Omid Ghaemmaghami, *Encounters with the Hidden Imam in Early and Pre-Modern Twelver Shīʿī Islam*. Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts. Volume 167. Brill: 2020, 1–276 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-34048-0 (hardback).

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Omid GHAEMMAGHAMI is Assistant Professor of Arabic and Near Eastern Studies at SUNY (Binghamton, New York). In this solid and enlightening piece of research he engages with a fascinating and yet insufficiently addressed topic within the ever-growing field of academic research on Shiite Islam. He studies the debates and the changing doctrinal attitudes concerning the possibility for "true believers'" (i.e., the community of Shiite Islam) to encounter and recognize the

Hidden Imām during the continuing period of the Greater Occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubrā*). Far from being a remnant of a distant past, the topic is on the contrary quite fashionable, so to speak, as diverse representatives of the "Shiite International" as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989), Ayatollah Marʿashi Najafi (d. 1990), and the Iraqi leader Moqtada al-Sadr – to cite just a few – have been rumored to have been in contact of some sort with the Hidden Imām.

Since the unexpected and mysterious disappearance in 874 CE of the twelfth Imām – the reportedly six-year-old Abū l-Qāsim Muḥammad (subsequently referred to as the Awaited Mahdī and Qāʾim), son of the eleventh Imām Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī – the followers who were at first known as the Imāmiyya but later as the Ithnā ʿAshariyya (the Twelver Shiites) have awaited his physical return. Ever since this traumatic event these Shiites have been confronted with the onerous and dramatically challenging task of explaining the inexplicable: How can it be that the indispensable guide of the community, the only source of authoritative legal and theological interpretation was made to disappear from sight with no possibility of any kind of physical communication with his devoted followers? If the Imam is an essential grace sent by God for the benefit of humankind, what is the reason for his long-lasting disappearance?

As Ghaemmaghami rightly points out, "the intellectual, philosophical, spiritual, social, and political history of Shīʿī Islam since the moment the Imam vanished can be seen as a history of attempts to explain his disappearance, negotiate or exploit his absence, and answer the burning question of when, where, and how he will return" (2–3). He then goes on to note that

> despite the increased scholarly activity and interest in virtually every aspect of Imāmī/Twelver Shīʿī Islam over the last century (in particular since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran), studies on the development of Shīʿī messianism and eschatology have been markedly slow. And while stories of encounters with the Hidden Imam are found in hundreds of books in Persian and Arabic, the issue is relatively uncharted territory in scholarship and books written in Western languages. The topic of encounters and contact with the Hidden Imam is one of the most observable and yet paradoxically least noticed features of Shīʿī Islam and an underdeveloped subfield of the academic study of Islam in the West (7).

In fact, reported narratives of encounters with the Hidden Imām have gradually increased in the Shīʿī cultural output (be it books, articles or, nowadays, even websites and blogs) since the Qajar period (nineteenth century). While, on the one hand, this phenomenon obviously testifies to the paramount yet somehow impalpable role of the Hidden Imām in the Shiite religious and cultural world, it should be noted, on the other, that contrary to what is generally assumed these stories are the product of what Ghaemmaghami calls an "invented" tradition

that emerged during the first centuries following the Major Occultation (tenth–twelfth centuries) and was expanded and enriched in the early modern era.

An early Imāmī tenet of the faith actually denied the possibility that anyone could physically meet and recognize the Hidden Imām, a position supported by the mostly Qom-based traditionist school, as represented by al-Kulaynī (d. 940–41) and al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 991), among others. The ideological basis for this was found in the final rescript (*tawqīʿ*) allegedly communicated by the Hidden Imām to the last of the Four Agents/Emissaries who, according to the much later established narrative, had kept alive a channel of interaction with the Imām during the earlier Lesser (or Minor) Occultation, that is, from 874 to 941 CE. In his last message, as preserved in a much-quoted *ḥadīth*, the Imām was reported to affirm that only a "lying impostor" could claim to have seen him before the coming of the Final Hour: "the final *tawqīʿ* – GHAEMMAGHAMI remarks – has long posed an epistemological challenge to the Shīʿī ulama to which they have responded in flexible ways" (4).

Even though it does not specifically say so, this rescript was nonetheless interpreted to deny not only the possibility of encounters with, and sightings of, the Hidden Imām, but also to reject the idea that anyone might *also* claim to be the Imām's representative and agent. This interpretation has also been accepted by modern and contemporary scholars, such as CORBIN and AMIR-MOEZZI, among others, but, according to GHAEMMAGHAMI, needs rectification.

Later, this interpretation gave way to a more nuanced, cautious yet expedient doctrinal stance, supported by the Muʿtazilī-influenced rationalist school of Baghdad (eleventh–twelfth centuries) as represented by the well-known pillars of Shiite creed and theology, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022), al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 1066–67), and their inner circle of students. Encounters with the Hidden Imām were henceforth deemed possible for "the *mawlā* who is in charge of his [i.e., the Imam's] affairs (73–74, material in brackets is this reviewer's)," as stated in only three much quoted and glossed *ḥadīth*s. As in the famous Ghadīr Khumm tradition, the multifarious term *mawlā*, understood by the author to mean "servant," lends itself to a variety of interpretations that GHAEMMAGHAMI rightly discusses and analyzes (75–84).

Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā and a number of his students went a step forward to include the chosen and most dedicated of the Imām's followers (i.e., the *ʿulamāʾ*) among those who could benefit from him in terms of knowledge. Yet, in order to do that, the rationalists had to find a way to "question the unquestionable," and bypass the Hidden Imām's last rescript.

If, as GHAEMMAGHAMI points out, "the initial, traditionist position that negated the possibility of seeing or having contact with the Imam during the Greater Occultation proved untenable" (4), the changing political and cultural contexts in the post-Buyid and particularly Ilkhanid era called for a doctrinal

re-adjustment. Without this adjustment, the softening of the tension between the reality of the Hidden Imām's inaccessibility, as clearly stated in the final rescript on the one hand and the claim to unquestionable authority before the community of the believers by an emerging class of Shiite jurists and theologians, on the other, would have proven impossible to achieve. The rather slow-but-gradual growth of stories about alleged encounters with the Hidden Imām can certainly be explained with the need to consolidate the doctrine of the *ghayba* and, consequently, of the Hidden Imām's necessary existence and necessary absence and concealment. Out of practical expediency, however, this set the scene for a move towards "bolstering clerical authority [and] cultivating an aura of sanctity for the ulama as his [collective] representatives". (6, material in brackets are this reviewer's) In turn, all this served the purpose of strengthening the religious and social influence exerted by the *ʿulamāʾ*.

It is no wonder then that the establishment of a powerful Twelver Shiite polity in Safavid Iran (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries), and its consolidation under the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century, saw a more marked increase (if not sheer proliferation, in GHAEMMAGHAMI's words) in the number of stories about physical (i.e., when the observer was "in a wakeful state") encounters of some believers with the Hidden Imām. The required theological base for justifying what was tantamount to a major shift in the doctrine was brought about by none other than the ever-influential Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699–1700) through a clever reassessment of the text of the Hidden Imām's final rescript, which is well described by the author. Since then, later scholars have almost universally followed suit in subscribing to al-Majlisī's interpretation, which was used as a suitable tool to ward off any challenge to clerical authority by alternative currents of thought from within the Shiite community, as represented, for example, by the Shaykhī, the Bābī, and the Sufis movements and currents in the nineteenth century.

The volume is comprised of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and two appendixes. In the introduction (1–22), under the heading "Approaches to the Question of Encountering the Hidden Imam in Sources in Western Languages," the author assesses the sporadic Western contributions to the topic under study, from the times of the eminent orientalist I. GOLDZIHER (d. 1921) to the present day. Lack of attention and interest in this respect are, according to GHAEMMAGHAMI, all the more surprising as

> numerous studies that chart the manner in which the sacrosanct authority of the Hidden Imam has been arrogated to themselves by the Shīʿī ulama, who, beginning in the sixteenth century CE, presented themselves as the "general representatives" of the Hidden Imam and gradually appropriated and exercised the rights, prerogatives, and privileges traditionally reserved for the Imams in the classical sources do not discuss this issue (13).

The notable exceptions are the detailed articles by H. CORBIN, “the first and in some cases […] the only Western scholar to have studied rare yet significant sources on the Hidden Imam in Arabic and Persian that include stories of those who met the Imam” (16, brackets are this reviewer’s), and AMIR MOEZZI, who, in GHAEMMAGHAMI’s words, “followed the interpretative trajectory laid out by Corbin in his (Amir-Moezzi’s) studies of the encounter narratives”. Clearly influenced by these two great scholars, GHAEMMAGHAMI is, however, ready to rectify what he considers their too overtly metaphysical and mystical interpretation of these source materials.

In the first two chapters entitled “The Unknown, the Unseen and the Unrecognized” (23–52), and “Hidden from All, yet Seen by Some? The Special Case of Three Hadiths” (53–84), respectively, the author analyzes the earliest known sources (Qurʾān commentaries and *ḥadīth* material) about the *ghayba* from the period of the Minor/Lesser Occultation (874–941 CE). This enables him to show that “the overwhelming majority of hadiths affirm that the Imam cannot be seen or recognized by anyone during the *ghayba*, while a small number of hadiths suggest that he can be seen though not recognized as the Hidden Imam” (21). In particular, Chapter 2 presents an analysis of three hadiths according to which the Hidden Imām can be seen *and* recognized by a select group of believers. It is concerning the specific identity of these devoted followers that much of the subsequent, intra-Twelver Shiite debate develops.

Chapter 3, entitled “A Lying Impostor” (85–132), focuses on the first two centuries of the Greater Occultation. Here the author analyzes how the traditionist approach endorsed by *ʿulamāʾ* from the early years of the Major *Ghayba* was quite abruptly altered by the exponents of the rationalist school on the issue of the possibility of encountering the Hidden Imam. While the first strictly adhered to a literalist interpretation of the Hidden Imām’s last rescript to declare that no one could see or physically meet him, the rationalist scholars gradually, if cautiously, allowed for the possibility of meeting the Imām, although they abstained from mentioning the names of those who had actually met him.

Chapter 4, entitled “From the Youth and the Stone and the Proliferation of Accounts” (133–171), examines the earliest surviving accounts of encounters with the Hidden Imām and shows how another critical change occurred in the post-*ghayba* centuries. GHAEMMAGHAMI writes:

> Accounts of encounters and contact with the Imam during the Greater Occultation, albeit rare and infrequent, begin to appear in the works of Shīʿī authorities (…). (I)n the Safavid period they increased and became more embellished. I propose that this development is linked to a critical gloss of the final *tawqīʿ*, a gloss that adumbrated the exponential proliferation of these accounts in the modern period (…). (22)

He concludes that the role of al-Majlisī, and of the rationalist/*uṣūlī* school in general, in skillfully bypassing the letter of the final rescript to accommodate a new interpretation could not have been more crucial.

Making use of Āqā Buzurg al-Ṭihrānī's monumental compilation *al-Dharīʿa ilā taṣānīf al-Shīʿa*, Appendix I (179–187) proposes an appropriate "Descriptive Catalogue of Some Key Sources that Deal with the Subject of Encounters with the Hidden Imam."

In Appendix II, entitled "Al-Majlisi's Gloss of the "Lying Impostor" Passage of the Final *tawqīʿ* of the Hidden Imām" (188–194), the author lists thirteen Shiite *ʿulamāʾ* and scholars from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries whose writings about the Hidden Imām embrace or reiterate al-Majlisī's interpretation of the twelfth Imām's final rescript, whereby the "lying impostor" passage is construed as applying only to those who report having seen *and* recognized the Imam while in a wakeful state – and therefore claim to be his exclusive representative – and not to those who report having seen the Imām while in a wakeful state without making such a claim to representation.

The volume also includes an extensive and exhaustive bibliography of works in Arabic, Persian, and Western Languages (195–245) and four indexes: Qurʾān citations (246), quoted ḥadīths (247–248), people and places (249–258), and subjects (259–276).

GHAEMMAGHAMI has brilliantly produced an interesting study that will benefit scholarship on Islam, its religious history in general, and the Shiite doctrine of authority in particular. This stimulating scholarly effort is also one more reminder of the importance of a solid, balanced philological approach when dealing with Islamic tradition, piety, and theology.