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The Docetic Doctrine and the Image of the Imām in Early *Ghulāt* Literature

This paper investigates the emergence of a docetic understanding of the Imāmology in early *Ghulāt* literature, arguing that the central thesis of this worldview is the metaphysical immortality of the Imām, the view that the Imām, or even more broadly, the Proof (*al-ḥujjah*), never truly dies. Although often dismissed as a philosophically ad hoc construct or the product of naïve exaggeration, a careful examination of the extant, and now newly accessible, primary sources shows that this doctrine articulates a coherent cosmological system in which divine manifestation and concealment unfold cyclically through the Proofs of God. Despite its seemingly hyperbolic character, the notion is underpinned by a complex philosophical and esoteric framework that lies well beyond the sphere of naïve speculation. Drawing upon formative *Ghulāt* sources such as *Kitāb al-Ḥaft wa-l-Aẓilla*, *Kitāb al-Širāṭ*, *Kitāb Ikhtilāf al-Ālamīn*, and *Kitāb al-Zīnah*, the paper argues that the *Ghulāt* conceived of the Imām as a timeless theophany (*maẓhar ilāhī*), whose ostensible death or martyrdom functions merely as a veil (*ḥijāb*) concealing an enduring divine reality, enacted whenever the particular Imām elects to enter into Occultation (*ghayba*). This doctrine parallels the docetic Christology of early Christian Gnostic texts, most notably the Gospel of Judas and related apocrypha, which likewise deny the genuine suffering or death of divine Proofs. The paper argues that the *Ghulāt* articulated a universal form of docetism encompassing all divine Proofs (*ḥujaj Allāh*), including ʿĪsā, ʿAlī, and Ḥusayn, wherein each emissary is a manifestation of transcendent light who only appears to suffer within the illusory realm of matter. Through detailed textual comparison, the paper identifies implicit and explicit traces of this doctrine within the *Ghulāt* corpus. Significantly, the paper also traces how several motifs originating in *Ghulāt* circles were later domesticated into more mainstream Twelver Shiʿi thought. The concept of the *Imām al-ghāʾib* (the Hidden Imām), for instance, bears structural resemblance to earlier *Ghulāt* notions of concealment and reappearance, reframed within a juridical-theological framework. Even in later Imāmī hadith compilations, subtle echoes of docetic imagery persist, suggesting that while the doctrinal excesses of the *Ghulāt* were repudiated, their metaphysical intuitions regarding divine continuity and the transcendence of death were never fully erased. By situating these developments within the broader late antique context of esoteric religiosity and symbolic theology, this study proposes that *Ghulāt* docetism represents an attempt to reconcile divine transcendence with the phenomenology of historical suffering. The Imām's body becomes an imaginal vessel through which divine light is refracted into the world, yet remains untouched by corruption or mortality. In affirming that the Imām never truly dies, the *Ghulāt* articulated one of the most sophisticated mystical metaphysics of personhood in early Islamic thought, one whose effects reverberate subtly within the later canon of Imāmī Shiʿism.



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