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A DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO HADITH CRITICISM IN THE IMĀMĪ SCHOOL: REJECTING HADITH CONTRARY TO IJMĀ' (CONSENSUS)

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Abstract: This study examines the Shi'a/Imāmiyya (Twelver Shi'a) position that a ḥadīth which contradicts ijmā', considered a criterion in ḥadīth criticism, should be rejected on methodological grounds. It analyzes the Shi'i conception of ijmā' and the tensions and inconsistencies that emerge when this conception is evaluated in light of established methodological principles. According to Shi'i scholars, ijmā' can function as probative evidence only insofar as it discloses the opinion of the Ma'sūm (the Imām). The opinions that the Imāms embraced while they were alive were reported by their students—those who came to be referred to as Aṣḥāb al-ijmā'. However, setting aside the debates about its very existence, the fact that during the period of ghayba the final Imām was a figure whose identity was unknown made determining his opinion difficult. A central focus of the article is the argument that, in relation to the concept of ijmā'—which developed within Shi'ism in contrast to the Sunnī legal schools—the Shi'a, in order to sustain their communal and doctrinal distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Muslim majority and to establish the legitimacy of their position, articulated an alternative understanding of ijmā', equated it with tawātur, and consequently advanced the principle that ḥadīths contradicting ijmā', that is, contradicting tawātur, should be rejected on methodological grounds. The article further explores the extent to which the criteria formulated by Shi'i authorities with regard to ijmā' are practically applicable and the degree of consistency with which these criteria were followed in practice.

Keywords: Shī'a, Ijmā', Infallibility, 'Iṣmah, Fabricated Hadiths, Contradictions.

INTRODUCTION

The term ijmā' (consensus) lexically denotes "intending" and "agreeing," whereas in the technical usage of Islamic legal theory it refers to the unanimous agreement of the mujtahids of the Muslim community in a given generation on a particular religious ruling—that is, the reaching of a definitive legal judgement by those qualified to issue authoritative fatwas (al-Jurjānī, 1306, 4). Shī'ī sources define ijmā' in nearly identical terms. Among Shī'ī scholars, al-Anṣārī notes that the concept bears two meanings: the first is "resolving/deciding," as attested in the Qur'ānic verse, fa-ajmi'ū amrakum (Yūnus 10:71). The second denotes "agreeing unanimously," as in the expression ajma'a al-muslimūn 'alā kadha, which signifies the Muslims' consensus on a given matter (al-Anṣārī, 1415, 1:500; al-Ghurayfī, 2014, 11).

Technically, therefore, ijmā' signifies a unanimous scholarly agreement on a particular issue, that is, the convergence of qualified Muslim scholars upon a religious judgement.

Within the Shī'ī—specifically Imāmī—tradition, however, ijmā' assumes a more specialized meaning. According to Imāmī doctrine, ijmā' refers not to the consensus of all Muslim scholars but exclusively to the agreement of Shī'ī scholars within a given generation on a religious matter (al-Ghurayfī, 2014, 11). Beyond this, Shī'ī scholarship identifies a group of eighteen transmitters among the students of Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/733 [?]) and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) who are collectively known as the Aṣḥāb al-Ijmā' ("the People of Consensus"). These eighteen authorities transmitted 110 legal opinions, and any report or ḥadīth that contradicts these 110

rulings is categorically rejected within Imāmī methodology. This is because, according to Shī'ī scholars, the consensus formed in these cases represents the very ruling of the Ma'ṣūm (Infallible) Imams. When the view of the Ma'ṣūm Imam on any matter is known, the disagreement of the broader Muslim community is considered irrelevant, for in such contexts the Ma'ṣūm Imam occupies an authoritative status analogous to that of the Prophet himself (al-Mufid, 1993, 121). His ruling constitutes a definitive legal judgement in religion; accordingly, issuing a fatwa that contradicts it is impermissible, and any report or ḥadīth that diverges from it cannot be accepted.

In this article, the focus will be limited to the Imāmī conception of ijmā', specifically the rejection of ḥadīth reports that contradict consensus and the various internal tensions associated with ijmā' as understood in Shī'ī sources. No comparative methodology will be employed between the Sunnī and Shī'ī/Imāmī traditions. The Sunnī understanding of ijmā' and the question of rejecting ḥadīth on the basis of contradicting consensus will be addressed in a separate study. It should merely be noted here that Imām al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), in his *al-Risālah*, does not refer at all to Shī'ī views when discussing the doctrine of consensus (al-Shāfi'ī, 1938, 471–476). Likewise, scholars who authored independent treatises on the subject—such as Ibn al-Mundhir (d. 318/930 [?]) and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1071)—do not treat or compare the Shī'ī understanding of ijmā' in their works.

Shī'ī scholars, however, felt compelled to articulate positions that diverged from Sunnī doctrine in order to reinforce their own legitimacy, for they never constituted more than roughly one quarter of the Muslim population. Consequently, they regarded alignment with the majority view—namely, the Sunnī position on ijmā'—as a threat to their doctrinal authority. For this reason, they did not accept those who denied the authority of the Ma'ṣūm Imam as complete believers, even if they were Muslims (Shaykh Ṣadūq, 1987, 231).

This stance was reinforced by the perception that Sunnī scholars considered reliable the ḥadīth transmissions of Companions who, at times, had disobeyed the Prophet's directives, and that they could establish consensus even on matters for which no explicit Qur'ānic verse or prophetic report existed. Moreover, Shī'ī scholars believed that the Ma'ṣūm Imam—whom they regarded as the exclusive repository of religious truth—could not hold the same views on legal and theological issues as Sunnī scholars who did not accept his authority (al-Murtaẓā, 1405, 1/15; al-Khudārī Bek, 1969, 279). This theory compelled Shī'ī scholars to confront

several uncertainties. After the year 329 AH, when the Major Occultation began, the Imam in whom they believed withdrew from public sight and declared that he would not meet with anyone until God willed otherwise. Yet, according to their doctrinal claims, the perpetual existence of a Ma'ṣūm (Infallible) Imam until the Day of Resurrection was deemed a necessary requirement (al-Qummī, 1987, 157). The concealment of the Ma'ṣūm and his apparent disengagement from the concerns of his followers seemed incompatible with divine wisdom. Because of the confusion generated by these issues, the Shī'ī community—having previously lost a portion of its adherents—developed theological and rational arguments to establish the continued existence of the Hidden Imam.

In the fourth Islamic century, the prominent Shī'ī theologian Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) and his disciples, such as al-Sharīf al-Murtaẓā (d. 436/1044) and al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), formulated the doctrine of ijmā'. According to this conceptualization, even if the Imam was not directly identifiable, he nonetheless existed as a real person among his partisans and continued to issue legal opinions as an unidentified (*majhūl al-hāl*) mujtahid scholar in matters of dispute. Thus, although the scholars could not determine his exact identity, their consensus was understood to be one that included the Ma'ṣūm Imam.

Although this theory was not acceptable to their opponents, al-Mufid's student al-Sharīf al-Murtaẓā deemed the Imam's participation in ijmā' a necessity, whereas his own student Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī considered it a divine favor. According to the understanding of ijmā' that crystallized in the subsequent period, the Ma'ṣūm Imam was believed to be definitively present within one of the two opposing views even in situations of internal contradiction. For this reason, identifying the valid ijmā' essentially meant locating the consensus in which the Imam participated. In cases of disagreement where the transmitted sources—namely the Qur'ān and reports from the Ma'ṣūm Imams—provided no decisive evidence, preference was to be given to the view that included a scholar whose identity was unknown. This was because the unidentified (*majhūl al-nasab*) scholar was, with high probability, the Ma'ṣūm Imam himself, issuing legal opinions for his adherents without disclosing his identity.

1. The Formation Process of Ijmā' and Its Evidentiary Status

Shī'ī scholars, even though they do not recognize his caliphate, acknowledge that the first ijmā' occurred among the Companions concerning the caliphate of Abū Bakr. From their perspective, although there

was no explicit religious proof regarding this matter, the scholars sought evidence from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The initial consensus took place primarily among the residents of Madinah or among the Prophet's prominent Companions. According to the Companions, this ijmā' and agreement on the caliphate were considered sufficient for establishing the ruling. That is, even in the absence of direct evidence in the Qur'ān or the Sunnah, the consensus and agreement of scholars on subsidiary matters—according to Sunnī schools of thought rather than Shī'ī interpretation—constitutes a valid religious proof.

Although the Shī'a accepted ijmā' as evidence for determining religious rulings, this acceptance represents merely a formal similarity to the theory of consensus in the broader (non-Imāmī) scholarly tradition (al-Muzaffar, 1360, 2:87; al-Ghurayfī, 2014, 12). In light of this, it is evident that, according to the Shī'a, ijmā'—being essentially a matter of agreement and unanimity—cannot, on its own, serve as a definitive proof. This is because ijmā' was instituted specifically for deriving religious rulings. Non-Shī'ī (general) jurists sometimes based ijmā' on definitive and explicit evidence, while at other times they relied on analogy or other non-authoritative speculative reasoning (zannī) (al-Ghurayfī, 2014, 13–14).

Scholars of uṣūl (principles of jurisprudence) have debated whether ijmā' derives its authority from the mere unanimity of opinion or from its grounding in textual evidence (naṣṣ). Shī'ī jurists argue that, unlike the Sunnī understanding of consensus, ijmā' can only be valid if it is based on a textual proof; otherwise, it holds no normative significance (al-Anṣārī, al-Mawsū'at, 1:502). Furthermore, the Sunnī schools themselves are not unanimous regarding the Qur'ānic verses (al-Baqarah 2:143; Āl 'Imrān 3:110; an-Nisā' 5:115; at-Tawbah 9:16; Luqmān 31:15) and the interpretations of ḥadīth they cite as evidence for ijmā' (al-Anṣārī, 1415, 1:503).

The Shī'ī exegete Abū'l-Ḥusayn 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 307/919), in his commentary on verse 115 of Sūrat an-Nisā'—which Sunnī scholars often cite as proof for consensus—does not address the issue of ijmā'. According to Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī, the phrase “those who oppose the Messenger” (man ya'ṣi al-Rasūl) in this verse (an-Nisā' 5:115) refers not to the general Muslim community but specifically to Abū Ta'mah b. al-Ubayrak, who apostatized and fled to Mecca; the verse applies similarly to anyone who opposed Islam and joined the polytheists (al-Ṭūsī, 1424, 5:84).

Another point concerns the interpretation of the particle man (من) in the verse, which can convey a universalizing sense. According to some Imāmī

authorities, the word ṣabīl (“path”) cannot signify all paths, nor can al-mu'minīn (“the believers”) signify all believers. If one were to adopt such a general interpretation, it could imply that those opposing the Prophet were disbelievers, while “believers” could include those who recognize the Ma'ṣūm Imāms. Interpreted this way, the verse would refer not merely to the consensus of believers in a particular generation but to the cumulative consensus of all believers across all eras (al-Ṭūsī, 1424, 5:85). The generality of the expression necessitates this understanding. Even Sunnīs, if they limit the meaning to the believers of a specific generation, could, by the same logic, construe it as referring to those who believe in the Ma'ṣūm Imām. After all, there is no certainty that they ceased to be believers; obedience to them presupposes their status as believers.

Al-Ṭūsī further adds that, as established by other proofs besides this verse, the threat mentioned in the verse is directed at the one who opposes the Prophet (al-Ṭūsī, 1424, 5:86). For more detailed discussions see (al-Ṭūsī, 1417, 2:605–612; al-Fayṣ al-Kāshānī, n.d., 1:462–463).

Shī'ī scholars reject the ḥadīth reports cited by their opponents as evidence for ijmā', either on the grounds of their weak authenticity or by arguing that the meaning cannot be understood in the manner interpreted by Sunnī jurists. According to them, even in the ḥadīth often cited among the proofs of ijmā'—“My Ummah will not unite upon error. If you encounter a disagreement, follow the side where the majority of Muslims (sawād al-a'ẓam) stand” (Ibn Mājah, Fitan, 8)—the term Ummah refers not to the general Muslim community but to those who are rightly guided. Shī'īs argue that the Sunnī claim of a single rightly guided sect cannot be substantiated; in reality, the rightly guided group (al-Firqah al-muḥiqqah / al-Firqah al-Nājiyah) comprises the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt. Furthermore, the transmission of this ḥadīth from Anas b. Mālik is weak, as noted in the Zawā'id, due to the presence of Abū Khalaf al-A'mā in its chain (al-Anṣārī, 1415, 1:504).

Similarly, in the ḥadīth frequently cited to demonstrate the authoritative nature of ijmā'—“Allah has protected you from three things: receiving the curse of your Prophet and being collectively destroyed, the oppressors prevailing over the rightly guided, and agreeing upon error (ijmā' upon misguidance)” (Abū Dāwūd, Fitan, 1; Dārimī, Muqaddimah, 8)—the common emphasis in both narrations is on the term dalālah (misguidance), which carries a more specific meaning than mere error. While error may signify simple mistake, dalālah entails sin and deviation from the right path

(inhirāf).

Moreover, according to the intended meaning of both hadiths, not only the jurists participating in the consensus but the entire Ummah are described as being free from error, which would imply the infallibility (ma'sūm) of the whole community. Since even for scholars such universal infallibility is impossible, it is clearly untenable to apply this to the entire Ummah. Shī'ī scholars interpret this issue from a distinct perspective, equating prophetic and Imāmic infallibility and attributing the ascription of infallibility to the Ummah in these reports to "the probable presence of the Ma'sūm Imam within the community" (al-Anṣārī, 1415, 1:504–505).

According to Shī'ī scholars, even considering ijmā' as rationally possible poses significant difficulties. Although Qur'ānic verses use the second-person plural "you" and ḥadīth reports refer to "my Ummah," indicating the consensus of the community of Muḥammad, al-Anṣārī raises objections by including members of other religious communities in his reasoning. He argues that to regard it as rationally impossible for knowledgeable and intelligent individuals to reach consensus in error would, by analogy, require that Jews, Christians, and adherents of other religions also never reach agreement in error—an untenable position. Their numerical superiority and their concurrence on matters contrary to Islam did not prevent them from erring or falling into misguidance. Similarly, philosophers have reached consensus on many issues using evidence, only to be proven mistaken later (al-Anṣārī, 1415, 1:505).

Hur al-Āmilī (d. 1104/1693) provides a noteworthy response to the Sunnī approach of following the majority (sawād al-a'ẓam). He argues that the Qur'ān emphasizes that the numerical strength of nonbelievers does not confer validity. Furthermore, in both Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīth reports, praise (maḥḥ) is attributed to the minority, whereas criticism (dhamm) applies to the majority at the level of tawātur. In contrast, ijmā' represents only the widely recognized opinion, and the evidence supporting its authoritative status is incomplete. The actual realization of consensus during the Occultation is particularly difficult, and fully mastering the subject is nearly impossible. There is no proof that ijmā' should be restricted to those living in a particular period.

All details concerning this matter primarily belong to non-Shī'ī authorities ('āmmah), and none of these considerations provide legitimate or acceptable evidence. In Shī'ī sources, the statement "take the consensus among the Companions [of the Shī'a], for there is no doubt in consensus" does not refer to

absolute consensus, but rather to agreement on the specific issue under discussion. Regarding the differences between two reports on this point, Hur al-Āmilī, like other Shī'ī scholars, maintains that ijmā' can only carry authority if it includes the view of the Ma'sūm Imam. Therefore, ijmā' is not an independent proof; in cases of disagreement, it serves only as a rationale supporting the view of the Ma'sūm (Sunna) (al-Āmilī, n.d., 214).

Although the concept of ijmā' in Shī'a and Sunnī thought may appear similar in name and form, its substantive content is entirely different. In Shī'ī perspective, ijmā' does not constitute an independent proof alongside the Qur'ān and Sunnah; rather, it derives its authority from revealing the Sunnah. In itself, ijmā' does not possess the attributes of infallibility ('iṣmah) or legal authority (ḥujjiyya). Since the Imāmiyya refers to the consensus of a small number of individuals, it cannot be designated as ijmā' in the technical sense. This consensus represents a definite agreement that manifests the view of the Ma'sūm Imam and, by ruling, carries the status of consensus. Otherwise, the mere agreement of people on a matter would carry no value (al-Muzaffar, 1360, 3:103–104).

Moreover, the epistemic authority of mutawātir reports does not arise from the general infallibility of the community of Muḥammad but from the fact that the report encompasses the view of the Ma'sūm Imam (al-Ṭūsī, 1417, 2:604, 612). In addition, those participating in the consensus must themselves be Shī'īs. Since others do not hold the belief in the Ma'sūm Imam, truth cannot be with them, nor can the Ma'sūm Imam enter into agreement with those who do not believe in him (al-Murtaẓā, 1405, 1:15). This is supported by Sūrat al-Aḥzāb, 33, which refers to the unanimity of the Ahl al-Bayt (al-Aḥzāb 33:33). God has purified the Ahl al-Bayt from impurities (riṣṣ). The use of the masculine pronoun ('ankum) in the verse excludes the Prophet's wives from the Ahl al-Bayt. In the ḥadīth, the term error refers to impurity (riṣṣ), which, according to the verse, cannot originate from the Ahl al-Bayt (al-Ṭūsī, 1424, 8:340–341).

2. Authorities of Ijmā'

2.1. The Prophet and the Ma'sūm Imāms

Although infallibility (ma'sūm), understood as protection from sin, is attributed only to prophets in the Sunnī tradition, the Shī'a recognize thirteen individuals from the Ahl al-Bayt as Ma'sūm. The first among them are 'Alī and his wife Fāṭima, while the remaining twelve are the Imāms traditionally acknowledged by the Shī'a. God created everything in existence out of respect for Muḥammad and his Ahl al-Bayt (Shaykh Ṣadūq, 1414, 93).

It should be noted, however, that neither the Qur'ān

nor Sunnī ḥadīth sources provide information explicitly supporting the Imāmate theory. Moreover, this theory is categorically rejected by Sunnī Muslims.

2.1.1. The Theory of Imāmate and the Identity of the Imām

During the Umayyad period, the Shī'a were subjected to intense political pressures. This environment facilitated the emergence of extreme ideas, and the first theory of Imāmate arose during this period. According to this theory, the Imāms had to be from the Ahl al-Bayt. Later, the theory was extended back to the time of the Prophet, developing into the belief that 'Alī had been appointed as Caliph by God and that the Imāmate was restricted to his descendants. This theory first appeared in the city of Kūfa during the revolt led by Imām Zayd b. 'Alī (d. 122/740) in Hijri 122 against the Umayyad Caliph Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 125/743) (al-Kātib, 2009, 228–229).

In later Shī'ī thought, for the sustainability of the Imāmate theory, it was accepted as established knowledge that "there must always exist a Ma'sūm between God and His servants, and this is obligatory until the Day of Judgment" (al-'Āmilī, n.d., 141). The issue of the Imāmate and the appointment of Imāms by naṣṣ (divine designation) became not only the most significant point of divergence between the Shī'a and their opponents but also the most challenging topic for persuading adversaries.

Initially, after the death of the eleventh Imām, Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d. 260/874), the claim that he had a son—and that some of his followers mentioned this after his death—remained a secretive and esoteric view that was not fully accepted among the Shī'a. During this period, many Shī'a doubted the existence of the twelfth Imām and even accused one another of disbelief (al-Kātib, 2005, 147). Since Ja'far claimed the Imāmate after the death of his brother Ḥasan al-'Askarī, he was referred to among the Shī'a as "Ja'far the Liar" (Ja'far al-Kazzāb) (Kılavuz, 1989, 2:394). The group that maintained, before Ḥasan al-'Askarī's death, that he had a son is referred to as the Isnā' Ashariyya (Twelvers) (al-Kātib, 2005, 142–147).

2.1.2. The Attributes of the Imāms and the Source of Their Knowledge

Almost all Shī'ī authors have felt the need to address the issue of Imāmate in some form or to write independent works on the subject. Among these, the most comprehensive work is arguably the famous book by Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Qummī (d. 329/941), al-Imāma wa't-Tabsira min al-Khayr. In this work, based on reports, some transmitted from the Prophet and most from the Imāms, he presents that the Prophet foretold the succession of twelve

Imāms after him, the first being 'Alī and the last being the Qa'im/Mahdī. It was also reported that the Qa'im would experience a period of concealment, during which people would be tested, and those who remained steadfast would be saved, while the deniers would belong to the people of Hell (al-Majlisī, 1983, 36:226–373). To support this belief, Shī'ī scholars cited numerous verses along with their reasons for revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl). According to a report transmitted by al-Qummī, Imām Riḍā (d. 203/818), the son of Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799), interpreted the verse "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due" (an-Nisa. 4:58) in response to a question as a divine command whereby an Imām entrusts the responsibility to the next Imām after him (al-Qummī, 1987, 166).

Although its precise nature is not fully known, the Imāmiyya generally maintain that the Imām receives knowledge from God through a special, non-ordinary means. Unlike other scholars, the Imām possesses a unique connection with God in matters of religion; endowed with certain miracles, he receives revelation conveyed by an unseen angel. For this reason, the Imām is fully cognizant of all matters and constitutes the ultimate source of correct judgment in every issue. The Imāms acquire their knowledge in three ways: through oral transmissions, written reports, and by being muḥaddath, that is, recipients of divine communication (Kuzudişli, 2011, 86).

The Imāms are said to possess knowledge of the complete exegesis and interpretation of the Qur'ān, its abrogating and abrogated verses, as well as all forms of heavenly knowledge revealed to prophets and angels (al-Kulaynī, 1388, 1:253–255). The phrase "those firmly grounded in knowledge" in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3:7) refers to 'Alī and the other Imāms (al-'Āmilī, n.d., 144). No one other than the Imāms can fully comprehend the exegesis of the Qur'ān (al-'Āmilī, n.d., 173). It is even reported that the deeds of servants are presented daily to the Imāms, together with the Prophet (al-'Āmilī, n.d., 145).

Since the creation of the world, a just Imām has always existed as God's proof (ḥujja), and the institution of waṣāya (divinely appointed succession) has passed from prophet to prophet beginning with Adam (Qummī, 1987, 153–155, 165–167), and will continue until the Day of Resurrection. Adam memorized the names of the Imāms, while Noah learned their number (Qummī, 1987, 145, 148).

The confusion arising from internal and external objections and doubts regarding the doctrine of Imāmate is also reflected in the language of the transmitted reports. According to these traditions, the Imāmate does not continue through paternal

uncles, maternal uncles, or brothers (Qummī, 1987, 177, 179). Apart from Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, it cannot pass between two brothers (Qummī, 1987, 187–189). Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 81/700), although regarded as a Mahdī by some, is not considered an Imām (Qummī, 1987, 193–195). Likewise, ‘Abd Allāh (Qummī, 1987, 209), Ismā‘īl (Qummī, 1987, 207), and Ja‘far are not Imāms (Qummī, 1987, 178). The Prophet reportedly informed ‘Alī of those who would share with him in the Imāmate, and he had these names written down for him. According to these accounts, it is through the Imāms that the community receives rain, that prayers are answered, and that calamities are warded off and divine mercy descends (Qummī, 1987, 183). The one who is to become Imām recognizes this at the final moment of the preceding Imām’s life. Gabriel is said to have come to the Prophet carrying a written document instructing him to appoint ‘Alī as his successor, along with a seal. Before dying, each Imām writes down the name of the next Imām and seals the document with this seal. This process will continue until the Day of Resurrection (Qummī, 1987, 166–167). Whoever dies without knowing the Imām of his time is deemed to have died the death of the pre-Islamic age of ignorance, which implies dying upon disbelief, polytheism, hypocrisy, and misguidance (Qummī, 1987, 219–220). The Prophet is also reported to have prayed to God not to grant intercession to those who oppose the Imāms (Qummī, 1987, 174). A person who lives during the time of the Imām but fails to acknowledge him, though still considered a Muslim, is not a believer (Qummī, 1987, 229). Anyone who associates with an Imām—whom God has not appointed—another person as equal in authority has committed shirk against God (Qummī, 1987, 231). The Imāms also possess the scriptures revealed to previous prophets, and it is inconceivable that they should remain ignorant of any matter pertaining to revelation (al-Kulaynī, 1388, 1:227).

2.1.3. The Occulted Imām and the Means of Communicating with Him

Among the Imams elevated by the Shi‘a to the level of doctrinal belief, the most enigmatic figure is the Twelfth Imam, known as al-Qā‘im and al-Mahdī, who is identified as the Occulted Imam (al-Imām al-Ghā‘ib). According to Shi‘i sources, the Occulted Imam shares certain characteristics with the prophets: like Moses, his birth was concealed and he remained hidden from his people for a period (Shaykh Ṣadūq, 1429, 2:374); like Joseph, he experienced a form of imprisonment; and like Jesus, he was said to have been declared dead despite not having died. Thus, in matters relating to occultation, al-Qā‘im is believed to embody attributes previously manifested by earlier prophets (Qummī, 1987, 234–35). It is asserted that those who attempt to

determine the exact time of his appearance are liars; those who hasten will perish; and those who show submission will attain deliverance and ultimately meet the Imams (Qummī, 1987, 235–36). Another report attributed to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq interprets the Qur’ānic verse, “We shall certainly test you with something of fear and hunger and loss of wealth, lives, and fruits; but give good tidings to the patient” (Al-Imran 2:155), as referring to the period of al-Qā‘im’s occultation. Although some narrations maintain that it is impermissible to mention al-Qā‘im by his given name—claiming such knowledge to be among the hidden matters of the Prophet—other traditions explicitly state that his name and teknonymy correspond to those of the Prophet and that he most closely resembles him in character and appearance (Shaykh Ṣadūq, 1309, 2:411). Shi‘i reports also describe a number of signs that will precede the appearance and uprising of al-Qā‘im. Among these are the emergence of the Yamānī and the Sufyānī, the call of a herald from the heavens, the swallowing of an army by the earth in the region of al-Bayḍā’, and the killing of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (Nu‘mānī, 2013, 184 [nos. 313, 315], 186 [no. 317], 188 [nos. 319–20], 191 [no. 325], 192 [no. 330]). Although, according to Sunni scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the notion of a Twelfth Imam never emerged during the lifetime of Ḥasan al-‘Askarī and no such child was ever born (Ibn Taymiyya, 1986, 403), Shi‘i sources maintain that the birth of Imam al-Mahdī was concealed out of fear of Abbasid persecution. Despite his young age, he is said to have attended his father’s funeral and prevented his uncle Ja‘far—who was claiming the imamate—from leading the prayer, taking his place before withdrawing again into occultation (al-Kātib, 2005, 177). It is further narrated that al-Qā‘im confronted his uncle Ja‘far during a dispute over inheritance, saying, “What right have you to interfere with what belongs to me?” Similarly, when Ja‘far attempted to bury their great-grandmother inside the house, al-Qā‘im reportedly appeared and asked, “O Ja‘far, is this house yours?”, after which he disappeared again and was not seen by him thereafter (Shaykh Ṣadūq, 2018, 2:373–74). Despite the abundance of detailed reports concerning al-Qā‘im, the means of communicating with him have remained confined to elusive accounts and mystical narratives, leaving the nature of such interactions shrouded in secrecy.

Shi‘i scholars, while formulating the doctrines and jurisprudence of the Shi‘a, consistently maintained a degree of reservation toward the reports transmitted by the Companions—even when these Companions fulfilled the reliability criteria established by the hadith scholars and had personally seen or heard the Prophet. By contrast, they displayed greater tolerance toward reports transmitted by their own

adherents, despite the fact that such transmitters should, in principle, be subject to the same standards of reliability. Yet the contradictions found among the reports attributed to the Imams were more numerous than the disagreements that emerged among Sunni jurists themselves (Tūsī, 11417, 1/137–138).

The works composed by Shī'ī scholars on hadith methodology and biographical evaluation (rijāl) further illustrate this phenomenon. According to various reports found in the Ahl al-Bayt sources, whenever one of the Imams was alive and accessible, disputants could meet him directly, present their conflicting views, and determine the correct ruling based on the Imam's statement. After the death of the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-'Askarī, the Imāmī community believed that communication with the twelfth Imam continued through correspondence and specially appointed emissaries. Indeed, during the first phase of occultation—known as the Minor Occultation (al-ghayba al-sughrā)—the Shī'ī community held that it could receive messages from the Imam through individuals recognized as his deputies. However, during the Major Occultation (al-ghayba al-kubrā), beginning in 329/940, the Imam—according to the final declaration transmitted by his last deputy—affirmed that he would no longer appoint any representative, nor would he meet anyone openly or communicate through a special messenger. In the period that followed, responding to objections raised by opponents and devising a method for resolving internal doctrinal and legal disagreements became a significant intellectual challenge and an important field of inquiry among Shī'ī scholars.

Imāmī scholars were compelled to devise a solution to this problem. In the fourth Islamic century, the prominent Imāmī theologian al-Mufīd displayed a distinct tendency to rely on theological arguments and rational inference—especially in matters that, in principle, required reliance on naṣṣ. This methodological inclination became even more pronounced in the works of his student al-Murtaẓā, particularly due to the rejection of khabar al-wāḥid. As a consequence, ijmā' began to occupy an increasingly central place as a means of resolving questions that should have been determined through naṣṣ. Al-Mufīd—and, following him, his two major disciples al-Murtaẓā and al-Tūsī—did not allow solitary reports (khabar al-wāḥid) to take precedence over reason, and the three shared the same view regarding the probative value (ḥujjiyya) of ijmā', devoting considerable space to the subject in their writings. Shī'ī scholars, although aligned with the Mu'tazila and opposed to Ahl al-Sunna on certain theological questions unrelated to the Imamate, adopted a position on ijmā' that set them at odds with all other schools. While al-Murtaẓā did not

consider khabar al-wāḥid sufficient proof in matters of legal rulings, he introduced an exception in the case of ijmā'. In his view, there had to exist some means of maintaining contact with the Imām, and such contact had to occur in a manner equivalent to tawātur, leaving no room for objection or contradiction. Al-Murtaẓā thus argued that this could be achieved through ijmā'—specifically, an ijmā' in which the Imām himself was believed to be included (al-Murtaẓā, Rasā'il, 1:213). Although the Imām whose existence was an article of faith remained unknown and concealed, he was still believed to be alive. Therefore, Shī'ī scholars held that, for the community to benefit from his guidance in intellectual and social matters, it was unnecessary to hear his opinion directly or receive it through tawātur. Rather, in periods during which the Imām was hidden and all means of direct communication with him were severed, the only viable method for determining his view was through an ijmā' in which his participation was deemed certain—and this became the accepted position (al-Murtaẓā, 1405, 1:11). However, it was not considered valid to treat the consensus of only known scholars as definitive proof. An ijmā' could function as evidence only if the Imām was included among the group, even if unrecognized. This notion simultaneously supported the belief in the Imām's continued existence and elevated ijmā' to the status of a binding religious proof. Yet once formalized, the theory generated a highly complex set of problems. There were no definitive criteria by which one could determine whether the Imām had actually participated in a given ijmā'. Moreover, based on a presupposition, scholars assumed that the Imām must necessarily be part of the ijmā'; and this assumption—despite being based on conjecture rather than any explicit or mass-transmitted textual evidence—was treated as equivalent to tawātur. In other words, a purely rational presumption, not even supported by a khabar al-wāḥid (a person's khabar), came to be regarded as possessing the epistemic weight of tawātur because of the doctrinal presuppositions of the school. Was this not a contradiction? According to al-Murtaẓā, the answer was straightforward: if one possesses knowledge that is certain and leaves no room for doubt, the absence of detailed information does not undermine the certainty of that knowledge. A person may know with certainty the existence of many established facts while lacking full knowledge of their particulars; such ignorance does not diminish the certainty of the facts themselves. Information concerning cities, lands, major historical events, and well-known rulers functions in this way. For example, someone who has never seen Basra or Kufa, yet knows with certainty that they exist, or someone who knows that the Battle of Badr or the Battle of Siffin occurred, may be unable to provide a detailed explanation if asked how they are certain of

these events. Similarly, the Imām's inclusion in the *ijmā'* was, for al-Murtazā, a matter whose occurrence was certain, even if its particulars remained unknown. In his writings, he sought to clarify that the certainty of the Imām's participation—and the impossibility of fully demonstrating its details—did not compromise the validity of this knowledge. He illustrated his argument with additional analogies to reinforce this point (al-Murtazā, 1405, 1:12–14).

While explaining how one can recognize a report that originates from God, al-Murtazā identifies several distinctive features—foremost among them the extraordinary inimitability (*i'jāz*) manifested in the Qur'ān's unparalleled eloquence and rhetorical perfection, which no human speech can match (al-Murtazā, 1405, 1:10–11). Since the divine speech has reached us through *tawātur*, there is no disagreement regarding its capacity to yield certain knowledge (*'ilm*) and to function as binding proof (*hujja*). In contrast, establishing the words of the Ma'sūm—whether the Prophet or the Imām—in a manner that yields certain knowledge is possible only by directly hearing their statements from their own mouths. For later generations, the only way for the Imām's statements to provide certain knowledge is for those statements to be transmitted through *tawātur*. Thus, when issuing a legal judgment, if neither the apparent meaning (*zāhir*) of the Qur'ān nor any *mutawātir* report from the Prophet or the Imāms can be cited as evidence, recourse must be made to the *ijmā'* of the scholars. For this reason, according to al-Murtazā, even when the Imām's individual view cannot be identified, once his participation in the *ijmā'* is presumed, the *ijmā'* becomes—by itself—a fully sufficient proof in all matters for which no other evidence exists (al-Murtazā, 1405, 1:16–17).

Although determining whether the Imām's view is present within an instance of *ijmā'* ultimately rests on *ijtihād* and therefore remains relative and probabilistic (*ẓannī*), this did not constitute a significant problem for the Shī'ī scholars. Otherwise, they would have had to concede that the Ma'sūm Imām neither identifies nor corrects the errors of the scholars who follow him, and that he remains unconcerned with the affairs of the Shī'ī community. From another perspective, the Ma'sūm Imām's silence regarding a matter on which *ijmā'* has formed was interpreted as an indication that the scholars' *ijtihād* was sound. In other words, this was analogous to *taqrīr al-sunna* in the methodology of the hadith scholars: the Prophet's tacit approval when witnessing an action. The notion that the Imām's silence signifies approval already existed within early Imāmī thought (al-Mufid, 1993, 107). While al-Murtazā referred to this principle as the

participation of the “unknown lineage” (*majhūl al-nasab*) Imām in *ijmā'*, his student al-Ṭūsī later termed it “the consensus of divine grace” (*al-ijmā' al-luṭfī*). According to al-Ṭūsī's formulation, if the scholars were to commit an error, the Imām would be required—by virtue of divine grace—to intervene and rectify it. Moreover, to deny that the Imām appears and participates in the formation of *ijmā'* would be tantamount to rejecting *ijmā'* itself (al-Ṭūsī, 1417, 2:631). Accepting the report concerning *ijmā'* as *mutawātir*—namely, affirming that the Imām necessarily participates in the *ijmā'* of the Shī'ī scholars—effectively resolved the issue for those who upheld this doctrine. Consequently, once a person accepts the *tawātur*-level certainty of such participation, giving credence to any opposing hadith becomes inconceivable.

According to Murtazā, there was no doubt that the Imām's opinion belonged not to the *ijmā'* of the Muslim community at large, but exclusively to the *ijmā'* of the Imāmiyya. For there existed numerous proofs indicating that the truth resided with this group (the Imāmiyya). Murtazā articulated his views on this matter in a manner that could justifiably be deemed dogmatic: “The school of the Imām—whom we trust never to depart from the truth nor rely on anything other than the truth—is, without doubt, the school of this group (the Imāmiyya). For there exists no other true (school) besides it. We know that, due to the Imām's occultation and his being indistinguishable from other people, his school is first and foremost the school of the people of knowledge and the people of divine unity, and thereafter the school of the whole community of Islam. We also know that the proofs indicate which school is correct and that the others are corrupt. Accordingly, whatever is said concerning the Imām follows the same line. From what has been stated, it becomes apparent that when the Imāmiyya reach *ijmā'* on a view or a legal school, they do so only upon the truth. For if they reach *ijmā'* on any matter, this necessarily means that the view of the Imām—and of all scholars belonging to them—is included within that *ijmā'...*” (Murtazā, 1405, 1/15–16).

However, this understanding—namely, that the Imām must have participated in *ijmā'* and that, consequently, a report based on *ijmā'* attains the level of *tawātur*—was not, in practice, as easily justifiable as it might appear in theory. Accepting an *ijmā'* founded on analogy (*qiyās*) or abstract reasoning (*mujarrad ijtiḥād*) as equivalent to *tawātur* did not fully align with the principle that *ijmā'* should be grounded in *naṣṣ*. After all, the *ijmā'* of the general community (*'amm*) had occasionally been criticized precisely because it was sometimes based on analogy or independent reasoning.

Murtazā sought to overcome this problem by asserting that the Masūm must necessarily participate in ijmā' on matters lacking naṣṣ, thereby ensuring that the ijmā' of the Sunnah could be regarded with an unassailable certainty. On the one hand, Murtazā rejected the reports of those who had personally witnessed the Prophet or the Imāms on the grounds that solitary reports (khabar al-wāḥid) only express conjecture (zann), and he also did not give weight to the ijmā' of the majority of the community. On the other hand, he treated differing reports concerning the ijmā' of the Imāmiyya—while accepting that the Imām participated in ijmā'—as effectively achieving tawātur through rational-theological inference (istidlāl kalāmī). This precondition, which lacked direct textual support (naṣṣ), contained an internal tension, but for Murtazā it served as a necessary theoretical device to secure the authority and reliability of ijmā' within the Imāmiyya.

2.2. Companions of the Ijmā' (Ashābu'l-Ijmā' / الإجماع أصحاب)

Within Shī'a scholarship, the claim regarding a group whose transmitted reports are considered authentic (عَنْهُمْ يَصِحُّ مَا تَصْنِیْجُ) and who are designated as Ashāb al-Ijmā' was first introduced by al-Kashshī (3rd–4th/9th–10th century) (al-Ghurayfī, n.d., 37, 41). Neither before him nor among his contemporaries is it known that anyone else articulated this claim, yet it remained one of the most significant problems in Shī'a hadith methodology. According to al-Kashshī, there was consensus among the Shī'a regarding the acceptance of the narrations transmitted by those deemed competent as jurists. Although some disagreed, the dominant view held that even if the narrators among this group were morally questionable or accused of fabricating hadiths, the reports were nonetheless considered authentic (Ghurayfī, n.d., 38; Kutluay, 2012, 267). Since it was believed that these narrations came only from trustworthy individuals, even mursal khabar (hadith) were treated as musnad (Ghurayfī, n.d., 41). After al-Kashshī, the issue of Ashāb al-Ijmā' remained debated regarding who precisely belonged to this group (Ghurayfī, n.d., 42); however, prominent scholars such as al-Murtazā, Tūsī, Najāshī (d. 450/1058), Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), Ibn Dāwūd (d. 707/1307), Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Āmilī (Shahīd I) (d. 786/1384), and Zayn al-Dīn b. 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Jubbā'ī al-Āmilī (Shahīd II) (d. 966/1559 [?]) also addressed the issue (Ghurayfī, Kawā'idu'l-Ḥadīth, 42). Excluding the twenty-two names cited by al-Nūrī and twenty-three cited by Ibn Dāwūd, the number of Ashāb al-Ijmā' recognized was eighteen. Among those accepted as Ashāb al-Ijmā', six witnessed the time of Muḥammad al-Bāqir, six the period of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, and six witnessed the era of Mūsā al-Kāẓim (Abū Ibrāhīm) and his son 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (d.

203/818) and participated in their gatherings (Ghurayfī, n.d., 38–39). Some even witnessed the times of two Imāms. The complication arises because certain individuals included in this group were jarḥed (criticized) by Shī'a scholars. For instance, Tūsī asserts that 'Abd Allāh b. Bukayr belonged to the Fataḥiyya (Hilli, 1964), 199–200). Aware of this, Zayn al-Dīn b. 'Alī al-Āmilī (Shahīd II) also criticized Ibn Bukayr's transmission from Zurāra, stating: "His transmission from Zurāra was because those around him did not trust him in issuing legal opinions. He did this to support his own school of thought" (Ghurayfī, n.d., 43). Thus, Tūsī's claim that "Ashāb al-Ijmā' does not transmit from unreliable narrators and does not narrate hadiths from others" did not reflect the truth. In fact, it is established that individuals such as Muḥammad b. Abū Umayr (d. 217/832) and others transmitted reports from weak narrators. Al-Kashshī himself criticized individuals like Ḥākim b. Uṭayba and Zakariyyā b. Yaḥyā, yet Ashāb al-Ijmā' also transmitted reports from them. Similarly, the qāḍī of Rey, 'Amr b. Jamī' al-Azdī, had comparable transmissions. Among the narrators of Ashāb al-Ijmā', there were also unknown figures such as Ḥākim al-A'mā (Ünalán, 2021, 63).

CONCLUSION

The consensus (ijmā'), which means that Muslim scholars reach agreement on a particular issue, is considered a religious proof by Shī'ī/Imāmī scholars to have emerged with the selection of the first caliph following the death of the Prophet. While there were examples of consultation (shūrā) on political and social matters during the lifetime of the Prophet, these do not constitute ijmā' in the juristic sense. This is because in matters of legal rulings (ahkām) that the Prophet declared "Allah commands," decision-making through consultation or consensus is not applicable. Shī'ī scholars share this view. However, among the Shī'a, the established classical cases of ijmā' are those reported by the Ashābu'l-ijmā' and believed to be linked to the Imāms. According to this understanding, fully developed by the third and fourth centuries AH, the first ijmā' issues traced back to the Imāms are considered equivalent to mutawātir khabar, and any opposing hadith must be categorically rejected. This is because it is believed that the Imām/Maṣṣūm definitely participated in these consensus, and any contradictory report would imply a contradiction with the Maṣṣūm himself, which is incompatible with the belief in Imāmāh.

Although ijmā' literally means the opinion of the majority, for the Shī'a it is the consensus of the khāṣṣ (the special group, i.e., themselves) rather than the 'āmm (the general populace) that carries evidentiary weight. According to the Shī'a, the ijmā' of the general public either constitutes mere consensus not

based on the Qur'an and Sunnah (nass) or relies on khabar's from the majority of companions who were fāsiq (sinful) or murtadd (apostate) and did not meet the criteria of sikkah (reliability). In contrast, a consensus in which none of the Maṣṣūmīn participated cannot be considered authoritative. From the defensive perspective represented by Ḥur al-Āmilī, the opponents' position that "one must follow the majority (savād al-a'ẓam)" is incorrect. For him, while the Qur'an emphasizes the insignificance of numerical superiority among the disbelievers, the merit of the minority and the demerit of the majority are both affirmed to the level of tawātur (continuous transmission) in verses and reports. Ijmā', however, represents only the famous opinion. Moreover, the evidentiary basis of ijmā' is not complete. Especially during the period of ghaybah (occultation), the realization of ijmā' is difficult, and full mastery over the topic is almost impossible. There is also no proof that ijmā' should be confined to those living in a particular era. All responsible beings—humans and jinn, past and future—fall under the concept of ummah. Ijmā' cannot be restricted solely to the ahl al-ḥāl wa al-'aqd (those in positions of authority or contractual responsibility). Every detail discussed in this context belongs entirely to the general public, and none of it constitutes valid evidence. Alongside Ḥur al-Āmilī's views, according to Ibn Taymiyya, the Shī'a have not even a single matter on which they are unanimously agreed among themselves. On the other hand, Shī'ī scholars may acknowledge that on issues where the Shī'a and Ahl al-Sunnah coincide, "the ijmā' of the ummah is likewise established." According to Shī'a scholars, among the total of 110 classical (kadīm) ijmā' issues, matters of 'aqidah (creed) are comparatively few, aside from the question of imāmah. Some of these issues are specific to the Imāmiyyah school. While certain rulings conflict with Qur'ānic verses or the hadiths transmitted from the Prophet, others are in agreement with the Ahl al-Sunnah's ijmā'.

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