The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiʿism*

The formative period of Imami Shiʿism from the mid-8th century to the mid-10th century remains obscure in many respects. This study is an attempt to organize the historical information about the period around a central problematic: the twin crisis of the nature of the Imamate and the succession to this office. The crisis of the Imamate and the efforts to resolve it serve as a focal point for constructing a conceptually coherent overview of these two formative centuries from a sociohistorical perspective. This perspective requires that the endeavors to create a stable system of authority in Imami Shiʿism be considered in the context of the social change and politics of the early ʿAbbasid era: ʿAlid-ʿAbbasid relations, massive conversion of the population of Iran to Islam, and the dialogue and competition between Shiʿism and other contemporary religious and intellectual trends and movements. Our approach suggests a new periodization of the early history of Imami Shiʿism.

1 Authority and Organization in the Imami Sect during the Period of Revolutionary Chiliasm: 744–818

The impressive feat of unifying sundry pro-ʿAlid groups into the Imami sect by the fifth and sixth imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733) and Jaʿfar al-Sadiq (d. 765), was premised on keeping aloof from political activism. It is remarkable that Jaʿfar al-Sadiq avoided involvement in politics during the revolutionary era that began with the murder of Walid II in April 744. In that year, the Hashemite dignitaries met at the Abwaʾ near Mecca to elect a leader, and the Talibid ʿAbd Allah ibn Muʿawiya inaugurated the Hashemite revolution on

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behalf of "the one agreed-upon (*al-Riḍā*) from the house of Muhammad."[1] Jaʿfar was the one dissident at the Hashemite meeting who refused to recognize his young cousin, Muhammad ibn ʿAbd Allah ibn al-Hasan, as the Mahdi of the House of the Prophet. Another Hashemite present at the meeting, the ʿAbbasid Ibrahim ibn Muhammad, was leading his father's clandestine movement in Khurasan. Ibrahim's son Muhammad studied with Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and reported traditions from him.[2] According to several traditions, Jaʿfar was invited by the Kufan revolutionary leader Abu Salama, presumably upon the death of the ʿAbbasid Ibrahim al-Imam, to assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement, but he refused to get involved.[3]

Once the ʿAbbasids emerged as the victors in the Hashemite revolution, Jaʿfar showed no signs of opposition to the new regime and visited the second ʿAbbasid caliph, Abu Jaʿfar ʿAbd Allah ibn Muhammad al-Mansur (754–45) in Iraq. Mansur, a seasoned revolutionary who is reported to have been among the participants in the Abwaʾ meeting and who had served ʿAbd Allah ibn Muʿawiya, was ruthless in his violent treatment of the ʿAlids in general. Yet his relations with Jaʿfar al-Sadiq were good. He solicited Jaʿfar's legal advice and reportedly restored the tomb of ʿAli in Najaf at his request.[4] Furthermore, Mansur retained some of Jaʿfar's important followers in his service, thus creating a permanent niche for an Imami office-holding aristocracy within the ʿAbbasid state.

The origin of these families of Imami officials can be traced to the ʿAlid-ʿAbbasid revolutionary coalition against the Umayyads. Yaqtin ibn Musa (d. 801), a Persian client of the Banu Asad, was a revolutionary with a remarkable ability to change sides. He must have preferred a Talibid "Rida from the House" over an ʿAbbasid one when operating underground in Kufa under Marwan II, and was close to Abu Salama. Yet he was called *yak dīn* by Abu

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1 H. Halm, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt, 1988), 27–70; P. Crone, "On the Meaning of the ʿAbbasid Call to *al-Riḍā*," in *The Islamic World. Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, C. Issawi, R. Savory, and A. L. Udovitch (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1989).

2 The correspondence between Ibrahim and Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was still extant in the eleventh century (Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī* [Qumm, 1986–87], 355–56).

3 S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Development of Shiʿa Islam* (London and New York: Longman, 1979), 273.

4 Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl*, abridged by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī as *Ikhtiyār Maʿrifat al-Rijāl*, ed. H. Muṣṭafavī, (Mashhad, 1970), 245; Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Nuʿmān, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād* (Qumm: Baṣiratī, n.d.), 12–23, English trans. I. K. A. Howard, *Kitāb al-Irshād. The Book of Guidance* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 6; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib Āl-i Abī-Tālib* (Najaf, 1956), 3:378–89, 389. For an overview, see Halm, *Die Schia*, 34–45.