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The Special Deputies of Imam Mahdi (as)

By Zahra Ra'isi

Translated by Mahboobeh Morshedian

Abstract

Little is found in early Shi'a sources regarding the special deputies of Imam Mahdi during the Minor Occultation. While in various Shi'a sources various people are referred to as envoys of Imam Mahdi, his four prominent deputies are 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri, Muhammad ibn 'Uthman, Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti, and Ali ibn Muhammad Samari. 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri, who was an agent (wakil) of Imam Hadi and Imam Hasan 'Askari, was his first deputy in the Minor Occultation, and his deputyship can be corroborated in many ways. After him, Muhammad ibn 'Uthman was chosen by the Imam as his second deputy. Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti, an influential figure of his time, served as the Imam's third deputy for about 21 years. Finally, 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri was the last deputy, who in the Imam's famous letter to him declared the start of the Major Occultation.

Statement of the Problem

The inception of Imam Mahdi's Occultation in 260 A.H. is considered a new chapter of the relation between the Imam and Ummah. The Shi'a community, which for years was accustomed to the direct relation with the Imam, now was to adjust itself with the new state of affairs. Hence, those who could not understand the situation abandoned the Shi'a school of thought. By plan of Allah, the Wise, the Prudent, at first the connection of people with the vicegerent of God was not severed completely. For this reason, the Shi'a name it The Minor Occultation, during which people were in contact with the 12th Imam through his deputies.

Generally, the issues of his Minor Occultation are seldom discussed. They include the issue of deputies of Imam Mahdi in that period of time. Its significance is revealed when we consider that first, many

claimed to be Imam Mahdi's deputy during that era; secondly, there is no consensus in Shi'a sources regarding the definite number of his deputies. Nevertheless, among the Shi'a it is well-known that the following four people were his deputies: 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri, Muhammad ibn 'Uthman, Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti, and Ali ibn Muhammad Samari.

This paper briefly offers the biographies of the above-mentioned deputies as well as the reasons for their deputyship.

The First Deputy: 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri

The first special deputy of Imam Mahdi was 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri, who was also the representative of the two previous Imams and trusted by them.

'Uthman ibn Sa'id: The representative of Imam Hadi and Imam Hasan al-'Askari

In this regard, there are a number of narrations, some of which are as follows. Some hadith narrators reported from Harun ibn Musa Tal'ukbari, who through his own chain of narrators quoted Ahmad ibn Ishaq Qumi as saying:

One day I went to Ali ibn Muhammad al-Hadi and told him: 'I am not always here, and whenever I am here, sometimes I cannot come to you and ask my religious and legal questions. Whom should I obey?' The holy Imam answered, 'This Abu 'Amr ('Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri) is a reliable and trustworthy person. I trust him, and whatever he tells and gives you is from me.' After martyrdom of Imam Hadi, once I went to his son, Imam Hasan al-Askari, and asked him the same question. The 11th Imam repeated the answer of Imam Hadi, saying,

"Abu 'Amr was trusted by the previous Imam and is trusted by me now and after my death, also whatever he tells and gives you is from me.' This word of the 11th Imam spread among Shi'as and 'Uthman ibn Sa'id was always respected by them.'[1]

Likewise, Ahmad ibn Ishaq Qummi quoted Imam Hadi as saying, "Amri and his son are trusted by me, so whatever he gives and tells you is from me. Listen to them and obey them."[2]

The reasons for his being a deputy of Imam Mahdi

After the martyrdom of Imam Hasan al-'Askari, 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Amri assumed the responsibility of performing the ritual bathing of the body of Imam, enshrouding and burying him. Afterwards, he became the deputy of Imam Mahdi. He moved from Samarra to Baghdad, and settled in the district of Karkh, where the Shi'as lived. Until his death, he ran the office of deputyship there. Like his routine in the time of Imam Hadi and Imam Hasan al-'Askari, he delivered the letters and religious taxes the Shi'as gave to the 12th Imam.[3]

The reasons for ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id’s being deputy of Imam Mahdi are as follows:

A) After the martyrdom of Imam Hasan ‘Askari , a group of the Shi’s from Qum and other parts of Iran brought some religious taxes to Imam Hasan al–‘Askari in Samarra. When they reached there, they were told of the martyrdom of the 11th Imam, and some people introduced Ja‘far as the successor of the holy Imam. Ja‘far asked them for the money, but the Qummis made this request contingent on his answering some questions. He could not reply to them, so they took the money and left.

Outside Samarra, a secret messenger guided them to Imam Mahdi. He told them about each and every feature and sign of the money, and they gave it to him. Then the holy Imam told them, “Do not bring your money to Samarra anymore. From now on, give it to my deputy and representative in Baghdad, ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id.”

B) The letters of Imam Mahdi were delivered to the ordinary and elite Shi‘as via ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id and his son, Muhammad. These letters include the Imam’s orders and prohibitions and his answers to the Shi’as’ questions. The handwritings used in the letters exactly resembled the one used in the letters of Imam Hasan ‘Askari, and Shi‘as agreed on the justice of both ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id and his son.[4]

Several letters of Imam Mahdi to ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri

1. After the demise of ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id’s father, Imam Mahdi issued a letter about his death; this letter included some sections. One part of it reads as follows, “We belong to Allah, and to Him is our return. We are submissive to His orders and content with His decree. Your father lived in salvation and left this world well.”[5]

2. When some Shi‘as quarrelled about the successor of Imam Hasan ‘Askari, a letter was issued by Imam Mahdi to ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id as follows:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

May Allah protect you from seditions, grant you certitude, and keep you immune from a bad end. I received the news of your doubts about the issue and your puzzlement at your leaders. I was sad with regards to this issue for your own sake, and not for my own because I am right and do not need others.[6]

The date of demise of ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri

The date of demise of ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri[7]

Although ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id played a vital role in Shi‘ism, the date of his demise was not specified. In this regard, Hashim Ma‘ruf Hasani wrote, “The deputyship of ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id lasted until 265 A.H.” However, he did not cite any reference for his word.

According to some, ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id passed away sometime between the martyrdom of Imam Hasan

‘Askari and 267 A.H., because it was in the time of Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman, the son of Uthman ibn Sa‘id, that the false pretender to the deputyship, Ahmad ibn Hilal, opposed him and did not accept his deputyship. Ahmad ibn Hilal died in 267 A.H. Thus, Uthman ibn Sa‘id must have passed away before Hilal’s death.

As for the burial place of ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id, Shaikh Tusi wrote:

I saw his burial place where Abu Nasr Hibatullah Mahmud mentioned. A building that included the prayer niche of a mosque has been constructed on it. We went there and paid a visit to his grave easily. From 408 A.H., when I came to Baghdad, to 430 A.H., it was in this condition. However, Abu Mansur Muhammad ibn Faraj destroyed the building, made the grave exposed and put a box on it. Then, there was a roof over the grave, and everybody could enter the structure and visit it. All people in the neighborhood who were all Sunni tried to be blessed by visiting his grave, saying, ‘He was a righteous man.’ Sometimes, they say, ‘He was a descendant of Imam Husayn’s wet nurse,” but they do not know the truth. The grave has been in the same condition up to now; that is, 447 A.H.’[8]

The Second Deputy: Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri

The second special deputy of Imam Mahdi was Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri. After his father’s death, he succeeded him and was appointed as the representative and deputy of Imam Mahdi.

Like his father, he was a genius of his time. He was also of great piety, God–wariness, and moral virtues. His epithet was Abu Ja‘far, and he was also called ‘Amri, ‘Askari, and Zayyat[9]. In his lifetime, he offered many services to Shi‘ism, such as writing books on Islamic Jurisprudence, and gathering the material of his books from the teachings of Imam Hasan ‘Askari, Imam Mahdi, and his own father, whose source was these holy Imams, too. Based on his will, this book was handed on to the third deputy of the Imam, Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti.

Among his other services was struggling against and defeating the false pretenders to the deputyship. Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman was the special deputy of Imam Mahdi for about 40 years, and false claims to deputyship were rampant then. Under the guidance of Imam Mahdi and his letters, Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman could struggle against and defeat them.

Like other deputies, his other works included addressing people’s problems, answering their legal problems, and delivering people’s letters to the 12th Imam and getting his responses to them.

The reasons for Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman’s being deputy of Imam Mahdi

In addition to being pious and trustworthy, Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman had a good record, being at the service of the Prophet’s Household and an active member of the representation network during his father’s lifetime. The reasons for his deputyship include the following:

1. As mentioned before, in a letter, Imam Hasan ‘Askari introduced him and his father as reliable people and trusted by himself.[10]

2. In addition to considering Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman reliable, Imam Hasan ‘Askari referred to his being representative of his son, Imam Mahdi, “Bear witness that ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id ‘Amri is my representative, and his son, Muhammad is representative of my son, Mahdi.”[11]

3. He gave people some letters from Imam Mahdi. These letters were in the uniform handwriting and with the same characteristics as the previous ones. Thus, the agents or representatives could find out about his truthfulness and connection with Imam Mahdi.

4. Sometimes he prepared the ground for some agents or representatives’ visiting with Imam Mahdi, and the holy Imam always told them, “Muhammad ’Uthman is my deputy.”[12]

Some extraordinary acts of Imam Mahdi’s second deputy

Imam Mahdi’s second deputy, Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman, is said to have performed many extraordinary acts. For example, Abi Nasr Hibatullah ibn Muhammad is quoted as saying,

“Once there was some money with my father from people of Qum and its suburbs. He was going to deliver it to the 12th Imam. When my father met Abi Ja‘far (the second deputy) and gave him the money, he told my father, ‘There is still some money left with you.’ My father thought but could not recall any other money. So he said, “I have delivered all money with me, and there is nothing left.’ But Abi Ja‘far told him where money was. When my father followed it up he could find the money. Then, he gave it to Abi Ja‘far. This was very strange, because nobody knew of that money.”

The Third Deputy: Abul-Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti

The third special deputy of Imam Mahdi was Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti. He worked as an agent for the second deputy and in the last few years of his deputyship, Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman appointed him as the head of network of the agents, and he acted as an intermediary between the second deputy and other agents. Husayn ibn Ruh enjoyed a high social status among the Shi‘as in Baghdad. Even high-ranking government officials were considerably under his sway and respected him. Also, the government was not sensitive to him.

In the lifetime of Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman, Husayn ibn Ruh was chosen as his successor and the third deputy by Imam Mahdi. Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman introduced him to the Shi‘a elites and the 12th Imam’s agents.

Reasons for Husayn ibn Ruh Nowbakhti’s being deputy of Imam Mahdi

1. According to Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman’s daughter, Umm Kulthum: For many years, Husayn ibn Ruh

was the agent of Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman and in charge of his lands. Husayn ibn Ruh used to transmit my father’s secret messages to the Shi‘i leaders and was my father’s close companion. Hence, the Shi’a took Husayn ibn Ruh to their hearts since they knew he was a close companion of my father. In the lifetime of my father, the arrangements for his deputyship were made. Then, on orders of Imam Mahdi, my father introduced him as his successor. There was no disagreement and doubt about his deputyship, and I know no Shi‘a who is doubtful about his deputyship.[13]

2. Another reason for his deputyship is the letters sent to him by Imam Mahdi on various topics, including legal issues and answers to the Shi‘as questions, as well as letters in which the 12th Imam condemned some of those who went astray, such as Shalmaghani.

3. Still another reason is that in the start of Husayn ibn Ruh’s deputyship, the servant of Muhammad ibn ‘Uthman took some belongings of Abu Ja‘far such as his cane, key, and casket to Husayn ibn Ruh, and told him, “Abu Ja‘far told me to deliver these to you after his burial. This casket contains the signets and seals of the holy Imams.”

Finally, Husayn ibn Ruh, who – for about 20 years – was the deputy of Imam Mahdi from 305 A.H. to 326 A.H., passed away on Sha‘ban 18th 326 A.H. His body was buried in Baghdad in Shurjah Bazaar, and his tomb attracts the Shi’a who seek blessings when they visit it.[14]

The Fourth Deputy: Abul-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad Samuri

The fourth and last special deputy of Imam Mahdi was Abul-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad Samuri. After the demise of Husayn ibn Ruh, he was appointed as the deputy by Imam Mahdi. As of Sha‘ban 18th 328 A.H., he assumed this responsibility.

Ali ibn Muhammad Samuri was from a devout Shi‘a family, and was renowned for offering valuable services in the representation organization of the Infallible Imams. Due to his good previous record, reliability, and trustworthiness, he faced no problem in his being accepted as deputy by the Shi’as and agents of the representation network. Representatives and elite Shi‘as recognized him as the true deputy of Imam Mahdi, and they gave the religious taxes to him to be delivered to the Imam. Abul-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad Samuri did not have much opportunity for his activities. Due to both his short period of deputyship and special political situation, he could not take considerable measures. And if he managed to do so, because of his dissimulating and taking precautions, few of his measures have been passed on to future generations. What stands out in the period of his deputyship is the last letter sent to him by Imam Mahdi.

The last letter from Imam Mahdi

Imam Mahdi issued his last letter to Ali ibn Muhammad Samuri six days before his demise. In this letter, the 12th Imam predicted the time of his demise and told him not to appoint any other deputy as his

successor, because with his death the Minor Occultation would end and the Major Occultation would begin. The letter reads as follows:

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

O' Ali ibn Muhamad Samuri! May Allah give you and your companions high rewards! You will die within six days. So prepare yourself, and do not appoint anybody as your successor, since the second occultation has started. Thus, my reappearance will not be realized but with permission of Allah, and after people become heartless and merciless and the earth is replete with oppression. Also, some Shi'a will claim they have seen me. Whoever claims this before the appearance of Sufyani and the cry from the sky is a slanderous liar.

There is neither might nor strength but in Allah, the High, the Great.[15]

Shaykh Saduq quoted Abu Muhammad, Hasan ibn Ahmad Maktab as saying:

In the year when Ali ibn Muhamad Samuri passed away, we were in Baghdad, and went to him some days before his demise. He showed us this last letter of Imam Mahdi. We made a copy of it and left him. The predicted day came; we went to Samuri and found him on his deathbed. On the verge of his death, he was asked, "Who is your guardian (wasiyy)?" He answered, "The divine providence will happen by His will." He then passed away.[16]

Analysis of the Imam's letter

1. Foretelling the day of the last deputy's demise by Imam Mahdi shows that this letter was really from the 12th Imam.

2. This letter states the time of the end of the Minor Occultation and the start of Major Occultation.

3. The reappearance of Imam Mahdi is with Allah, and we do not know when it will happen.

4. The letter tells us of two indications of Imam Mahdi's reappearance: the appearance of Sufyani and the cry from the sky.[17]

Conclusion

The special deputies of Imam Mahdi lived fruitfully in a time when the Shi'a suffered extreme hardship. Above all, the absence of the Infallible Imam occurred for the first time. On the other hand, Sunnis and followers of the deviant schools of thought took advantage of the absence of an Imam; they leveled false unfair accusations against the Shi'as, questioned their beliefs, and considered them misled.

However, it was the special deputies who under the guidance of Imam Mahdi overcame the difficulties, saved the Shi'as from confusion and disunity, and kept them in the clear path of truth. They were among

the most pious, clever, and shrewd people of their time; and due to earning Allah's satisfaction, they were risen to the high rank of deputyship.

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3. The History of Occultation, p. 289.
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5. Ibid, p.361.
6. Abbas Rasikhi, The Envoys of the Imam (a.s.), p. 71.
7. Ibid.
8. Shaikh Tusi, al-Ghaibah, p. 358.
9. Somebody who sells oil is called Dhiyat. It was Muhammad ibn 'Uthman's job.
10. 'Amri and his son are reliable.'
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13. Shaykh Tusi, al-Ghaibah, p. 372.
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