

The Benefits of Occultation of Imam Mahdi (A.S.)

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Engineer Madani If the Imam is the leader of the people he should be present among them. What is the benefit of having an Imam who lives an invisible life What is the use of having an Imam who lives in the state of occultation for centuries without fulfilling any of the functions that he normally undertakes such as propagating religion, solving the problems of society, responding to the attacks of his opponents, commanding the good and forbidding the evil, helping the poor and redressing the wrongs committed against the downtrodden, upholding the ordinances of God by instituting proper penalties and explaining the lawful and the unlawful to the people, and so on.

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Mr. Hoshyar The people are surely deprived of the benefits that you have enumerated during the occultation. However, the benefits of the Imams presence are not limited to these. In fact, there are other benefits that are available during the occultation. The following two are among those many other benefits that you have not enumerated

First, in accord with all that we have said previously and the proofs that were derived from the writings of Muslim scholars, including the hadith-reports that spoke about the necessity of the Imamate, the existence of the Imam as a perfect and unique embodiment of humanity serves as a link between the material and the spiritual world. If the Imam is absent the human species will be extinct. If there is no Imam then God cannot be known or worshipped perfectly. Without the Imam the link between the material and the spiritual become severed. The heart of the Imam is like the source of electricity that distributes light to numerous lamps. The illumination and energization of the hidden universe first mirrors on the heart of the Imam and then from there it reflects on the hearts of humankind. The Imam is the heart of the created universe and the leader and guide of humankind. It is evident that his presence and absence have an impact upon

these actualities. After all these, can one ask what benefit accrues from the invisible existence of the Imam I think that you are raising this objection on behalf of someone else who does not have a real understanding of the meaning of wilayat and the Imamate and who does not see the Imam as more than a legal expert and an administrator of justice, whereas the responsibilities of the wilayat and the Imamate are much more than these external functions.

In a long tradition reported from Imam Sadiq it is related that Imam Sajjad said

We are the leaders of the Muslims, Gods proofs for His creatures, masters of the believers, guides for the godfearing, and those invested with discretionary authority over the affairs of Muslims. We are the security for the dwellers of the earth, just as the stars are the security of the dwellers of the heavens. It is because of us that the heavens descend on the earth whenever God permits. It is because of us that the rain descends and blessings of earth come out of it. If we had not been on earth its dwellers would have been consumed in it.

He then went on to say

From the day God created Adam until today He has not left the earth without a competent authority (=proof=hujjat). But this authority is sometimes manifest and well known; at other times he is in occultation and in concealment. The earth will not be void of such an authority until the Day of Judgement. If there is no Imam, God will not be worshipped.

Sulayman, the narrator, asked Imam Sadiq How can people benefit from the existence of an Imam who is in occultation The Imam said In the same way as they benefit from the sun behind the clouds.[1]

In this and other traditions of this kind the existence of the twelfth Imam and the benefit derived from him are compared to the benefit derived from the sun hidden behind the clouds. To elaborate on this imagery let us remind ourselves of the way natural science explains the phenomenon. It is established in natural science and in astronomy that the sun is the center of our solar system. The laws of gravity protect the earth from falling into an abyss, and permit the earth to revolve around the sun, generating the distinction between day and night and different seasons according to its position in relation to the sun. The thermal energy produced by the sun is the source of life on earth and its light illuminates the otherwise dark earth. This benefit accrues to the earth regardless of the fact of whether the sun is shining directly or from behind the clouds. In other words, all its functions (illumination, providing energy, growth, etc.) are intact even when it shines from behind the clouds. In fact, whether it is from behind the dark clouds or at night when we think the sun is not present, we are still recipients of the suns thermal energy and all other benefits that are critical for our survival on earth.

The existence of the Imam is like the sun behind the clouds that benefits the dwellers of the earth. He is the heart of humankind and its existential guide. In order for his benefits to reach

humanity it does not matter whether he is manifest or in concealment. Let us recall our previous discussions about the necessity of the Prophethood and Imamate and review all their aspects so that we can appreciate the true meaning of wilayat. This review will help us to understand the most important benefit of having an Imam from the progeny of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), whether manifest or in concealment. As we ponder this matter, we are actually enjoying the blessings of this Imams invisible existence.

As for other benefits enumerated by you, Engineer Madani, of which people are deprived, actually, both from the direction of God and from the existence of the Imam, there is no obstacle to these benefits reaching the people. The problem is with the people themselves. If these obstructions could be removed and if the people worked towards creating the just order and toward preparing to launch Gods government by spreading the right information and strengthening the character of the people to receive the Imams leadership, then the Imam would appear to lead humanity towards the creation of the divine order on earth.

It is possible that someone might say Under the circumstances when the overall situation is not favorable to the appearance of the Imam, why should we put ourselves in the dangerous situation of trying to prepare for his return In response to this it must be pointed out that a Muslims actions in this connection should not be motivated by the personal gain of some individuals; rather, it should become the goal of each and every person to endeavor for the social reforms affecting all people. Seriousness of purpose in improving the conditions of the people and in removing causes of injustice and tyranny in society are regarded as the most meritorious act of worship in Islam.

Again, it is possible that someone might say The endeavors of one or a few individuals trying to change the conditions in society may come to nothing. Hence, one should not even try to do anything. Moreover, in principle, it might be asked what wrong have I done to be deprived of meeting my Imam In response to this one can point out the benefit that accrues to an individual and to the society in general when we endeavor to raise the standard of thinking and moral awareness among people, informing them about the lofty goals of Islam and bringing them closer to the goals of the Imam (peace be upon him). By doing so we have actually fulfilled our obligation as a follower of the Imam. In return, we have attained the highest reward of having furthered the realization of an ideal society, even if merely by a step. Any rational person can attest to this benefit of striving to further the divine purposes for human society. It is for this reason that there are numerous traditions that speak about the merits of awaiting deliverance through the appearance of the twelfth Imam, and which regard this awaiting as a form of serving God.[2]

Second, faith in the Hidden Imam and awaiting deliverance through his return is a source of hope and peace for the hearts of the believers. Such a hope is one of the major causes of the success and advancement of the Islamic ideal. Any group of people that becomes bogged down

by pessimism and despair also suffers from self-imposed negativism that leads to the defeat of the purpose.

There is no doubt that the social and political turmoil in many parts of the world, the decline of moral and ethical vision, the deprivation and poverty suffered by the downtrodden, the spread of tools of various forms of imperialistic intervention in the affairs of the weaker societies, the arms race among the powerful countries --all these -- have led sensitive and conscientious thinkers around the globe to become concerned and even, to a certain extent, pessimistic about the ability of human society to deliver itself from its self-cultivated gradual destruction.

The only door that has remained open for humanity is the door of hope in the darkness of despair. That hope lies in the divine intervention in human affairs by the sending of a divinely guided leader, the Mahdi, to establish a godly society founded upon the divinely ordained laws. Indeed, it is this hope that gives solace to the disturbed hearts of those who have suffered injustices. It is the hope of seeing that government based on the acknowledgement of the Unity of God which has safeguarded the faith of the people, and has made them firm in their commitments to God. It is faith in the ultimate victory of truth that has made these people seek an active role in working towards social reforms and other related matters. Seeking the help of God under these circumstances helps human beings to avoid becoming hopeless in the face of continued atrocities and wrongs committed against the innocent. The Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) laid the foundation of this positive attitude by introducing the universal program of reform under the divinely guided leadership that will undertake to unite human resources in creating the ethical order proclaimed in the Quran.

Imam Zayn al-Abidin has conveyed this positive aspect of the hope of deliverance in the tradition in which he says To hope for deliverance and release in itself functions as the most profound form of deliverance.[3]

To conclude our discussion at this point, faith in the promised Mahdi has made it possible for the Shia community to hope and work for the ideal. It has eliminated the negative spirit of pessimism, engendering in it the positive spirit of confidence in the human ability to work for its betterment. The belief has, furthermore, required the followers of the twelfth Imam to fight against the forces of disbelief, materialism, corruption, and injustice, and to work for the government of God, the perfection of the human intellect and the establishment of true peace through justice on earth, and to further human knowledge and technology. It is for this reason that the hope for deliverance during the occultation has been regarded as the best form of divine worship and martyrdom in the path of truth in the numerous traditions reported from the ahl al-bayt.[4]

The Twelfth Imam Endeavors to Defend Islam during the Occultation

One of the orations of the Nahj al-balagha points to the fact that the Imam of the Age during the occultation also is engaged in furthering the cause of Islam and solving the problems faced by the Muslims as much as he can. Imam Ali b. Abi Talib said

They (i.e., Muslims) took to the right and the left piercing through to the ways of evil and leaving the paths of guidance. Do not make haste for a matter which is to happen and is awaited, and do not wish for delay in what the morrow is to bring for you. For, how many people make haste for a matter, but when they get it they begin to wish they had not got it. How near is today to the dawning of tomorrow. O people, this is the time for the occurrence of every promised event and the approach of things which you do not know. Whoever from us (i.e., ahl al-bayt) will exist during these days will move through them with a burning lamp and will tread on the footsteps of the virtuous, in order to unfasten knots, to free slates, to divide the united and unite the divided. He will be in concealment (sitra) from people. The stalker will not find his footprints even though he pursues with his eye. Then a group of people will be sharpened like the sharpening of swords by the blacksmith. Their sight will be brightened by the revelation (tanzil, i.e., the Quran), the interpretation will be put in their ears and they will be given drinks of wisdom, morning and evening. [5]

The apparent sense of this oration suggests that during the time of Ali b. Abi Talib, people were awaiting events about which the Prophet had informed them. In all probability, it was information related to the occultation. The presumable sense of the oration suggests the Imam during the period of concealment would live an extremely veiled life. But he will endeavor to solve the problems facing the community with deep insight and will vindicate the sanctity of Islam. He will remove the difficulties and will come to the aid of the wronged ones. He will disperse the group that would have come together to destroy the Islamic foundations. He will eliminate all the organizations that he would identify as being detrimental to the purposes of God. He will provide the necessary preliminaries needed for bringing about a beneficial society. With the blessed presence of the Imam of the Age a group of people will be trained to defend the religion, and will be inspired by the Quranic sciences in their resolutions about the ideal Muslim society.

Dr. Fahimi I wanted you to explain to me the reason as to why in our traditions, that is the Sunni hadith, the existence of the Mahdi, especially his other names like Qaim and Sahib al-amr (the Master of the Command = the one entrusted with the command), is not mentioned. However, since it is getting very late in the night, I should keep this question for our next session.

To be sure, it was quite late at night. The meeting was adjourned with the next date announced.

It was decided that we should meet at Dr. Fahimis house.

Notes

1. Yanabi al-mawadda, Vol. 2, p. 317.
2. Bihar al-anwar, Vol. 52, p. 122-150.
3. Ibid., p. 122
4. Ibid., p. 122-150.
5. Nahj al-balagha, Vol. 2, Sermon No. 146.

Ref: Al-Imam Al-Mahdi- by Ibrahim Amini p. 154-161

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