

The Age of the occultation¹

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Abstract: This article, is about the occultation of Imam Mahdi that is in two parts (short and long) and also the features of these occultation's which included : Retribution for the Ungrateful and a Test for the people .The Occultation of Imam Mahdi (p.b.u.h.) Is not a new case. Rather there have been many examples of Occultation for the previous prophets.

¹ Occultation: According to Shiite belief, Imam Mahdi lives like a normal man on the earth. He eats and sleeps normally. In some Islamic prays- narrated from our infallible Imams- we are instructed to pray the Almighty God, to preserve him from sickness. In few prays we pray for the health of his family. However, in all these circumstances, he lives unknown. His surrounding people do not know his true name. There is in some narrations that people see him but do not know him. (In our daily activities, and our passing through streets, we see many people, but as we do not have any pervious acquaintance or relation with them, we do not care and just pass along them.) In some narrations, it is repeated that when Imam Mahdi WILL SAY: " o God, we have already seen this gentleman." so his absence or Occultation goes not mean that he does not have physical body, or does not live on the Earth.

Every year he attends the ceremony of Hajj. He may live in different places from time to time. He has very honest servants to serve him. By the permission and grace of Allah, he enjoys some special abilities and powers.

The Short occultation

*T*he Short occultation of Imam Mahdi (May God hasten his

Reappearance) began on the 9th of Rabi-ul-Awwal in the year 260 A.H. (about 860 A.D.), which coincided with the beginning of his *Imamat* (mastership). It continued until the 15th of Sha'ban of the year 329 A.H. (about 927 A.D.), around 69 years later. The fact that Imam Mahdi's Occultation consists of two stages has been mentioned by the previous infallible imams (p.b.u.h).

Zorareh narrates from Imam Sadegh (p.b.u.h.), "*Al-Qaim – Mahdi* -, has two occultation during the first stage, it is possible to reach him; and during the other, his location is unknown. At that time, he will participate in the Holy Pilgrimage and he will be able to see the people, but the people will not see him."

During the time of short occultation, the connection between Imam Mahdi and the people was held through four direct representatives, who are known as, "The Selected Representatives", "The Four Representatives", and "The Ambassadors" (*Sofaraa'*). They were:

- 1-Abu Amr, Othman-ibn-Saeid Amri
- 2-Abu Jafar, Mohammad-ibn-Othman Amri
- 3-Abu Al-Qasim, Hussein-ibn-Rooh Nobakhti
- 4-Abu Al-Hassan, Ali-ibn-Mohammad Thaimori

The Long time occultation

With the death of the fourth representative, and by the order of Imam Mahdi (P.B.U.H.), the age of the "selected representation" ended. This happened in the year 329 (A.H.), which marked the beginning of the Long Occultation , or the Complete Occultation . These two names have been picked because they indicate certain concepts of the Occultation : it shows the length of this era, and the Complete Occultation shows almost complete blocking of any kind of communication, through letter or otherwise, with the Imam (p.b.u.h.).

The Long Occultation is the most important concept of Islamic Mahdavidism, (Islamic Messiah-ship), since the time of the Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H.A.H.F.) it is known to be a very important event. Just this has caused many of the important Shi'a scholars, such as Sheikh Toosi and Shiekh No'mani to name their books on this topic: Kitab-Al-Ghaibah or the Book of the Occultation . Now by using different approaches, we take a look at the aspects of this Occultation .

A Test for the people

The World is like a farm for the Hereafter (i.e. whatever is done in this world, one will see its effects in the hereafter); and a person's life is an opportunity for hard work and to reap greater and better rewards. In fact, God has created man to test him:

﴿(Allah) is the One, who has created death and life, that He may try you mankind, and to make known which of you by comparison is best in deeds; and He is the Invincible-Mighty and Forgiving.﴾(The Holy Quran al-mursalaat :2)﴿

The human life has been structured to follow this great divine tradition of examination. Whoever cannot see the world as a competitive arena –such as a farmland, or a trade centre - cannot fully comprehend the difficulties of life, or the teachings of religion which pertain to him. The physical differences among human beings, the different degrees of blessings, and the hardships and suffering are all understandable under this concept. The humans beings, under normal conditions, are more likely to support and accept a belief. But when the conditions change so that a person must support these belief with his actions, by enduring financial strain, striving (hard work), forgiving another, or sacrificing his life, only a few will stay committed. Amir-ul-Mo'mineen (P.B.U.H.) says, “It is during the change of conditions, that the essence of the people is evaluated.”

The test of creation does not add to the knowledge of God, but it is rather to prepare the people. The final and certain victory of truth over evil, –as the holy Quran states, ‘My messengers and I will prevail’...” – requires well-experienced and well-trained warriors. Imam Sadegh once

said, "By God, you will be tested. By God, you will be examined just as the unripe grains of wheat are separated from the others." Imam Reza (P.B.U.H.) stated, "By God, what you are looking for (the Reappearance of Imam Mahdi) will not occur unless you have been tested and at least a few of you will stand firm."

Retribution for the Ungrateful

The existence of Imam is the greatest divine gift bestowed upon mankind for it is through the Imam that God has completed His religion.

❁ ***"Today, I have completed your religion for you and finished my blessings upon you." (The Holy Quran al-maaaida:3)*** ❁

The blessing of the Imam is through his guidance. Imam is a guide to the Prophet. The Prophet cautions and warns the people so that they awaken from the ignorance and thoughtlessness. Imam leads and guides the people, so that they will reach their goal. Therefore, whoever has heard the proclamation of the Prophet has awakened from ignorance, and (through the Imam) the light of guidance will help him so that evil and ignorance do not return:

❁ ***"...Surely, you are only a Warner and for every nation there is a guide." (The Holy Quran ar.rad:7)*** ❁

Indeed, the Imam is guidance, and by accepting this guidance and becoming "guided" is how one can be grateful.

❁ ***"And for those who have accepted the guidance, greater guidance will be bestowed (by God) upon them..." (The Holy Quran muh am-mad :17)*** ❁

In the same way, ungratefulness will cause the deprivation of this blessing. Now, have we thanked the blessing of guidance of the (previous) eleven brilliant stars (our Imams)? Ali-ibn-Abi Taleb, who was the principal successor of the prophet, suffered a difficult and strangulated time for 25 years. once the people did go to him, and pledged their allegiance to him, they stayed with him only for a short while. With the crucial imposed arbitration, the people limited his power together and by staying in their homes instead of fighting against Muawiyah, they broke.

His stalwart son, Hassan Ibn Ali, (p.b.u.h.) was left alone in the battle field with the enemy. And when he desperately signed a peace treaty in order to save their lives, they regarded him with abjectness, and prophet .

The people of Kufa sent massive amounts of letters to Imam Hussein (p.b.u.h.) inviting him to their city. Yet, once he accepted their invitation, they went to war against him! They remained silent after the war ,and never rose up to help him. This occurred until Imam Hussein's family were taken from city to city and prison to prison, and were completely disregarded and disrespected. At the end, they (the Ahlul-Bayt) were killed by oppression and tyranny . These facts show the people's laziness and faithlessness. Thus, should the final treasure of God, who has been the final hope for all messengers and (religious) leaders through history, face the same calamity and martyrdom? Or, with the support of God, should he be preserved through an occultation until truthful followers come to help him and, without being forced into allegiances or covenants with oppressors, allow him to establish a new rule?

Imam Ali explicitly stated that it is a punishment (from God) caused by mankind's sins. "Know that the Earth will never be left without a *Hojjat* (Divine leader); But rather the Almighty will blind the eyes [of people] from him, due to their oppression, cruelty, and sins." (The book *Al- Ghibat*, P:177)

The Practice of the Prophets

The Occultation of Imam Mahdi (P.B.U.H.) is not a new case. Rather there have been many examples of Occultation forth previous prophets:

Prophet Idriis had an occultation of about 20 years from his people. During this time, his people suffered from drought and famine.

The great Abraham was forced to leave his city by the heretics. He announced his occultation as such:

❦'And I will withdraw from you and that which you worship apart from Allah (the idols); I will invoke my Creator, and I hope that my invocation shall not be rejected.' (The Holy Quran mar.yam:49) ❦

in addition to the above occultation , Abrahamic an had other occultation .

The very honest Joseph, (p.b.u.h.) was also hidden from his village and family, from the time his brothers threw him into the well, until he sent his shirt to his father, Prophet Jacob (James).

Moses also had an occultation from the tribes. After the Pharaoh (Fir'oun) conquered them (the Israelites) and began his tyranny, Moses was born and lived in the Pharaoh's palace. During this time, there was a very knowledgeable person among the Israelites who was their source of serenity. Once, under the cover of night, he took them to the desert and he narrated for them the coming of their savior, describing his characteristics. At that moment, the young Moses, who had left the palace for a walk, encountered them. The wise man saw Moses, recognizing him through his characteristics, and the Israelites rejoiced, respected him, and thanked God. After this event, Moses disappeared from among them and went to the city of Madyan, staying with Sho'aib for ten years.

Mufazzil-ibn-Omar narrates from Imam Sadeq, "Indeed, the owner of this cause, (Imam Mahdi) has an occultation , in which he recites this Quranic verse (the same verse which Moses recited when he was escaping from the palace to Madyan): 'Thus I fled from you, as I was in danger; and my God granted me wisdom and knowledge, and he appointed me as a messenger.'

Imam Sadeq thus said, 'There is a particular similarity between Musa-ibn-Imran (Moses, p.b.u.h.) and *Al-Qaim* (Imam Mahdi, p.b.u.h.).' I (Mufazzil-ibn-Omar) asked, 'What is the similarity?' Imam Sadeq said, 'A concealed birth, and his occultation from his people.' "