

Chapter 6: Can a Five Year Old Boy Become an Imam?

The session began on time. Everyone was anxiously waiting to begin the discussion. Dr. Fahimi formulated his question thus.

Dr. Fahimi: Let us assume that Imam Hasan 'Askari did have a son. But how can one believe that a five year old lad is appointed to the position of *wilayat* and Imamate? How is it possible that he is given the charge of protecting and effecting the laws of God at that young age and is made the Imam, the leader of the people and God's Proof on earth?

Mr. Hoshyar: It appears that you have imagined the position of the Prophethood and the Imamate to be a trivial thing not requiring any precondition or criterion for anyone who is supposed to protect and effect the divine laws! Moreover, it would seem that you do not require any qualifications or personal character and perfection in a person who is to assume such a divinely ordained position --even to the extent that it is possible that Abu Sufyan could take the position of the prophethood occupied by Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah and Talha and Zubayr could assume the Imamate instead of 'Ali b. Abi Talib.

However, a little attention will lead you to the traditions reported on the authority of the *Ahlul Bayt* that the matter of the leadership and guidance of the community is not that simple. Indeed, Prophethood is a divine office that requires a qualified individual to be designated to carry out its functions derived from a special spiritual relationship between God and His emissary, a prophet. More importantly, such an individual is endowed with hidden knowledge, and knowledge about God's laws and injunctions which have been revealed to him through God's special favor on him and, hence, both he and the message are free from any error or falsehood.

Similarly, *wilayat* and Imamate are extremely important offices. The person occupying that position is required to preserve the divine laws and teachings of the Prophet without committing any error or inadvertence in their transmission and their promulgation in the community. Moreover, that person has to be in contact with the hidden source of divine knowledge so that he may receive God's guidance in

understanding and illuminating His revelation for humanity. It is because of his knowledge and the actions based on divine guidance that he attains the position of being proclaimed God's Proof (*hujjat*) and His manifestation on earth.

It is obvious that not every person on this earth is capable of fulfilling these requirements and effecting the laws of God in human society. It is necessary that the person assuming this sensitive position should be endowed with a spiritual and human perfection so as to establish proper contact with the divine source and receive the knowledge and retain it for the community. Moreover, this person must possess both physical and mental qualities most appropriate to the execution of his functions as the leader and guide of the Muslim community. He cannot afford to be fallible and erroneous in conveying the religious truth necessary for the well being of humanity.

Hence, it must be maintained that the Prophet and the Imams are the best in creation. More importantly, it is because of these personal qualities that God, the Almighty, appoints them in the position of a Prophet and an Imam. These qualities are present in them from the time they come into this world. At the appropriate time and as the situation demands, and provided there are no obstacles, they become manifest. It is only then that these individuals become selected and appointed as Prophets and Imams with the mission to carry and effect God's ordinances for humanity. This manifest designation may occur at times after they attain the age of maturity, and at other times even while they are younger in age.

The Qur'an provides the best example of the appointment to the prophethood at a very young age. In the example of Jesus (peace be upon him), the Qur'an speaks about the miracle of Jesus while he was still a baby in the cradle. At that time Jesus introduced himself as a prophet who had brought the revealed message for the Children of Israel. Thus, he says:

Lo, I am God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet. Blessed He has made me, wherever I may be; and He has enjoined me to pray, and to give the alms, so long as I live. (Sura Maryam, 29)

From this and other verses of the Qur'an it is clear that Jesus (peace be upon him) from his very early childhood had been appointed as the Prophet and had been given the Book.

In light of the above, it is correct to say that there is no objection to maintaining that a person could establish relations with the divine sources of knowledge at a very early age and could be appointed to undertake the critical responsibility of promulgating the divine laws with utmost care and accuracy. Moreover, he could be made completely capable of performing his task and safeguarding the divine trust.

Incidentally, Imam Jawad (peace be upon him), at the time of his father's death was nine or seven years old. It was because of his young age that some among the Shi'is had doubts about his being the Imam. To resolve this problem some of the leading members of the community came to see Imam Jawad and asked him several difficult and complex questions. To all these the Imam was able to give sufficient and

satisfactory answers. Moreover, they also witnessed some miracles from him which removed their doubt in his being their Imam at that young age¹.

Imam Rida had appointed Imam Jawad as his successor and when he found people surprised at his designation he said: "Jesus (peace be upon him) also became a Prophet and a Proof of God at a young age²."

Imam 'Ali Naqi also became the Imam at the age of six years and five months, following his father's death³.

So, Dr. Fahimi, the Prophets and the Imams are specially created to carry out the functions assigned to them by God. Hence, it is not proper to compare them with ordinary people and their capacities.

The Gifted Children

Often among ordinary people one comes across rare individuals endowed with excellent intelligence and immense potential. In fact, they manifest unusual mental powers and faculties of perception superior to an individual of, let us say, forty years of age.

Abu 'Ali Sina, known as Avicenna to Western readers, is regarded among the geniuses of his times. In his autobiography he writes:

Later we all moved to Bukhara, where I was given teachers of Qur'an and Arabic letters (adab). By the time I was ten years old, I had completed the study of the Qur'an and a major part of Arabic letters, so much so that people wondered at my attainments. . . . Then, under the guidance of al-Natili, I began to read the Isagoge [of the Greek neoplatonist philosopher Porphyrius]Almagest [of Ptolemy]. . . . Then I took up medicine and began to read books written on this subject. Medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and in a very short time I undoubtedly excelled in it, so that physicians of merit studied under me. . . . At the same time I carried on debates and controversies in jurisprudence. At this point I was sixteen years old⁴.

It is said that Fadil Hindi had mastered all rational and traditional sciences by the age of twelve, and had begun to write a book. The list of the gifted people is long. One only has to open a history of the world to realize that a number of universally recognized individuals were endowed at a young age with uncommon intelligence and a capacity to learn and leave for posterity a wealth of knowledge in different disciplines.

Dr. Fahimi, if other children can be endowed with unique potentials and turn out to be a genius, capable of memorizing hundreds of things and a variety of subjects -- provoking wonderment in others -- why should it be inconceivable that God in His wisdom appointed the twelfth Imam, God's authentic proof who happens to be a five year old, to occupy the position of wilayat and to be the exponent and protector of God's ordinances? In fact, the Imams had predicted his attaining that high position at an

incredibly young age. Imam Baqir said: "The one who will be entrusted with the command (sahib al-'amr) will be youngest in age and less known than all of us⁵."

Rising of the People when Naming the Qa'im

Dr. Jalali: I am sure you know that it is customary among the people to rise when the word qa'im is mentioned. Is there any tradition to support this custom?

Mr. Hoshyar: This custom is common among all the Shi'is around the world. It is related that Imam Rida was present in one of the gatherings in Khurasan when the word qa'im was mentioned. At that he rose, put his right hand on his head and said: "O God, make his deliverance soon and his rising graceful!⁶"

This custom was prevalent even during the time of Imam Sadiq (peace be upon him). Somebody had asked him: "Why is it that one should rise (qiyam) when the Qa'im is mentioned?" The Imam replied:

The one who is entrusted with the command (sahib al-'amr) will have a very long occultation. Because of the utmost love that he has for his followers, whoever remembers him with his title Qa'im, which carries the meaning of awaiting his rule and conveys the impact of the longing for him, he too will show his concern for the faithful. Since the person remembering the Qa'im is also attended by him, it is appropriate to rise out of respect for him and pray to God for his early deliverance⁷.

Hence, the Shi'i custom has a religious root and reflects respect and conveys an aspiration, although whether such an act is obligatory or not is unknown.

When Did the Story about the Occultation Begin?

Dr. Fahimi: I have heard that since Imam Hasan 'Askari died without leaving a son, some opportunistic people like 'Uthman b. Sa'id, fabricated the story about the occultation of the Mahdi in order to preserve their own position in the community.

Mr. Hoshyar: The Prophet and the Imams had long before that informed the people about the impending occultation of the Mahdi. Thus, for instance, the Prophet is reported to have said:

I swear by the One Who prompted me to give you the good news that the Qa'im among my descendants, in accordance with the covenant that reaches him from me, will disappear. [The situation will be such] that most of the people will say: "God does not need the progeny of Muhammad." Others will doubt his very birth. Whoever lives during [this period of occultation] should cling to his faith and not let the Satan approach him through the channel of doubt and cause him to abandon my religion, just as he had caused your parents [Adam and Eve], to be thrown out of Paradise. Undoubtedly, God has made Satan friend of those who do not believe⁸.

Asbagh b. Nubata relates the occasion when Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali b. Abi Talib remembered the Qa'im and said: "Be aware that he will disappear in such a way that an ignorant person will say: 'God does not need the progeny of Muhammad9."

Imam Sadiq advised his followers saying: "If you hear the story about your Imam's occultation, do not deny it10." There are some 88 hadith-reports on this subject.

It was because of these traditions that Muslims regarded the occultation necessary for the Qa'im. It was considered to be one of his characteristics. In fact, anyone who claimed to be the promised Mahdi or was fancied to be so was necessarily believed by his supporters to be in occultation. Abu al-Faraj Isfahani, in his description of one of such claimants, writes: "'Isa b. 'Abd Allah reports that Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah b. Hasan [b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib] lived in concealment from the very early childhood and was named Mahdi11."

Sayyid Muhammad Himyari, the well known poet during the Umayyad period, relates that he used to hold exaggerated beliefs about Muhammad b. Hanafiyya, including the belief that he was in occultation. For a long time he held such erroneous beliefs until that time, as he says, God favored him and he was saved from them by Imam Sadiq's right guidance. The event is described thus by him:

When I was fully convinced about the Imamate of Ja'far b. Muhammad [Sadiq] through well demonstrated proof, I went to see him one day and asked him: "O son of the Prophet, there are traditions about the occurrence of occultation that have reached us from your forefathers which regard occultation among the definite things. Would you kindly inform me as to whom these traditions speak?" The Imam replied: "This occultation will occur for the sixth of my descendants. He is the twelfth Imam after the Prophet, of whom the first is 'Ali b. Abi Talib and the last is the Qa'im, Baqiyyat Allah (the Remnant of God), and the Master of the Age. I solemnly declare that even if his occultation lasts for as long as the age of Noah, he will not leave this world until he rises and fills it with justice and equity."

Sayyid Himyari adds:

When I heard this from my master Ja'far b. Muhammad the truth became evident for me. I apologized to him for the erroneous belief that I held before that and composed a poem on the subject12.

Hence, the story of occultation of the Mahdi was not invented by 'Uthman b. Sa'id. It was God who foreordained it for him, and the Prophet and the Imams had informed the people about it before his father Imam Hasan 'Askari was born. Tabarsi, in his book on the history of the Prophet and the Imams entitled, *l'lam al-wara*, writes:

The traditions about the ghaybat of the twelfth Imam were in circulation before his, his father's, and his grandfather's birth. They were recorded and cited by the Shi'i traditionists who lived during the time of Imams Baqir and Sadiq. Among these highly trusted traditionists is Hasan b. Mahbub. He wrote a book entitled *Mashikha* a century before the occultation of the twelfth Imam in which he recorded traditions

about the occultation. One of the traditions published in this book included the following hadith reported from Abu Basir, who relates:

I asked Imam Sadiq: "Abu Ja'far [Imam Baqir] said, 'The Qa'im among the descendants of Muhammad will have two occultations, one long and the other short.'" Hearing this Imam Sadiq said, "Yes, that is so. One of the two occultations will be longer."

Tabarsi then draws his conclusion and writes:

Do you see how with the materialization of the two occultations for Imam Hasan 'Askari's son the prediction in the hadith came to be true¹³?

Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Ja'far Nu'mani was born during the Short Occultation (ghaybat-i sughra), and when he wrote his book on Ghayba the twelfth Imam was eighty and some years old. He writes the following on page 6:

The Imams had foretold the occurrence of the occultation. If the occultation had not occurred, this very point would have become the source of falsification of the belief of the Shi'a Imamiyya (i.e., the Twelvers). But God manifested the truthfulness of the Imams' predictions by means of causing the Imam to go into occultation.

The Books on the Subject of the Occultation before the Birth of the Twelfth Imam

The story of the Mahdi and the twelfth Imam's occultation was told by the Prophet, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and the rest of the Imams from the very early days of Islam. It was well known among the early companions to the extent that some scholars and narrators of hadith-reports, including the close associates of the Imams, had written books on the subject long before the twelfth Imam or his father and grandfather were born. In these books the hadith about the promised Mahdi and his occultation were recorded. The names of these authors and the titles of their works are preserved in the biographical dictionaries (kutub al-rijal). Thus, for instance:

(1) 'Ali b. Hasan b. Muhammad Ta'i, a companion of Imam Kazim, wrote a book on ghaybat. He was a jurist and was regarded as reliable in his transmission of hadith¹⁴.

(2) 'Ali b. 'Umar A'raj Kufi, a companion of Imam Kazim, wrote a book on ghaybat¹⁵.

(3) Ibrahim b. Salih Anmati, a companion of Imam Kazim, wrote a book on ghaybat¹⁶.

(4) Hasan b. 'Ali b. Abi Hamza, who lived during the time of Imam Rida, was also an author of a book on ghaybat¹⁷.

(5) 'Abbas b. Hisham Nashiri Asadi was a prominent figure and a reputable person. He was among the companions of Imam Rida. He died in the year 220 AH/835 CE. He also wrote a book on ghaybat¹⁸.

(6) 'Ali b. Hasan b. Faddal was a learned man and reliable in his transmission of religious information. He was among the companions of Imams Hadi and Hasan 'Askari. He wrote a book on ghaybat¹⁹.

(7) Fadl b. Shadhan Nishaburi was among the jurists and theologians. He was among the companions of Imams Hadi and Hasan 'Askari. He died in the year 260 AH/873 CE. He wrote a book on the subject of the Qa'im of the Family of Muhammad and his ghaybat²⁰.

It is important to keep in mind that the story about ghaybat is not something new in Islam. It has deep religious roots and was always discussed and debated from the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny). Consequently, the possibility that a person like 'Uthman b. Sa'id invented and disseminated it is absolutely unfounded. Such an accusation cannot come about from any one other than a prejudiced individual. Moreover, if we append the following three propositions together, then the matter of the occultation of the Imam of the Age becomes certain:

(a) On the basis of rational demonstration as well as numerous hadith-reports related from the Prophet and the Imams, it is certain that the existence of the Imam and the Proof of God on earth is necessary for the survival of humanity. Therefore, there is no time when the earth could be without the Imam.

(b) On the basis of numerous hadith-reports, there can be no more than twelve Imams.

(c) On the basis of many reports, both in the books on hadith and history, it is a fact that eleven of these twelve Imams have lived and died.

These three propositions make it necessary to conclude that the existence of the Imam Mahdi is beyond any doubt, and that since he does not live a visible existence, he must be in occultation.

The Short and Complete Occultation²⁰³

Dr. Jalali: What is the meaning of 'short' and 'complete' occultation?

Mr. Hoshyar: It means that the twelfth Imam (peace be upon him) remained concealed from the public at two different times. The first period extends from the time of his birth in 255 or 256 AH/868 or 869 CE or from the time of his father, Imam Hasan 'Askari's death in 260 AH/873 CE, to the year 329 AH/940 CE. During this time, although he lived an invisible existence as far as the public was concerned, he was not completely cut off from them. Rather, he maintained regular contact with his followers through his deputies, who were able to reach him and present to him their needs and inquiries. The existence of the Imam during this period that lasted some 74 or 69 years is known as ghaybat-i sughra.

The second period extends from the year 329/940, with the termination of the deputyship of his

prominent and trustworthy associates, to the time when he will emerge from the state of the occultation to lead humanity to establish the rule of justice and equity on earth. This period of occultation is known as ghaybat-i kubra.

Both the Prophet and the Imams (peace be upon them) had informed people about the two forms of occultation for the Mahdi. Thus, for instance, Ishaq b. 'Ammar relates a hadith he heard from Imam Sadiq:

The Qa'im will have two forms of occultation: one long and the other short. During the first occultation his special followers will know his whereabouts; during the second occultation, except for a few very special followers of his in his religion, no one will have any information about his whereabouts. 21

In another tradition Imam Sadiq said:

The one who is entrusted with the command (sahib al-'amr) will have two forms of occultation. One of them will be so long that a group of the people will say that he has died; others will say he has been killed; still others will say he has disappeared. Very few will remain who will still have faith in his existence, and will continue to be steadfast. At this time no one will have any information about his whereabouts except his very few followers²².

The Short Occultation and the Contacts with the Shi'a

Dr. Fahimi: I have heard that after the short occultation began, there were some charlatans who, taking advantage of the ignorance of the ignorant masses, claimed to be the deputies and 'gates' (bab = 'mediator' between the Imam and his followers) of the Hidden Imam. They cheated the people and pocketed a lot of their wealth. Could you take some time to explain who exactly these deputies were and what kind of contact and relationship there was between the Imam and his followers, and in what form?

Mr. Hoshyar: During the short occultation people in general were deprived of a more normal contact with the Imam. However, the relationship was not completely severed. It was maintained through some special individuals known as bab ('mediator'), na'ib ('deputy'), and wakil ('representative'). It was through these individuals that the people established contact with their Imam, asking questions of him and seeking his assistance in their affairs. The share of the Imam from the khums (the 'fifth') was delivered to the Imam through his deputy. Sometimes, they used to ask for material help from the Imam; at other times they used to seek permission to go for hajj or other kinds of travel; still at other times they would ask the Imam to pray for their sick or to pray for a child for them.

The Imam used to respond to these requests through different individuals who represented him among them in different parts of the Muslim world. In the performance of all these tasks there were specific individuals who executed the will of the Imam. There were times when the requests were made in letters to the Imam and, accordingly, he would respond in writing. These 'signed notes' from him were known as

tawqi'.

Were these Letters from the Imam in His Own Handwriting?

Dr. Jalali: Who wrote these letters? Was it the Imam himself or someone else?

Mr. Hoshyar: It is said that the Imam himself wrote these letters or notes. In fact, his handwriting was well known among his associates and the contemporary scholars. They used to recognize it well. There is some evidence to that effect in the sources. For instance, Muhammad b. 'Uthman 'Amri says: "A signed note was issued from the Imam and the handwriting was well known to me²³."

Ishaq b. Ya'qub relates that he had sent a letter asking questions to the twelfth Imam through Muhammad b. 'Uthman. He received the reply in the Imam's own handwriting²⁴.

Shaykh Abu 'Amr 'Amiri relates: Ibn Abi Ghanim Qazwini had a dispute on a matter with a group of the Shi'is. For resolving it they wrote a letter to the Imam explaining the matter. The response came from the Imam in his own handwriting²⁵. According to Shaykh Saduq, the letter that his father had received from the Imam was in his possession²⁶.

These aforementioned individuals have borne the testimony that the letters they received or were in their possession were from the Imam himself, in his own handwriting. However, we do not know the way they determined that it was the Imam's handwriting. The reason is that with the occultation it was not possible to see the Imam. In addition, there were some who reported contrary to what these aforementioned individuals were claiming. For example, Abu Nasr Hibat Allah relates that the signed notes were issued by 'Uthman b. Sa'id and Muhammad b. 'Uthman, in the same handwriting that was used during the time of Imam Hasan 'Askari²⁷.

In another report the same person relates that Abu Ja'far 'Amri died in the year 304 AH/916 CE. He had been the deputy of the Imam for over fifty years. People used to bring their donations to him and signed notes were issued to them in the same hand writing as during the time of Imam Hasan 'Askari²⁸. In yet another report he says that the signed notes of the Imam were issued by Muhammad b. 'Uthman, in the same handwriting as they were issued during the time of his father, 'Uthman b. Sa'id²⁹.

'Abd Allah b. Ja'far Himyari relates: "When 'Uthman b. Sa'id died, the signed notes of the Imam of the Age were issued in the same handwriting in which we used to receive earlier letters³⁰."

On the basis of all these reports it can be surmised that the notes that were received by the people during 'Uthman b. Sa'id and Muhammad b. 'Uthman's time were in the same handwriting as those that were received during the time of Imam Hasan 'Askari. Thus, these could not be in the handwriting of the twelfth Imam. Rather, it can be maintained that Imam Hasan 'Askari had a special scribe who was in charge of writing the letters and who continued to do so also under these two deputies, namely, 'Uthman and his son Muhammad. It is also plausible to maintain that some of these letters were dictated directly

by the Imam, whereas others were dictated by someone other than him. However, it is important to state that from the evidence provided in the biographies of the Shi'i scholars living during the short occultation, the contents of these letters were trusted by the Shi'is, were regarded as coming from the Imam himself, and were accepted as authentic. They used to write to the Imam about their points of dispute. And, when the response came for them, they used to submit to his judgement.

'Ali b. Husayn b. Babawayh corresponded with the Imam in occultation and requested him to pray for a son for him. To be sure, he received a response from the Imam.

One of the prominent scholars who was born during the short occultation and had been in touch with the deputies of the Imam was Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Jafar Nu'mani. In his book entitled Ghayba he confirmed the deputyship of some prominent associates of the eleventh and twelfth Imams. After relating some hadith on the subject of the ghaybat, he writes:

During the first occultation there were the mediators between the Imam and the people, carrying out [the duties of the Imam], having been designated [by him], living among the people. These were the eminent persons and leaders from whose hands emanated cures derived from the knowledge and the intricate wisdom which they possessed, and the answers to all the questions which were put to them about the problems and difficulties [of religion]. This was the short occultation, the days of which have come to an end and whose time has gone by. Now it is the time of the complete occultation³¹.

It appears that the signed notes received from the Imam served as special signs and documentation which the Shi'is and their scholars accepted. Shaykh Hurr 'Amili writes:

Ibn Abi Ghanim Qazwini used to argue with the Shi'is on the matter of the successor to the Imamate. He used to say: "Imam Hasan 'Askari had no son." The people wrote to the Imam. Their custom was to write on a white sheet with a pen without ink so that it would serve as a sign of miracle. To this they received the answer from the Imam (peace be upon him)³².

The Number of Deputies

There is difference of opinion regarding the number of deputies of the twelfth Imam. Sayyid Ibn Tawus in his book entitled Rab'i al-shi'a has mentioned their names as follows:

- (1) Abu Hashim Dawud b. al-Qasim
- (2) Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Bilal
- (3) 'Uthman b. Sa'id
- (4) Muhammad b. 'Uthman
- (5) 'Umar al-Ahwazi

(6) Ahmad b. Ishaq

(7) Abu Muhammad al-Wajna'

(8) Ibrahim b. Mahziyar

(9) Muhammad b. Ibrahim³³

Shaykh Tusi introduces the names of the deputies of the Imam as follows:

From Baghdad 'Uthman b. Sa'id and his son Muhammad b. 'Uthman, Hajiz, Bilali, and 'Attar; from Kufa 'Asimi; from Ahwaz Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Mahziyar; from Qumm Ahmad b. Ishaq; from Hamadan Muhammad b. Salih; from Rayy Shami and Asadi; from Azerbaijan Qasim b. 'Ala'; and from Nishabur Muhammad b. Shadhan³⁴.

However, the deputyship of the four prominent members of the community is famous among the Shi'is. These are:

(1) 'Uthman b. Sa'id 'Amri (260 AH/874 CE)

(2) Muhammad b. 'Uthman 'Amri (d. 304 AH/916 CE)

(3) Husayn b. Ruh Nawbakhti (d. 326 AH/937 CE)

(4) 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Samarri (d. 329/940 CE)

'Uthman b. Sa'id, the First Deputy

He was among the most trustworthy and eminent companions of Imam Hasan 'Askari and was his representative among the Shi'a. According to Bu 'Ali and Mamqani, "'Uthman b. Sa'id was thoroughly reliable and highly respected because of his impeccable character. He served as the agent of the Imam Hadi, Imam Hasan 'Askari, and Imam Qa'im (peace be upon them)³⁵." Such an opinion of him was universally held by all other authors of biographical dictionaries. Thus, 'Allama Bihbahani, in addition to praising 'Uthman, says that he was actually accredited by the Imams Hadi and Hasan 'Askari³⁶.

Ahmad b. Ishaq relates the incident in which he asked the tenth Imam Hadi regarding the person with whom the Shi'a should deal and whose guidance they should accept as coming from the Imams. The Imam said: "'Uthman b. Sa'id is my trusted agent. If he relates something for you then he is telling the truth. Listen to him and obey him because I trust him." When Imam Hasan 'Askari was asked a similar question he mentioned both 'Uthman and his son Muhammad as his trusted agents. Moreover, he also required his followers to listen to and obey Uthman. These reports were so widespread among the companions of the last Imams that they became the source of the respect and trust with which 'Uthman b. Sa'id was held³⁷.

On one occasion Muhammad b. Isma'il and 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah came to Samarra to visit Imam Hasan 'Askari. There was a group of Shi'a visiting the Imam at that time. Suddenly, the servant came and announced that a group of villagers, shabbily dressed, were seeking permission to enter the presence of the Imam. The Imam said: "They are Shi'a from the Yemen." Then he told the servant to ask 'Uthman to be prepared for the visitors. Within a short while 'Uthman was ready. The Imam said to him: "'Uthman, you are our trusted agent. Receive the goods this group has brought." This elevation of 'Uthman, according to the narrators of the report, was done in order to let the Shi'a know the status of 'Uthman. In fact, towards the end of that visit Imam Hasan 'Askari declared to the group saying: "Let it be known to you that 'Uthman b. Sa'id is my agent and his son will be the agent of my son Mahdi³⁸."

Imam Hasan 'Askari revealed his son to the group of forty people among his followers, including 'Ali b. Bilal, Ahmad b. Hilal, Muhammad b. Mu'awiya, and Hasan b. Ayyub and said: "This is your Imam and my successor. Obey him! Know that after this time for a while you will not see him. Listen to what 'Uthman b. Sa'id says and follow his instructions because he [Uthman] is the successor of your Imam. The management of the affairs of our people will be in his hands³⁹."

His Miraculous Acts

In addition to these favorable statements from the Imams accrediting 'Uthman b. Sa'id, there are miraculous acts (karamat) ascribed to him. These acts actually provide further evidence to bolster the truthfulness of his statements. For instance, Shaykh Tusi in his Kitab al-Ghayba, relates the following story from a number of persons belonging to Nawbakht family, including Abu al-Hasan Kathiri:

A person brought some goods [belonging to the twelfth Imam] from Qumm and the vicinity to 'Uthman b. Sa'id. When the person wanted to leave 'Uthman b. Sa'id said: "You have been entrusted with something else too. Why have you not delivered it?" The person said: "There is nothing else left." 'Uthman b. Sa'id told him to go back and search for it. After a few days of searching the person returned to report that he had not found anything on him. At that 'Uthman b. Sa'id asked him: "What happened to the two pieces of cloth that were handed to you by so and so?" The person said: "By God, you are right. But I have forgotten about them, and now I do not know where they are."

Once more he returned to his place and searched for the material, but could not find it. He came and told 'Uthman b. Sa'id about that. 'Uthman said: "Go to so and so, the cotton seller, to whom you delivered two bundles of cotton. Open the bundle on which such and such is written. You will find that entrusted material in it." The man went and did what 'Uthman b. Sa'id had asked him to do. He found the material and brought it to him⁴⁰.

Muhammad b. 'Ali Aswad, another agent of the Imam, was given a piece of cloth by a woman for 'Uthman b. Sa'id. He took it with some other clothes to 'Uthman. 'Uthman asked him to hand it to Muhammad b. 'Abbas Qummi. He did so. After that 'Uthman b. Sa'id sent him a message which said: "Why have you not delivered the cloth given by the woman?" Muhammad b. 'Ali Aswad remembered the cloth and searched for it until he delivered it to him⁴¹.

Shaykh Saduq has narrated another incident in his Kamal al-din. He writes:

A man from Iraq brought the Imam's share (sahm imam) to 'Uthman b. Sa'id. 'Uthman returned the money and said: "Deduct from it that which you owe to your cousins." The man was surprised to hear that. When he investigated his goods he found that he owed part of the agricultural land to his cousins, which he had not returned. On careful calculation he found that the land was equivalent to four hundred dirhams. Thus, he deducted that from his goods and took the remaining portion to 'Uthman b. Sa'id. This time it was accepted from him⁴².

After all these reports about 'Uthman b. Sa'id's honesty and trustworthiness, the respect with which he was held by the tenth and eleventh Imams, and the consensus among the Shi'a about his moral probity and sound character, is it fair to assume that he was a manipulative individual, intent upon deceiving the generality of the Shi'is?

'Uthman b. Sa'id, the First Deputy

He was among the most trustworthy and eminent companions of Imam Hasan 'Askari and was his representative among the Shi'a. According to Bu 'Ali and Mamqani, "Uthman b. Sa'id was thoroughly reliable and highly respected because of his impeccable character. He served as the agent of the Imam Hadi, Imam Hasan 'Askari, and Imam Qa'im (peace be upon them)."[36] Such an opinion of him was universally held by all other authors of biographical dictionaries. Thus, 'Allama Bihbahani, in addition to praising 'Uthman, says that he was actually accredited by the Imams Hadi and Hasan 'Askari.[37]

Ahmad b. Ishaq relates the incident in which he asked the tenth Imam Hadi regarding the person with whom the Shi'a should deal and whose guidance they should accept as coming from the Imams. The Imam said: "Uthman b. Sa'id is my trusted agent. If he relates something for you then he is telling the truth. Listen to him and obey him because I trust him." When Imam Hasan 'Askari was asked a similar question he mentioned both 'Uthman and his son Muhammad as his trusted agents. Moreover, he also required his followers to listen to and obey Uthman. These reports were so widespread among the companions of the last Imams that they became the source of the respect and trust with which 'Uthman b. Sa'id was held.[38]

On one occasion Muhammad b. Isma'il and 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah came to Samarra to visit Imam Hasan 'Askari. There was a group of Shi'a visiting the Imam at that time. Suddenly, the servant came and announced that a group of villagers, shabbily dressed, were seeking permission to enter the presence of the Imam. The Imam said: "They are Shi'a from the Yemen." Then he told the servant to ask 'Uthman to be prepared for the visitors. Within a short while 'Uthman was ready. The Imam said to him: "Uthman, you are our trusted agent. Receive the goods this group has brought." This elevation of 'Uthman, according to the narrators of the report, was done in order to let the Shi'a know the status of 'Uthman. In fact, towards the end of that visit Imam Hasan 'Askari declared to the group saying: "Let it be known to you that 'Uthman b. Sa'id is my agent and his son will be the agent of my son Mahdi."[39]

Imam Hasan 'Askari revealed his son to the group of forty people among his followers, including 'Ali b. Bilal, Ahmad b. Hilal, Muhammad b. Mu'awiya, and Hasan b. Ayyub and said: "This is your Imam and my successor. Obey him! Know that after this time for a while you will not see him. Listen to what 'Uthman b. Sa'id says and follow his instructions because he [Uthman] is the successor of your Imam. The management of the affairs of our people will be in his hands." [40]

His Miraculous Acts

In addition to these favorable statements from the Imams accrediting 'Uthman b. Sa'id, there are miraculous acts (*karamat*) ascribed to him. These acts actually provide further evidence to bolster the truthfulness of his statements. For instance, Shaykh Tusi in his *Kitab al-Ghayba*, relates the following story from a number of persons belonging to Nawbakht family, including Abu al-Hasan Kathiri:

A person brought some goods [belonging to the twelfth Imam] from Qumm and the vicinity to 'Uthman b. Sa'id. When the person wanted to leave 'Uthman b. Sa'id said: "You have been entrusted with something else too. Why have you not delivered it?" The person said: "There is nothing else left." 'Uthman b. Sa'id told him to go back and search for it. After a few days of searching the person returned to report that he had not found anything on him. At that 'Uthman b. Sa'id asked him: "What happened to the two pieces of cloth that were handed to you by so and so?" The person said: "By God, you are right. But I have forgotten about them, and now I do not know where they are."

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Muhammad b. 'Uthman, the Second Deputy

Muhammad b. 'Uthman succeeded his father, 'Uthman b. Sa'id, as the deputy after the latter's death in 260 AH/874 CE. Shaykh Tusi, commenting on both these deputies of the Hidden Imam (peace be upon him), writes that "they enjoyed the highest esteem in the eyes of the Master of the Age⁴³."

According to Mamqani, the high status of Muhammad b. 'Uthman among the Shi'is is self-evident. They are in agreement that during the lifetime of his father he was the deputy of Imam Hasan 'Askari, and later on he became the deputy of the twelfth Imam. In fact, 'Uthman b. Sa'id explicitly appointed Muhammad b. 'Uthman as his successor and the deputy of the Hidden Imam⁴⁴.

Ya'qub b. Ishaq, a prominent follower of the Imams in Samarra, relates:

I wrote a letter to the Imam of the Age through Muhammad b. 'Uthman in which I asked some questions about religious problems. The reply came in the Imam's own handwriting. In addition to the responses to my inquiries it included the statement: "Muhammad b. 'Uthman is the trusted one. His letters are my letters⁴⁵."

His Miraculous Acts

Muhammad b. Shadhan, a close companion of Imam Hasan 'Askari, relates that he had four hundred and eighty dirhams that belonged to the Imam (peace be upon him). Since he did not like to send without rounding the figure to five hundred, he added twenty dirhams from his money and sent it to Muhammad b. 'Uthman, without writing to him that he had added that amount. A receipt came from the Imam in which it was written: "We received five hundred dirhams, which included twenty dirhams from you⁴⁶."

A similar story is reported by Ja'far b. Ahmad b. Matil. Muhammad b. 'Uthman sent a message calling him to visit. When Ja'far came Muhammad b. 'Uthman gave him some pieces of cloth and a bag of dirhams, and asked him to go to Wasit. There he asked him to hand the bag and cloth to the first person he would meet. When Ja'far reached Wasit the first person he met was Hasan b. Muhammad b. Qatah. He introduced himself to Hasan who recognized him and they embraced each other. He related to him Muhammad b. 'Uthman's greetings and handed over to him the goods he had brought. When Hasan heard this he thanked God and said: "Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah 'Amiri has died. I left the house to get a shroud for him." Upon opening the goods that were sent by Muhammad b. 'Uthman they found everything they needed to prepare for 'Amiri's burial. Even the money was exactly the amount that was

needed to cover the expenses related to the funeral. Hence, they went ahead and buried 'Amiri⁴⁷.

According to another eminent follower of the Imams, namely, Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Aswad Qummi, Muhammad b. 'Uthman had prepared his burial place while still alive. He asked him for the reason. In response Muhammad b. 'Uthman said: "I have been ordered by the Imam to take care of my affairs in advance." Two months following this event Muhammad b. 'Uthman died⁴⁸.

Muhammad b. 'Uthman remained the Hidden Imam's deputy for almost fifty years and died in the year 304 AH/916 CE.

Husayn b. Ruh, the Third Deputy

The third deputy of the Imam of the Age (peace be upon him), was the most learned and astute leader of his time. Muhammad b. 'Uthman had himself designated him as his successor and deputy of the Imam.

'Allama Majlisi, in his *Bihar al-anwar*, writes:

When Muhammad b. 'Uthman became seriously ill, a group of prominent Shi'is like Abu 'Ali b. Humam, Abu 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad Katib, Abu 'Abd Allah Baqtani, Abu Sahl Nawbakhti, and Abu 'Abd Allah b. Wajna' came to see him. They asked him about his successor. In reply he said: "Husayn b. Ruh is my successor and the trusted deputy of the Master of the Age. Refer to him in your affairs. I have been commanded by the Imam to designate Husayn b. Ruh in the position of deputyship⁴⁹."

Ja'far b. Muhammad Mada'ini relates that he used to carry the goods that belonged to the Imam to Muhammad b. 'Uthman. One day he took four hundred dinars to him. Muhammad b. 'Uthman asked him to deposit it with Husayn b. Ruh and so Ja'far asked him the reason he did not accept it himself. Muhammad b. 'Uthman said: "Take it to Husayn b. Ruh. You should know that I have appointed him as my successor." Ja'far went on to ask if he had done so under instructions from the Imam. He replied: "Yes." Hence, Ja'far took the money to Husayn b. Ruh and from this time on he deposited the Imam's share with the latter⁵⁰.

Among the companions and close associates of Muhammad b. 'Uthman there were a number of people, such as Ja'far b. Ahmad b. Matil, who held much higher position in merits than Husayn b. Ruh. In fact, many thought that the deputyship would be given to Ja'far Matil. However, contrary to the generally held expectation, it was Husayn b. Ruh who became the next deputy. Everyone at that point submitted to Muhammad b. 'Uthman's decision, including Ja'far Matil⁵¹. Abu Sahl Nawbakhti was asked about this decision:

"How did Husayn b. Ruh get appointed to the position of deputyship, when you were more qualified to assume it?" In response he said: "The Imam knows better about the person who can represent him. I am always in debate with our opponents. If I were the deputy, maybe at the time of heated debate, in order to prove my point, I would have revealed the Imam's whereabouts. But Husayn b. Ruh is not like me. If

he had the Imam hidden under his garments, and if he were being cut to pieces, he would not expose him to anyone⁵²."

Shaykh Saduq relates the circumstances that led his father to write a letter to the Imam and ask him to pray for a son for him. According to this report, it was Muhammad b. 'Ali Aswad who related that Shaykh Saduq's father, 'Ali b. Husyan b. Babawayh, sent a message through him to Husyan b. Ruh to ask the Imam to pray for a son for him. That message was delivered to Husayn b. Ruh. After three days he informed Muhammad Aswad that the Imam had prayed for him and that in the near future God would favor him with a son.

That very year Muhammad, that is Shaykh Saduq, was born. After that several other sons were born. But it was Shaykh Saduq who used to pride himself on having been born through the special prayer of the Imam. In fact, whenever Muhammad Aswad saw Shaykh Saduq in the learning sessions with prominent teachers, studying extremely well, he would say: "It is not surprising to see you studying so well. After all you were born through the prayer of the Imam of the Age!⁵³"

There was a man who had doubts about the deputyship of Husayn b. Ruh. For clarification of his doubt he wrote a letter to the Imam with a dry pen without ink. After a few days he received a reply from the Hidden Imam (peace be upon him) through Husayn b. Ruh.

Husayn b. Ruh died in the month of Sha'ban, in the year 326 AH/937 CE⁵⁴.

'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri, the Fourth Deputy

He was the fourth deputy of the Hidden Imam (peace be upon him). His full name was Abu al-Hasan 'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri. According to Ibn Tawus, he had served under the Imam Hadi and Imam Hasan 'Askari. These two Imams were, moreover, in correspondence with him and had written a number of signed notes for him. He was undoubtedly among the most eminent faces of the Shi'a in Baghdad⁵⁵. Husayn b. Ruh, as reported by Ahmad b. Muhammad Safwani, had appointed 'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri in his place so that he could manage his affairs. When his death approached, a number of Shi'is came to see him and asked him about his successor. His response was that he had not been asked to appoint anyone to that position⁵⁶.

It is related by Ahmad b. Ibrahim Mukhallad that one day 'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri, without any indication, said: "May God have mercy on 'Ali b. Muhammad b. Babawayh Qummi!" Those present at that time made note of the date of this pronouncement. Later the news came that 'Ali b. Babawayh had died on the same day. He himself died in the year 329 AH/941 CE⁵⁷.

Hasan b. Ahmad relates that he was with 'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri some days before he died. A letter came from the Imam which he read for the people. The contents were as follows:

In the name of God. O 'Ali b. Muhammad Samarri, may God reward your brethren in your death, which is

going to take place in six days' time. So take care of your affairs and do not appoint anyone in your place, since the complete occultation has taken place. I will not appear until God permits me to do so (may His name be exalted) and that will be after a long time and after the hearts become hard and the earth is filled with wickedness. In the near future there will be those among my followers who will claim to have seen me. Beware, those who claim this before the rise of Sufyani and the [hearing of the] voice from the sky are liars.⁵⁸

This was the end of the Short Occultation and the beginning of the Complete Occultation. The deputyship of these four prominent members of the Shi'a community is famous among the believers. There were also some individuals who made false claims about being deputized by the Hidden Imam (peace be upon him). Since they could not prove their claim their falsehood became manifest and they were discredited in the community. Among this latter group were Hasan Shari'ati, Muhammad b. Nusayr Numayri, Ahmad b. Hilal Karakhi, Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Bilal, Muhammad b. 'Ali Shalmaghani, and Abu Bakr Baghdadi.

This was, in brief, the account of the special deputies. From all the sources that speak about them it is reasonable to assert that their claim to be the deputy of the Hidden Imam was defensible. There is no rational ground to doubt that they truly held that kind of highly esteemed position in the Shi'a community in the ninth–tenth century.

Dr. Fahimi: I had many more questions in this connection. However, I shall postpone asking them now, since it is getting quite late. Let us raise these questions when we meet next time.

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1. *Ithbat al-wasiyya*, pp. 186–89
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 185
 3. *Ibn Shahr Ashub, Manaqib*, Vol. 4, p. 397; *Ithbat al-wasiyya*, p. 194
 4. *Ibn al-Qifti, Ta'rikh al-hukama'*, pp. 413–417
 5. *Bihar al-anwar*, Vol. 51, p. 38
 6. *Ilzam al-nasib* (1351 AH edition), p. 81
 7. *Ibid*
 8. *Ithbat al-hudat*, Vol. 6, p. 386
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 393
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 350
 11. *Maqatil al-talibiyyin*, p. 165
 12. *Kamal al-din*, Vol. 1, pp. 112–115
 13. *l'lam al-wara* (Tehran edition, 1378 AH), p. 416
 14. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 77; *Rijal Tusi*, p. 357; *Fihrist Tusi*, p. 92
 15. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 79
 16. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 86; *Fihrist Tusi*, p. 3
 17. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 132; *Fihrist Tusi*, p. 50
 18. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 119; *Rijal Tusi*, p. 384; *Fihrist Tusi*, p. 147
 19. *Rijal Najashi*, Vol. 2, p. 119; *Rijal Tusi*, p. 384; *Fihrist Tusi*, p. 147

20. Rijal Najashi, Vol. 2, p. 167; Rijal Tusi, p. 420 and 434; Fihrist Tusi, p. 150
21. Ithbat al-hudat, Vol. 7, p. 69; Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 52, p. 155
22. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 52, p. 153. There are eight more traditions on this subject
23. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 33
24. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 349
25. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 53, p. 178
26. Anwar al-nu'maniyya (Tabriz edition), Vol. 2, p. 24
27. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 346
28. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 352
29. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 306
30. Ibid., Vol. 51, p. 350
31. Kitab al-ghayba, p. 91
32. Ithbat al-hudat, Vol. 7, p. 360
33. Rijal Bu 'Ali, p. 302
34. Rijal Mamqani (Najaf edition, 1352 AH), Vol. 1, p. 200; Ithbat al-hudat, Vol. 7, p. 294
35. Rijal Bu 'Ali, p. 200; Rijal Mamqani, Vol. 2, p. 245
36. Minhaj al-maqal (Tehran edition, 1307 AH), p. 219
37. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 348
38. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 346
39. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 346
40. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 316
41. Ibid., p. 335
42. Ibid., p. 335
43. Manhaj al-maqal, p. 305; Rijal Mamqani, Vol. 3, p. 149
44. Rijal Mamqani, Vol. 3, p. 149 and Vol. 1, p. 200
45. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 325
46. Ibid., p. 325
47. Ibid., p. 337
48. Ibid., p. 352
49. Ibid., p. 355
50. Ibid., p. 352
51. Ibid., p. 353
52. Ibid., p. 359
53. Kamal al-din, Vol. 2, p. 502-503
54. Ithbat al-hudat, Vol. 7, p. 340
55. Rijal Mamqani, Vol. 2, p. 304
56. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 360
57. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 51, p. 360
58. Ibid., p. 361

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