reappearance and whatever Shi'ites needed to know about this issue.

Another action which was carried out by both of these Imams (A), sometimes wittingly and sometimes compulsorily, was to reduce direct and oral contact with Shi'ites; for Shi'ites were supposed to enter an age in which there was no possibility of making contact with Imam, except in written form and through mediums; therefore, it was necessary that both Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) practically enabled the Shi'ites to become accustomed to this situation.

The third important action of Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) in making preparations for occultation was to reinforce the network of agents as a key factor in making contact between Imam and the Shi'ites whether in presence of Imam (A) or in his absence.

Each one of the above-mentioned measures needs more explanation which is given below:

A) To explain the imamate of Imam Mahdi (A) and his occultation

As mentioned before, the idea of Mahdi and his occultation was explained by the Prophet (S) and all Imams previous to Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A); so Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) mainly

emphasized the proximity of coming of his age and warned Shi'ites from being trapped in bewilderment, straying from the truth or apostasy. In many hadiths, Imam Hadi (A) is quoted as saying:

Surely, the Imam after me is my son Hasan and after him [the Imam is] his son, the Upriser, who will fill the earth with equity and justice after it is filled with oppression and cruelty.[18](#)

In some hadiths from Imam Hadi (A), Shi'ites are informed that [the promised] Mahdi (A) is the one whose birth is hidden from others. Such hadiths from Imam Hadi (A) are warnings for Shi'ites not to have doubt in their hearts about Imam Mahdi (A) because of his birth being hidden.

When Imam Hadi (A) was martyred, Imam Hasan b. Ali 'Askari (A) took over a heavier responsibility in making preparations for occultation. During Imam 'Askari's (A) imamate, Mahdi (A) was born and there was a short time left to the beginning of the age of occultation; therefore, Imam 'Askari (A) had both responsibilities of not only explaining the heart of the doctrine of Mahdi and his occultation but also proving the birth of the promised Mahdi (A). This is why Imam 'Askari (A) honoured some of the intimate and trustworthy Shi'ites and by giving them the permission to see his son Mahdi (A).

In some cases, Imam 'Askari (A) pinpointed the exact time for the beginning of the age of occultation. Abu Ghanim quotes Abu Muhammad Hasan b. 'Ali al-'Askari (A) as saying:

My Shi'ites will face the detachment and separation in the year (260 A.H).[19](#)

Also in some hadiths, Imam 'Askari (A) clearly mentioned the divergence of opinions among Shi'ites just after the beginning of the age of occultation. Mūsā b. Ja'far b. Wahab Baghdadi reported that he heard Imam 'Askari (A) saying:

It is as if I see you have disagreements over my successor after I pass away...Know that there will come an age of occultation for my son, during which people will have doubt [in their faith] except those who are saved by God.[20](#)

Also in some other hadiths, Imam 'Askari (A) ordered Shi'ites to be patient and expect the relief during the age of occultation. One of such cases is his letter to Abu al-Hasan, 'Ali b. al-Husayn b. Babiwayh Qummi in which he (A) stated:

It is expected from you to be patient and expect the relief! [for] The Holy Prophet (S) stated: "Best of my Shi'ites' actions is the expectation of the relief" and our Shi'ites will always be in grief and sadness until my son, about whom the Holy Prophet (S) has given the good news, reappears and fills the earth with justice and equality. Then, O' Abu al-Hasan 'Ali! Be Patient and call my Shi'ites to be patient, for the earth indeed belongs to Allah, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wishes of His servants, and the outcome will be in favour of the God wary.[21](#)

B) Reduction of direct contact with Shi'ites

Gradually veiling from Shi'ites was among other actions of Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) in making preparations for the occultation of Mahdi (A). This fact is fully clarified through the explanation from Mas'ūdi, the famous historian in Ithbat al-Wasiyyah; when he mentioned:

Imam Hadi (A) would stay away from most of his friends except few favoured ones; and when [after him] Imam 'Askari (A) became the Imam, he (A) would speak with both common and favoured friends from behind a curtain except for the time he (A) would ride to the king's palace.”

These two great Imams (A) were away from Shi'ites compulsorily or willingly because of being under control of Abbasid rulers in Samarra's fortifications and also because of living just before the age of occultation. Most of their affairs and contacts with Shi'ites were through correspondence, writings and agents. And it was for the validation of these correspondences that Ahmad b. Ishaq Qumi, for example, asked Imam 'Askari (A) a piece of his handwriting in order to be able to recognize his (A) handwriting from the rest.²²

And therefore, crowd of Shi'ites would sit on the way and wait for Imam (A) to take the advantage of seeing him when going to Caliph's house weekly.

C) Reinforcing the network of agents

Another way of preparing the Shi'ite to the age of occultation by Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) was to reinforce the network of agents. To know more about that network, the way it developed and its status at the age of Imam Hadi (A) and Imam 'Askari (A) and also the age of occultation, it is necessary to pay a particular attention to that important network, understanding the process of its establishment and evolution and its other features and tasks. These issues will be studied in the second part of this paper.

¹. Sheikh Tusi, Al-Ghaybah, p. 101.

². Sheikh Saduq, Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 1, p. 257; Sheikh Tusi, Al-Ghaybah, p. 95.

³. Ibid. vol. 1, p. 303, no. 14.

⁴. Ibid. vol. 1, p. 305, chapter 27; Sheikh Tusi, Al-Ghaybah, p. 92.

⁵. Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 1, p. 315. About the same issue,

Sheikh Saduq reported a hadith from Imam Jawad (A) in which he (A) recounted the story of Imam Hasan's (A) answering three questions of Khidr (A) that after his answering, Khidr (A) professed his faith to oneness of God, prophethood of the Holy Prophet (S) and imamate of Imam Hasan, Imam Husayn (A) and other Imams until Imam Mahdi (A.J) and reported about his task of establishing justice.

⁶. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 316, chapter 30, no. 1.

⁷. Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 1, p. 320. There are nine hadiths concerning this matter which Saduq quoted from Imam Sajjad (A). We just referred briefly to the hadith reported by Abu Khalid Kabuli. Researchers may refer to the mentioned source.

⁸. Nu'mani, Al-Ghaybah, p. 113.

- [9.](#) Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 1, p. 330. Hadiths received from Imam Baqir (A) about Imam Mahdi (A), his occultation and its characteristics and his reappearance are reported in chapter 32 of Sheikh Saduq's Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah as well as Sheikh Tusi's Al-Ghaybah, p. 92 onwards and Nu'mani's Al-Ghaybah, pp. 97 – 113.
- [10.](#) Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 1, p. 333, ch. 33, no. 1.
- [11.](#) Sheikh Tusi, Al-Ghaybah, p. 102.
- [12.](#) Ibid.
- [13.](#) Nu'mani, Al-Ghaybah, p. 114.
- [14.](#) Ibid. p. 100.
- [15.](#) Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 2, p. 361, no. 4.
- [16.](#) Ibid. vol. 2, p. 372, ch. 35, no. 6.
- [17.](#) Ibid. vol. 1.
- [18.](#) Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, vol. 2, p. 383, ch. 37, no. 10.
- [19.](#) Ibid. no. 6.
- [20.](#) Ibid. no. 8.
- [21.](#) Cf. Manaqib, vol. 3, p. 533; Tarikh al-Ghaybat al-Sughra, P. 224.
- [22.](#) Cf. Manaqib, vol. 3, p. 527; Tarikh al-Ghaybat al-Sughra, P. 217.

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