

Introduction

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-‘Askari is the Twelfth Imam of the "Imamates" or "Twelve-Imam Shi'ites", *al-Ithna Ashariyya*, who form the second largest denomination in Islam after the Sunnis. He appears to have been born in 256 A.H./869 A.D. Four years later, after the death of his father al-‘Askari, the eleventh Imam, he was hidden from the authorities of the ‘Abbasid caliphs as a precaution.

His whereabouts were disclosed only to a very few of his followers. Four of his father's close associates became successive mediators between the Imam and his followers until the year 329/941.

This period has been considered by the Imamites as the first or the short occultation (*al-Ghayba*) of the Twelfth Imam. During it the four *Saf'irs* directly supervised the underground religious and political activities of the Imamites.

The last *Saf'ir* announced on his death-bed in 329/941 that the Twelfth Imam had decided not to appoint another *Saf'ir* and had entered into total occultation. The Imamites considered this declaration the beginning of the Twelfth Imam's second occultation, which has continued until the present time.

Because of the second occultation the series of Imams stopped at the number twelve. Accordingly the Imamites believe that the Twelfth Imam is *al-Qa'im* ("he who will rise"), whose rising was promised by the Prophet. For the Prophet is said to have predicted that a descendant of his daughter Fatima would rise with the sword and fill the world with justice and equity. For this reason the Imamites believe that he is still alive, but in a state of occultation until the moment of his rising at an unspecified time in the future.

Since the first half of the fourth/tenth century many scholars have examined the occultation of the Twelfth Imam purely from the theological point of view, even though this event appears to have been historical. However, because of the close connection between the occultation and the Imamate (*al-Imama*) or the religious and political leadership, it became involved with Shi'ite theological discussions and gradually its historical aspects came to be ignored.

Thus modern scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, Margoliouth, Snouck Hurgronje and Darmesteter were inclined to study the occultation of the Twelfth Imam as a theological phenomenon and tried to trace its pre-Islamic origins.

The present inquiry is an attempt to study the historical background and circumstances of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam. The Imamites had political ambitions to obtain political power under the leadership of an Imam called *al-Qa'im bi-l-sayf* (the one who will rise with the sword). This study tries to examine the role of these ambitions in his occultation and to trace as well the evolution of the underground Imamite organization (*al-Wikala*) and its role during the time of the Twelfth Imam's short occultation.

It is essential to make a survey of the main sources of this study so that the viewpoint of each of them can be understood and the information they contain evaluated accordingly.

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