

## 8. The Mahdi Claimants

So, who is this Mahdi, *'alaihi al-salam*, who will transform our cursed earth into a land of unprecedented purity and comfort? We only know, at this point, that he is from the offspring of the Prophet, *sallallahu 'alaihi wa alihi*, from his Ahl al-Bayt, *'alahim al-salam*. We are also aware that he has a broad forehead and a curved nose, and will be the leader and ruler over 'Isa b. Maryam, the Masih, *'alaihi al-salam*. We know as well that his name is Muhammad, the name of the Messenger of Allah. We are yet to look into the other authentic *ahadith* on the lineage and physical characteristics of our *mawla*, the saviour of mankind. Nonetheless, what we have so far is a good guide in identifying the true Mahdi of this *Ummah*, the last *khalifah* of al-Rahman on His earth.

Meanwhile, a lot of people have claimed to be this Mahdi throughout Islamic history; and a lot of people have similarly been called “the Mahdi”, even without or against their approval<sup>1</sup>. For instance, this is a list of people who were respectively identified – without their sanction – as the Promised Mahdi by some sections of the *Ummah*:

1. 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40 H), *'alaihi al-salam*.
2. Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 93 H).
3. Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 99 H).
4. 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 101 H).
5. Musa b. Talhah b. 'Ubayd Allah (d. 103 H).
6. Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Baqir (d. 110 H), *'alaihi al-salam*.
7. Isma'il b. Ja'far b. Muhammad (d. 138H).
8. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah (d. 145 H).
9. Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Sadiq (d. 148 H), *'alaihi al-salam*.

10. Muhammad b. Isma'il b. Ja'far (d. 193 H).
11. Musa b. Ja'far al-Kazim (d. 182 H), *'alaihi al-salam*.
12. Yahya b. 'Umar b. Yahya b. al-Husayn b. Zayd b. 'Ali b. Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 250 H).
13. Sayyid Ahmad b. 'Irfan (d. 1246 H)
14. Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Sunusi (d. 1320 H)
15. Muhammad b. al-Qasim b. 'Ali.
16. Yahya b. Abi Shumayt.
17. 'Abd Allah b. Mu'awiyah b. 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib.
18. The Masih 'Isa b. Maryam.

As it can be clearly seen, only six of them were named "Muhammad". So, naturally, all the others are ruled out. Interestingly, even the Masih and other people who were not from the Prophet's offspring were identified as the Mahdi by some Muslims! What exactly has happened to this *Ummah*?

Meanwhile, there were equally a number of others, who each declared himself the Mahdi. Some of their names are these:

- i. Al-Harith b. al-Shurayh (d. 116 H).
- ii. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi al-'Abbasi (d. 169 H).
- iii. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Maghribi (d. 524 H).
- iv. Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah b. Hashim (d. 740 H).
- v. Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh al-Sufi (d. 869 H).
- vi. Sayyid Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Jawunburi (d. 910 H)
- vii. 'Ali Muhammad al-Shirazi (d. 1850 CE).
- viii. Muhammad Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah al-Hasani al-Sudani (d. 1899 CE)
- ix. Ghulam Ahmad al-Qadiyani (d. 1908 CE)
- x. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Qahṭani al-Salafi (d. 1980 CE)

Most of them truly had the name "Muhammad" and some of them were indeed from the Messenger's

offspring. However, only one – or none – of them could have been the prophesied Mahdi. Therefore, it is apparent that even those two criteria are not enough to fully identify the Awaited Imam.

Something that comes to the mind of the researcher is: why would people identify 'Ali b. Abi Talib, for instance, as the Mahdi, knowing fully that he died long ago, long before the end of the world? After all, the Mahdi is expected to come out during the last generation of our *Ummah*. A lot of those who have been called the Mahdi – such as al-Baqir, al-Sadiq and al-Kazim – died more than a thousand years ago! Perhaps, more puzzling is the fact that these various sects who attributed *mahdawiyyah* (i.e. office of the Mahdi) to people like 'Ali and al-Baqir continued to do so even after witnessing their deaths! How can a Mahdi die before fulfilling his mission? Worse still, how can a dead person be the Mahdi who will purify our earth and rule over it with equity and justice?!

As noted by Dr. al-Bastawi, those ancient sects of Islam had their solution to the huge puzzle. Each of them believed in the concepts of *al-ghaybah* concerning its chosen saviour: that it is he had not *really* died, but had only disappeared from human view to “reappear” at the end of the *Ummah* as the Awaited “Mahdi”. So, his death and burial were mere illusions – none of them was real – like in the case of 'Isa b. Maryam<sup>2</sup> too. For instance, the Sabaiyyah supposedly claimed that Imam 'Ali is alive, and will reappear during the End Times to rule the world<sup>3</sup>. Some of the Kaysaniyyah also made the same claims about Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib<sup>4</sup> while some others among them attribute the *ghaybah* and *mahdawiyyah* to 'Abd Allah b. Mu'awiyah b. 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib instead<sup>5</sup>. Some of the Jarudiyyah believed too that Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah never died, but only disappeared and would reappear at the end of the world as the Mahdi<sup>6</sup>. Others among the Jarudiyyah awarded the *ghaybah* and *mahdawiyyah* to Yahya b. 'Umar<sup>7</sup> while lots of other Jarudis declared both for Muhammad b. al-Qasim b. 'Ali<sup>8</sup>. The Nawusiyyah announced too that Imam al-Sadiq never died, but only went into *ghaybah* and would return as the Awaited Mahdi<sup>9</sup>. The Isma'iliyyah also attributed the *ghaybah* and *mahdawiyyah* to Isma'il b. Ja'far al-Sadiq<sup>10</sup> while the Mubarakkiyyah instead gave both to his son, Muhammad b. Isma'il b. Ja'far<sup>11</sup>. Of course, the Musawiyyah – better known as the Waqifiyyah – affirmed as well that Imam Musa b. Ja'far al-Kazim never died, and would return as the Awaited Mahdi<sup>12</sup>.

But, how did they develop this concept of *al-ghaybah* to explain and excuse the apparent deaths of their saviours? Was it only a tactical invention created by them to address the contradictions within their claims, following the unexpected deaths of their Mahdis? Or, was it their misapplication of a genuine teaching of the Messenger of Allah? These and others are questions we will be investigating in this book of ours. Meanwhile, we must quickly mention that 'Umar too, the second Sunni *khalifah*, proclaimed the *ghaybah* of Muhammad al-Mus<sup>h</sup>afa – although there is not sufficient evidence that he believed in the latter's *mahdawiyyah*. Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256 H) ends this chapter with the report:

حدثنا إسماعيل بن عبد الله حدثنا سليمان بن بلال عن هشام بن عروة عن عروة بن الزبير عن عائشة رضي الله عنها زوج النبي صلى الله عليه و سلم: أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم مات وأبو بكر بالسنح – قال إسماعيل يعني بالعالية – فقام عمر يقول والله ما مات رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم قالت وقال عمر والله ما كان يقع في

نفسى إلا ذاك وليبعثته الله فليقطعن أيدي رجال وأرجلهم .

Isma'il b. 'Abd Allah – Sulayman b. Bilal – Hisham b. 'Urwah – 'Urwah b. al-Zubayr – 'Aishah, may Allah be pleased with her, the wife of the Prophet, peace be upon him:

The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, died while Abu Bakr was at a place called al-Sunah (i.e. al-'Aliyah). 'Umar stood up, saying, "I swear by Allah! **The Messenger of Allah is not dead!**" She ('Aishah) narrated: 'Umar said, "I swear by Allah! Nothing occurred to my mind except that. **Verily! Allah will RESURRECT him and he will cut the hands and legs of some men.**"<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> See generally Dr. 'Abd al-'Alim 'Abd al-'Azim al-Bastawi, al-Mahdi al-Muntazar fi Dhaw-i al-Ahadith wa al-Athar al-Sahihah wa Aqwal al-'Ulama wa Ara al-Firaq al-Mukhtalifah (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm; 1st edition, 1420 H), p. 60–118 for the full list and discussions of those who have been called Mahdi – with or without their knowledge or approval – and those who have called themselves the Mahdi.

<sup>2.</sup> See Qur'an 4: 157

<sup>3.</sup> Dr. 'Abd al-'Alim 'Abd al-'Azim al-Bastawi, al-Mahdi al-Muntazar fi Dhaw-i al-Ahadith wa al-Athar al-Sahihah wa Aqwal al-'Ulama wa Ara al-Firaq al-Mukhtalifah (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm; 1st edition, 1420 H), p. 64

<sup>4.</sup> Ibid, p. 67

<sup>5.</sup> Ibid, p. 68

<sup>6.</sup> Ibid, p. 71

<sup>7.</sup> Ibid, p. 72

<sup>8.</sup> Ibid

<sup>9.</sup> Ibid, p. 74

<sup>10.</sup> Ibid, p. 75

<sup>11.</sup> Ibid

<sup>12.</sup> Ibid, p. 76

<sup>13.</sup> Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma'il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-Ju'fi, al-Jami' al-Sahih al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dab al-Bagha], vol. 3, p. 1341, # 3467. 'Umar's claims are contradictory. If the Prophet was not dead, how come then that Allah would "resurrect" him later? Are living people ever "resurrected"? But then, a look into the Sunni ahadith establishes that 'Umar was later convinced of the Messenger's death by Abu Bakr. However, this author was unable to locate any proof – Sunni or otherwise – that 'Umar ever abandoned his belief that Allah would resurrect Muhammad from death before the end of time.

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