

Two Types of Occultation

Question:

According to the content of existing traditions, the occultation of the Imam of the Age (may Allah hasten his return) has occurred in two forms. During the first occultation, communication with him was possible through his representatives and agents, but with the ending of this period and the beginning of the second occultation, which is the complete occultation, the period of the responsibility of the agents and particular representatives also ended.

The question is whether referring to these two occultation as the “minor” (صغرى) and “major” (كبرى) was prevalent from the beginning or whether it became prevalent in later times, like the Safawi period.

Answer:

Discussion regarding issues like this should not be a verbal discussion. Whether a person calls the first occultation, which was shorter, the minor occultation (كبرى) or the shorter occultation (قصرى), or the second occultation, which has a long duration, the major occultation (كبرى) or the longer occultation (طولى) or refers to them by any other word, the fact and reality of the matter is not changed. In any case, these two occultations have occurred.

The issue is that principle of the occultation having two forms was explicitly stated in the *usul* (early hadith collections) and other books of hadith even before its occurrence. Nu‘mani and others who lived before the termination of the minor occultation have narrated it, and this fact is proof that the two forms of occultation were put forth.

During the period of the minor occultation, though the position of the Shi‘a was sensitive, no one can claim that all these traditions related from the Imams (peace be upon them) in books like the *Ghaybat* of al-Fadl ibn Sha‘han and Nu‘mani and *Kamal al-Din* of Saduq are all falsified and were written after the occurrence of the occultation.

We see that the Shi'a of the various cities and regions would refer to the *nawwab* (representatives); they did not do such for no reason. Signs and evidences were definitely present that indicated that they were in contact with the Imam. Otherwise, it is impossible that individuals like 'Ali ibn Babawayh, with that intellectual position and eminence of thought, would pursue contact with the Imam (peace be upon him) through the *nawwab* without their link being as clear for him as daylight. This event itself indicates that they had clear evidence of the truth of the representatives.

The other issue is that though Abu Ja'far al-'Amrawi - 'Uthman ibn Sa'id—and the remaining representatives were a means of Shi'a unity and their agency was completely accepted in all Shi'a circles and regions, especially a city like Qum, this unity was because of belief in the *Imamah* of the twelfth Imam. This issue brought about the spiritual influence of the representatives, not that they became a cause of Shi'a unity without taking in view the issue of *Imamah*.

The unity and consensus of the Shi'a about believing in the *Imamah* of the twelfth Imam was the cause of their unity in following the Imam's (peace be upon them) representatives.

Just as today belief in the *Imamah* of that personage is a cause of the spiritual influence in believers' hearts of the 'Ulama' and Fuqaha' (scholars and jurists) as general representatives of that personage.

During the minor occultation, specification of the representatives took place directly by the person of the Imam (peace be upon him), and the fact that we see eminent scholars lowering their heads in submission before the representatives is proof that this selection was by the person of the Imam (peace be upon him) on the basis of the representatives' worthiness. And the submission of all classes and political and scholarly personalities is proof that original leadership during the period of the minor occultation was with the person of the Imam (peace be upon him).

It was as a result of the existence of persuasive evidence and proofs that scholarly men of the Shi'a and personalities like Abu Sahl al-Nawbakhti and Ibn Matil, and Hasan ibn Janahasibi and other eminent Shi'a believed in the righteousness of the representatives.

Similarly, after the demise of the fourth representative—'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Samarri - also the issue that the period of occultation and the particular representation has ended was accepted by all. And if any claimed to be a representative, they repudiated him on the basis of this very principle, and in passing it can be said that one of the important wisdoms of the shorter occultation was to make the Shi'a familiar with the issue of occultation and preparing the ground for the period of the long occultation, so the Shi'a can continue his life during a long period without the apparent presence of the Imam and successfully complete this major Divine test.