

## Imam *Absconditus* and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation\*

The last quarter of the ninth century is the most obscure in the history of Imami Shi'ism—bedeviled as it is by confused and tendentious documentation. Following the death of the eleventh Imam with no offspring, it represents a period of severe crisis and yet, within it, are found the beginnings of a number of far reaching doctrinal and institutional trends which shaped Shi'ism permanently. Two important documents are used as a window for viewing this critical period by focusing on the major rupture in the history of Shi'ism that marks its end: the cessation of communication between the Imam and his Shi'a and the formal acceptance of an Imam *absconditus*. From the historical point of view, this rupture is the decisive turning point that divides the historical Imamate from the era of occultation.

### 1

On Friday, January 1, 874/8 Rabī' I, 260, the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, died. “He died and no offspring (*khalaf*) was seen after him.”<sup>1</sup> His followers splintered into fourteen or more groups. Two of these took up the ideas of the Wāqifiyya, the group of followers of the seventh Imam, Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799/183), which, after his death, considered the Imamate suspended in him, as he was the apocalyptic *qā'im* (redresser/riser) in occultation. The Wāqifiyya had also held that the *qā'im* would have two occultations, a short one followed by a longer one extending to his rising, a tenet whose origin can be traced to Mūsā al-Kāẓim's two periods of imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> One splinter

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- 1 Sa'd b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ash'arī al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wāl-firaq*, ed. M. J. Mashkūr (Tehran, 1963), 102 (henceforth *MF*). In Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Kitāb firaq al-shī'a*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1931), 79 (henceforth *FSh*). The word *athar* (vestige) is used instead of *khalaf*.
- 2 W. Madelung, “al-Mahdī,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (1986), 5: 1236; H. Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 87.

group among Ḥasan's followers argued that, as a childless Imam cannot die and leave the world devoid of proof (*hujja*) of God, Ḥasan had not died but had gone into occultation. He was the *qā'im* and the *mahdī*, and would have two occultations.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the next two decades, these neo-Wāqifite ideas were adopted in modified form by the leadership of the nascent Imami hierarchy.

Ḥasan b. 'Alī had become the eleventh Imam by default, as his older brother and the successor-designate of the tenth Imam, Muḥammad, had predeceased their father. Some of the Imamis had refused to accept his Imamate and had instead chosen his younger brother, Ja'far. Probably the majority maintained that the eleventh Imam had died childless and, considering this proof that they had been mistaken in accepting his Imamate in the first place, became followers of his rival brother, Ja'far, who survived him by some two decades.<sup>4</sup> 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd al-'Amrī, the eleventh Imam's chief agent, who, assisted by his son, Muḥammad, had been in charge of the seat of the Imam (*al-nāḥiya al-muqaddasa*) in Sāmarrā' since the time of the tenth Imam, refused to come to terms with Ja'far. Instead, the 'Amrīs opted for an absent Imam whose name they refused to divulge "as the people believe that this lineage has come to an end."<sup>5</sup> 'Amrī the elder died before long, and his son, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Uthmān, assumed the direction of the seat of the Imam for over forty years until his death in 917/304.<sup>6</sup>

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Some even saw his imprisonment as part of the occultation (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Irshād* (Qumm: Baṣīratī, n.d.), 303; English tr. I. K. A. Howard, *Kitāb al-Irshād: The Book of Guidance* (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 456, assimilating it to Joseph's imprisonment which they also considered an occultation. (Ibn Bābūya, Muḥammad b. 'Alī, al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-ni'ma fi ithbāt al-ghayba wa kashf al-ḥayra*, ed. 'A. A. Ghaffārī (Tehran, 1975/1395), 152–53 (henceforth *Kamāl*).

3 *FSh*, 79–80; *MF*, 106–7; *Kamāl*, 40; Kohlberg, "From Imamiyya to Ithnā-'ashariyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 531. The second neo-Wāqifite splinter group had similar beliefs, except for maintaining that Ḥasan had died but would return to life as the *qā'im* and the *mahdī*. (*FSh*, 80–81; *MF*, 107).

4 Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-zūna*, edited and published as a supplement to 'Abd Allāh al-Sallūm al-Samarrā'ī, *al-Ghulūww wa'l-firaq al-ghāliya fi'l-ḥadāra al-islāmīya* (Baghdad, 1972/1392), 291–93. See also Modarressī, 81, nn. 141–43.

5 *Kamāl*, 442.2012.

6 There is an unresolved problem with the elder 'Amrī's name. Our oldest source, Kashshī, reports it as "Ḥafs b. 'Amr known as al-'Amrī," adding that his son, Muḥammad ibn 'Uthmān, was known as Ibn al-'Amrī. (Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl*, abridged by Muhammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī as *Ikhtiyār ma'rifat al-rijāl*, ed. H. Muṣṭafavī [Mashhad, 1970/1348], 530–31.) All subsequent sources, however, give the totally different name of 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd. The Shi'ite biographical science (*ilm al-rijāl*) has added the epithet *jammāl* (camel-driver) to