

## Al-Majlisī's Gloss of the “lying impostor” Passage of the Final *tawqīʿ* of the Hidden Imam

The Safavid scholar Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī interpreted the “lying impostor” passage of the final *tawqīʿ* of the Hidden Imam as applying only those who claim to see the Imam *and* be his exclusive representative (like the four emissaries (*sufarāʾ*) from the Lesser Occultation). Al-Majlisī's gloss of this phrase has served as the established position on the issue, as evidenced by the fact that it is quoted, alluded to, or referred to by numerous scholars after him. To illustrate this point, I list thirteen ulama and scholars whose writings about the Hidden Imam embrace or reiterate al-Majlisī's interpretation of the final *tawqīʿ*. The list is not meant to be exhaustive.

1. The scholar and Quran commentator ʿAbd Allāh al-Shubbar (d. 1242/1826–7) cites al-Majlisī's explanation almost verbatim to validate stories from the time of the Greater Occultation of “large numbers of pious and trustworthy scholars of the past and present” who have met the Hidden Imam.<sup>1</sup>

2/3. Maḥmūd al-Maythamī al-ʿIrāqī (d. 1306/1888–9, 1308/1890–1 or 1310/1892–3) and Ḥusayn al-Nūrī al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1902) both quote al-Majlisī's explanation verbatim in the chapters of their collections devoted to reconciling the final *tawqīʿ* and hadiths stating that the Hidden Imam cannot be seen with stories of those who have encountered him during the Greater Occultation.<sup>2</sup>

4. The celebrated reformist Lebanese scholar and Shīʿī biographer Muḥsin al-Amīn (d. 1957–8) concedes that “there are hadiths that establish the impossibility of seeing [the Imam] (*dālla ʿalā ʿadam imkān al-ruʿya*) during the Greater Occultation.” He argues that the way to reconcile these hadiths with the accounts describing encoun-

1 Al-Shubbar, *al-Anwār*, 36. In the chapter on the Hidden Imam in his exposition of core Shīʿī doctrines and beliefs, al-Shubbar does not refer to any of the encounter stories during the period of the Greater Occultation, see al-Shubbar, *Ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, 283–91. On the author, see the introduction to his Quran commentary, al-Shubbar, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 56–7; Anṣārī, *Tashayyuʿ-i imāmī*, 81–120.

2 Al-Maythamī al-ʿIrāqī, *Dār al-salām*, 193; al-Nūrī, *Najm-i thāqib*, 2:852; al-Nūrī al-Ṭabarsī, *Jan-nat al-maʿwā*, 146. See appendix 1 for descriptions of these works.

ters with the Imam is to declare as unbelievers anyone who claims to have *both* seen the Imam and "to deliver information on his behalf as the [four] representatives did [during the Lesser Occultation]."<sup>3</sup>

5. Muḡtabā Qazvīnī-Khurāsānī (d. 1967) argues that the hadiths indicating that the people cannot recognize the Imam do not contradict (*tanāfiʿ nadārad*) the stories of people who have seen the Imam "because the meaning [of those hadiths] is that while the Imam is amongst the people, the generality of people cannot recognize him. Therefore, there is no contradiction between these hadiths and the fact that a small number (*ʿiddih-yi qalīlī*) of people have seen (the Imam)."<sup>4</sup> Qazvīnī-Khurāsānī maintains that the final *tawqīʿ* sought not only to prevent harmful innovations and heretical teachings (*bidʿat-hā*) from being introduced into Shīʿī Islam, but also to anathematize anyone who claimed to be the Imam's special representative during the Greater Occultation "like the Šūfī poles, the Shaykhī fourth pillar (*rukn-i rābīʿ-i shaykhīyyih*), as well as those who claim to be the Mahdī [himself]." He then decries the fact that "this blessed narration" issued by "the source of inspiration and the dawning place of revelation (*maʿdīn-i vaḥy va-maṭlaʿ-i tanzīl*)" has not been studied, reflected on, and accepted by all of the Shīʿa, for if it had, such claimants who divided the Shīʿī community and caused great suffering to the Shīʿa would never have appeared.<sup>5</sup>

6. ʿAlī Davānī (d. 2007) asserts that the *tawqīʿ* anathematizes anyone who claims to be the Imam's representative or the Imam himself. He adds that it is entirely possible for pious and righteous Shīʿa and the devoted friends (*dūstān-i khālīṣ*) of the Imam to see him during the Greater Occultation but choose not to tell anyone.<sup>6</sup> Davānī then argues that eminent scholars like al-Murtaḡā, al-Ṭūsī, and Baḥr al-ʿUlūm al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī all affirmed that

the Shīʿī ulama do not believe that the Imam of the Age cannot appear to his righteous friends (*dūstān-i pākīrisht*). On the contrary, it is certainly possible for them to see the Imam and either recognize him or not recognize him. All

3 [= *wa-īṣāl al-akhbār min jānibihī ʿalā mithāl al-sufarāʾ*] Al-Amīn, *ʿĀyān al-shīʿa*, 2:71, also cited in Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntazār*, 57–8. On al-Amīn's monumental biography of prominent Shīʿī figures and scholars, see Ende, "ʿĀyān al-Šīʿa," *Elr*, 3:130–1.

4 Qazvīnī-Khurāsānī, *Bayān al-furqān*, 901.

5 Qazvīnī-Khurāsānī, *Bayān al-furqān*, 902, also cited in al-Majlisī, *Mahdī mawʿūd* (trans. Davānī), 928 (no. 1). On the Shaykhī doctrine of the 'fourth pillar,' see Amir-Moezzi, "An Absence Filled with Presences," 40–52.

6 Davānī adds an explanation to his translation of al-Majlisī's explanation. See al-Majlisī, *Mahdī mawʿūd* (trans. Davānī), 929 n. 1, 943 n. 1.

of our great scholars like al-Kulaynī and al-Ṣadūq narrated stories of such encounters in their works.<sup>7</sup>

7. The prolific Iraqi scholar Bāqir Sharīf al-Qurashī (d. 2012) argues that there are many ways to reconcile the tension between the final *tawqīʿ* and the well-attested (*tawātur*) stories transmitted by “many people from among the greatest and most righteous Shīʿī ulama” who have definitely (*min al-maqtūʿ*) seen the Imam. However, he mentions only one, which he considered the best explanation: anyone who claims to have seen the Imam and likewise claims to be the Imam’s representative is a lying impostor.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, al-Qurashī avers that during the Greater Occultation, “the great jurists (*al-fuqahāʾ al-ʿiẓām*) became the “sources of emulation” and received [the position of] the most great representation (*al-niyāba al-uẓmā*) from the eagerly awaited Imam. During [the Greater Occultation], the [Hidden] Imam had numerous encounters and corresponded often with prominent ulama.”<sup>9</sup> He names only one such scholar: al-Mufīd, who, as mentioned in chapter 4, is alleged to have received letters from the Hidden Imam.

8. Contemporary scholar Ḥabīb Ṭāhirī concedes that “some” reject the stories of encounters with the Imam based on hadiths (*riwāyāt*) that state that whoever claims to have seen the Imam or encountered him should be declared a liar. He does not say explicitly who these are, but he does mention that we are living at a time when “the enemies of the Imam claim that [these stories] are lies.”<sup>10</sup> Ṭāhirī responds to these naysayers by first arguing that it is not hadiths, plural, but rather one hadith, the last *tawqīʿ* of the Hidden Imam, that declares that all those who claim to have seen the Imam are frauds. He then argues that the key word in the final *tawqīʿ* is “impostor” (*muftar*) which suggests that the *tawqīʿ* does not condemn everyone who has encountered the Imam as liars but rather only those who have seen him and claim to be his exclusive representative.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Ṭāhirī adds a parenthetical note to his Persian translation of the “lying impostors” passage: “Anyone who claims to have seen (in the sense that the four representatives saw me) is a lying impostor.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Ṭāhirī asserts that anyone who claims to have seen the Imam and likewise claimed to be his representative is a

7 Al-Majlisī, *Mahdī-i mawʿūd* (trans. Davānī), 943 n. 1.

8 Al-Qurashī, *Ḥayāt al-Imām al-Mahdī*, 130–1, 134.

9 [= *kānat lil-imām ʿiddat iltiqāʾāt wa-murāsālāt maʿa ʿuyūn al-ʿulamāʾ*] Al-Qurashī, *Ḥayāt al-Imām al-Mahdī*, 133–4.

10 Ṭāhirī, *Sīmā-yi āftāb*, 308.

11 Ṭāhirī, *Sīmā-yi āftāb*, 309.

12 Ṭāhirī, *Sīmā-yi āftāb*, 231.

liar. Otherwise, if one does not claim to be the Imam's representative, this sentence of the *tawqīʿ* does not apply.

Responding to the question of why the Imam did not appoint specific ulama as his special representatives during the Greater Occultation as he did during the Lesser Occultation with the *sufarāʾ*, Ṭāhirī reasons that it is because "the enemies of the Imam" would attempt to apprehend and torture such representatives in order to force them to reveal the Imam's location (so that they might kill him); and if they refused, the enemies would incarcerate them for life.<sup>13</sup>

9. The contemporary Najaf-based scholar ʿAlī al-Sabzavārī, son and student of the "Grand Ayatollah" ʿAbd al-ʿAlā al-Sabzavārī (d. 1993), argues that the final *tawqīʿ* "established the position of general representation (*al-niyāba al-ʿamma*) for the *fuqahāʾ* and the *mujtahids*."<sup>14</sup> Al-Sabzavārī goes on to say that the ulama who have been blessed to meet the Hidden Imam have attained a level of spiritual maturity (*kamāl*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), and loyalty (*wafāʾ*) that others can attest to; he cites the examples of al-Muqaddas al-Ardabīlī and Baḥr al-ʿUlūm al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī.<sup>15</sup> He maintains that the ulama who saw the Imam were ordered to keep their encounters with him secret (*maʾmūr bi-l-kitmān*) as long as they lived. After they died, their students and close associates revealed that their teacher or colleague had met the Imam.<sup>16</sup>

10. In his short work *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar* (an introduction to a longer book), ʿAlī Kawrānī, a Lebanese scholar and the author of numerous books about the Mahdī, argues that "without a doubt, the clearest proof that settles any disagreements about his existence or nonexistence is seeing him." He then adds, "fortunately, the accounts of those who have been honored by seeing him number in the hundreds and cover all periods of time from both the Lesser and Greater Occultation."<sup>17</sup> He refers to the one hundred accounts compiled in al-Nūrī's *Najm-i thāqib* and states that al-Nūrī "bore witness to the truth of each and every account and still there are those among us who reject the truth of these stories!"<sup>18</sup> Kawrānī contends that the ulama have not denied the pos-

13 Ṭāhirī, *Simā-yi āftāb*, 219. As of 19 July 2012, Ṭāhirī was the chair of the Department of Islamic Propagation at the Islamic Development Organization, an institution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Website of the Islamic Development Organization, 14 July 2012, <http://www.ido.ir/n.aspx?n=13910424353>. Among some Shīʿī ulama and scholars today, "the enemies of the Imam" is code for Israel, the United States, and their agents.

14 Al-Sabzavārī, *Umr al-imām al-mahdī*, 68.

15 Al-Sabzavārī, *Umr al-imām al-mahdī*, 65–6.

16 Al-Sabzavārī, *Umr al-imām al-mahdī*, 65.

17 Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 9.

18 Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 70.

sibility of meeting the Imam.<sup>19</sup> He adds that “there is no room whatsoever to reject the possibility of meeting [the Imam]; whoever attempts to reject [this possibility] has adopted an aberrant opinion that does not deserve any consideration (*fa-ra'yuhu shādh-dh lā yultafat ilahiyi*).”<sup>20</sup>

In a different work, Kawrānī writes:

Some adduce the [final] *tawqīʿ* of the Imam to the fourth *safīr*, al-Samurī, as proof that [the Imam] cannot be seen during the Greater Occultation. However, from the beginning of the Greater Occultation until now, the most eminent of our jurists and scholars among the foremost “sources of emulation” have affirmed the possibility of seeing [him] or the reality of seeing him. They do not believe that the final *tawqīʿ* [of the Hidden Imam] to al-Samurī represents proof of the impossibility [of seeing the Imam]. Rather, [the *tawqīʿ*] negates seeing [the Imam] in the sense that [the favor of seeing him] was granted to al-Samurī as a special representative (*ka-nāʾib khāṣṣ*) [of the Imam]. In other words, the *tawqīʿ* negates anyone seeing [the Imam], if that claim is followed by a claim to be the special representative [of the Imam].

Kawrānī then argues that we know that this is the meaning of the *tawqīʿ* because, according to the opinion of the ulama, the “stories of seeing [the Imam] with sound chains of transmission” (*qiṣaṣ al-mushāhada al-ṣaḥīḥa al-sanad*) settle the matter of seeing the Imam and verify it beyond doubt. Moreover, Kawrānī asserts that “many of those who were honored to meet him are among the most eminent ulama and the most venerable of the pious.”<sup>21</sup>

11. After repeating al-Majlisī’s interpretation of the final *tawqīʿ*, the contemporary “Grand Ayatollah” Luṭf Allāh Gulpāyigānī (b. 1918) cites the many “famous, well-authenticated stories” of ulama who have met the Imam as proof that the final *tawqīʿ* does not reject the possibility of seeing the Imam during the Greater Occultation.<sup>22</sup> He went as far as to declare that “an intelligent person would never entertain any doubt about the soundness” of these stories. Gulpāyigānī speculates that perhaps the intent of the

19 Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 58. Later, he states that with the exception of al-Murtaḍā and al-Ṭūsī who speak about “the possibility” (*imkāniyya*) of meeting the Imam, all the other ulama speak about the occurrence (*wuqūʿ*) of seeing the Imam, Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 63.

20 Kawrānī, *Ḥawl ruʾyat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 59.

21 Kawrānī, *Ādāb ʿaṣr al-ghayba*, 179–81.

22 Gulpāyigānī, *Imāmat va-mahdaviyyat*, 2:475; Gulpāyigānī, *Pāsukh-i dah pursish*, 64–5.

*tawqīʿ* was to reject anyone who claims that he has the ability to see the Imam at will, that is, to meet the Imam whenever he wishes. He also considers the possibility that the *tawqīʿ* is meant as a reminder to those who see the Imam, that they must not divulge the secret of their encounter. However, Gulpāyigānī leaves open the possibility that certain individuals are capable of seeing the Imam at will, but even these people should never reveal that they have this power; otherwise, according to his reading of the *tawqīʿ*, they must be denounced as liars.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Gulpāyigānī asserts that along with hadiths ascribed to the previous Imams foretelling the *ghayba* of the Qā'im, the stories of encounters with the Hidden Imam constitute the greatest proof of his existence.<sup>24</sup>

12. The prolific Quran commentator and cleric Muḥammad Muḥammadī Ishtihārdī (d. 1385 Sh./2006) asserts that the Imams decreed that whoever claims to see the Hidden Imam should be declared a liar. It is not clear what hadiths or reports he is referring to when he says "the Imams." He goes on to write that claimants to encounters with the Imam have been condemned as liars throughout history because many of those claimed to see the Imam also claimed to be the Imam's representative. He adds that anyone who brings a law or commandment from the Imam should be declared a liar. He argues that many of the accounts of those who have met the Imam have been related after the person died; but if the person does not have a bad intention, there is no harm in his telling others that he has met the Imam even while he is still alive.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, Ishtihārdī, after the citing the final *tawqīʿ*, contends that the claim of anyone who alleges to be the Mahdī, the gate to the Mahdī (*bābīyyat*), or to have seen the Imam (*mushāhadīh*) is "invalid and rejected" (*bāṭil va mardūd*).<sup>26</sup>

13. Javād Mu'allim, a contemporary Shī'ī scholar, attempts to reconcile the critical passage of the *tawqīʿ*, which declares anyone who claims to have seen the Imam a liar, with the many stories of ulama who claimed to have encountered the Hidden Imam in the modern period. Mu'allim translates the critical sentence of the *tawqīʿ* into Per-

23 Gulpāyigānī, *Imāmat va-mahdaviyyat*, 2:475; Gulpāyigānī, *Pāsukh-i dah pursish*, 65.

24 Gulpāyigānī, *Imāmat va-mahdaviyyat*, 2:45–6; see also Gulpāyigānī, *Iṣṣalat-i mahdaviyyat*, 55–70.

25 Ishtihārdī, *Ḥaḍrat-i Mahdī: Furūgh-i tābān-i wilāyat*, 95.

26 Ishtihārdī, *Bābīgarī va Bahā'īgarī: mawlūd-i mudda'īyān-i durūghīn-i niyābat-i khāṣṣ az imām-i zamān*, 19. In a footnote, Ishtihārdī comments that according to the interpretation of "some," by *mushāhadīh* is meant those who claim to see the Imam, yet abuse this favor, "like those who have claimed to be the gate of the Imam (*bābīyyat*)."<sup>27</sup> Ishtihārdī, *Bābīgarī va Bahā'īgarī*, 19 n. 1.

sian as follows: "Whoever claims to have seen me in the same manner that you, the four representatives, saw me, which was of your own volition [i.e., anytime the four emissaries (*sufarā'*) wished to meet with the Imam, they could], is a liar and a charlatan."<sup>27</sup>

- 27 Nahāvandī, *Barakāt-i ḥaḍrat-i valī-i 'aṣr*, 13–4 (from the introduction by Javād Mu'allim); see also idem, 74 n. 1. In a footnote, Mu'allim adds that in translating the *tawqī'*, he used other hadiths/reports (*rivāyāt-i dīgarī*) on the same issue, but he does not provide any further information about these hadiths. Idem, 14 n. 1. In recent years, other writers have repeated al-Majlisī's explanation, though they have not always given al-Majlisī credit. They include al-Shīrāzī, *Kalimat al-imām al-mahdī*, 203 n. 2, who claims that what the final *tawqī'* actually negates is "constantly seeing [the Imam] and continually being in contact [with him]" (*al-mushāhada al-dā'ima wa-l-ittiṣāl al-mustamirr*); al-Mūsawī, *al-Arba'ūn fī l-mahdī*, 13; al-ʿAṭṭār, "Muqaddimat al-muḥaqqiq," 22; al-Kawrānī, *al-Mu'jam al-mawḍūʿī*, 1102; al-Shāhrūdī, *al-Imām al-mahdī*, 176 n. 1; Āl ʿUṣfūr, *Zāhirat al-ghayba wa-da'wā l-sifara fī ḡill imāmat al-mahdī l-muntaẓar*, 20 (of the appendix); Khādīmī-Shīrāzī, *Tuḥfih-yi imām mahdī*, 138–40; al-Khazrajī, *Sufarā' al-mahdī*, 258; Faḡhī, *Karāmāt al-imām al-mahdī*, 13 (referenced in Hage Ali, *Nationalism*, 152); Kamarihi'i, *Davāzdahumīn, sin-hā'*; Mutlaq, *The Last Luminary*, 39–42; and Ayatollah Muḥsin Arakī (b. 1956), who writes, "No one has the power to see Imam Mahdi in [the] latter's *Ghaybet* [i.e., the Greater Occultation]. *Ghaybet* itself means being inaccessible/invisible to the people at large. However, it is the privilege of the Imam that when and where he deems necessary he meets his representative(s) to clarify/explain any ideological or jurisprudential issue, which is beyond the perception of an ordinary human being. Therefore, it is not acceptable if one claims to see the Imam, but the possibility about someone's contact with the Imam cannot be ruled out. There are people who have the blessing of having an audience with the Imam, and these [accounts] are usually mentioned in the authentic Shia books on ideology." Araki, *Ideological and Jurisprudential Frontiers* (trans. Shīrāzī), 28–9. Ayatollah Arākī is a prominent Iraqi-born *mujtahid*, a prolific writer, and a politician. He is a current member (elected 2016) of the Assembly of Experts, has previously served as Ayatollah Khāmīnī's personal representative in London, and, since 2012, heads the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, an organization that seeks to promote rapprochement among Islamic sects and legal schools. Ayatollah ʿAlī Karīmī Jahrumī gives a different interpretation of the "lying impostor" passage of the final *tawqī'*. Rather than disallowing others from claiming to be the Imam's representative, Jahrumī argues that the final *tawqī'* sought to prevent the malicious from using their claim to encounter the Imam for selfish reasons. The curious example he gives is of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (d. 1980), the former shah of Iran who, according to Jahrumī, "in his writings formally claimed to have seen the Imam of the Age and has spoken about this in his speeches." Al-Jahrumī, *Mahdī muqtadā-yi masīḥ*, 108, 111. I am not aware of any evidence to support this claim.