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Chapter 1: Mahdi in Islam

1-1 Messianism in Islam

According to the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Messianism may be described in general terms as an ideology consisting of a complex of ideas, doctrines, attitudes, and expectations which, at a particular moment in history and as a result of a specific configuration of facts, has the potential to materialize in a Messianic movement with a markedly eschatological or Utopian revolutionary character and message.

Messianism, which tends to develop in conditions of frustration, stress and suffering, includes both a negative evaluation of the present as well as a hope and expectancy that the time process will bring about a major change for the better, leading either to the restoration of a past golden age or to the creation of a new one. Although Messianism both as ideology and as movement is not necessarily centered upon a Messianic figure, Messianic movements are usually initiated by a charismatic personality. 1

Messianism is a widespread ideology present among people from all kinds of cultural and religious background. As A.A. Sachedina states: "The notion of an expected deliverer who is to come... and establish the rule of justice and equity on earth, is shared by all major religions in the world. Jews, Christians, or Zoroastrians who at different times were subjected to the rules of those who did not share their religious heritage, cherished their traditions concerning a Messiah or Saoshyant of a divinely chosen line."2

Also Shari'ati in his *Expectation: a School of Protest*, acknowledges that the "yearning instinct" for a saviour is a universal phenomenon in all human cultures and that Islamic yearning for the *Mahdi* is identical to the expectation in Christianity of Christ's second coming and to a universal hope for establishing a "golden age". 3

The similarity of this ideology in all religions and the question of its origin often leads to studies and conclusions on the influence of one religion on another as regards the Messianism issue. For example, we find studies about the Jewish influence upon Christian and Islamic Messianism or Persian and

Zoroastrian influence on Jewish, Christian or Muslim apocalypticism, Messianism and eschatology.

In modern scholarship, these conclusions are a subject of controversy. In fact, the sheer extent of belief in this ideology would seem to reflect the universality and innateness of humanity's hope for a better future.

In the Islamic context, Messianism is emblemized by the eschatological figure of the *Mahdi* who, it is believed, will rise to restore the purity of the faith and to create an ideal religio– political system under a just social and legal order, a world free from oppression in which the Islamic Revelation will be the norm for all nations.

However, it is difficult to discuss Messianism as a concept within the Islamic faith in general without first considering it separately within the two main branches of Islam, Sunnism and Shi'ism, as the dimensions, the functions and the importance of this ideology vary between them.

1-2 Mahdi in Sunnism

Al-*Mahdi*, "The Rightly Guided One", is the name given to the restorer of religion and justice who, according to a widely held Muslim belief, will rule before the end of the world. The term *Mahdi* as such does not occur in the Qur'an but is derived from the Arabic root h-d-y commonly used in the Qur'an with the meaning of divine guidance.4

During the Second Civil War, after the death of Mu'awia, the term first came to be used for an expected ruler who could restore Islam to its original perfection. Among religious scholars, discussions about the *Mahdi* and his identity can be traced back to that time. These discussions developed in different directions and influenced later beliefs about the *Mahdi* to varying degrees.5

There are a number of differences between the two main branches of Islam as to the conception of the creed in the final restorer. According to the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the status of the *Mahdi* awaited by the Sunnites is different from that of the twelfth Imam awaited by the Shi'ites. The essence of Sunnite Islam is that the Muslim people will accede to self-rule, attaining a state of truth and certitude through their own exertions.

The idea of an absolute *Mahdi* as an infallible guide is therefore rejected by Sunni theologians. 6 The Sunnites, in fact, expect the *Mahdi* to be the ultimate Caliph of the Prophet 2 and to spread justice throughout the Earth. They do not believe in the future restorer as one of the fundamental principles of faith, as do the Shi'ites.

Furthermore, a minority among the Sunnites do not accept that the Restorer will be called *Mahdi* and, indeed, entertain doubts as to his existence. The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* asserts that: "Lingering doubts concerning the *Mahdi* may partly account for the absence of any traditions about him in the *Sahihs* of al-Bukhari (810/870 AH) and Muslim (817/875 AH)."8 "There is no mention of the *Mahdi* in either of the two

Sahih's of Muslim or Bukhari".9

There are also controversial discussions about whether the idea of Messianism rightly belongs to Islam or not. Some claim that the idea of Messianism is not Islamic. The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* says that "Islam is not a Messianic religion and has no room for a Saviour–Messiah." 10

Riffat Hasan supports this thesis and states that: "Messianism appears to be incompatible with the teachings of the Qur'an, nonetheless in the Muslim world it is a widespread phenomenon, playing a pivotal role in the lives of many present-day Muslims from all segments of society."11

Also: "Normative Islam as embodied in the Qur'an does not support the idea of Messianism in any of its forms, while Messianism is an essential part of religious belief and practice for almost all Shi'a Muslims. Shi'a Messianism does not fit theologically or logically into the framework of normative Islam." 12

Riffat Hasan also relies on Fazlur Rahman's comments showing that Messianism was not a part of original Islam. He stated: "As for Messianism, it was originally adopted in Islam either by Shi'ism or Sufism, but in any case it came to Sunni Islam through the Sufis or rather through the precursors of the Sufis – the public preachers of the 2nd/8th century who consoled and satisfied the politically disillusioned and morally starved masses by holding out Messianic hopes." 13

These discussions are ongoing even though the belief in the *Mahdi* is essentially Islamic and is widely accepted among scholars and ordinary Muslims. Even though it is not an essential part of the Sunni creed, it is accorded widespread belief among this community. Indeed, early Sunni sources record several traditions from the Prophet about the appearance and attributes of the *Mahdi*.

These traditions are designated as *Mutawatir*, meaning that they have been reported from the Prophet successively by so many different unbroken chains of transmission and such a number of narrators in every generation that it would be virtually impossible to fabricate their existence without such fabrication becoming known. 14

The verses of the Qur'an concerning the *Mahdi* have also been interpreted by numerous traditions through Sunni chains of transmission, as will be seen in the third chapter. There are many other important terms and practices widely accepted by the Sunnis but that are not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. The authenticity or otherwise of the traditions of classical and post–classical collections of *hadith* are open to discussion as regards all fields of Islamic thought, not only on the subject of the *Mahdi*.

Moreover, despite the absence of the term "Mahdi", both the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (hadith) in the two Sahihs provide strong grounds for expecting the appearance of someone who, both through thought and deed, will represent the long-awaited spiritual "guide".

Indeed, in different *hadiths* the two *Sahihs* allude to the coming of a personage at the End of Time, someone whom Jesus will accompany. For example, let us cite two *hadiths*: The *Sahih of Bukhari*

mentions a tradition reported by Abu Hurayra: "The Prophet said: 'How will you react when the son of Mary (Jesus) descends among you while your Imam will be from among yourselves?" 15

The *Sahih of Muslim* reports a tradition from Jabir b. 'Abdullah: "I heard the Prophet saying: 'A group of Pure ones from my Community will fight continuously for the Truth (*Haqq*) until the Day of Judgement.' He said: 'Then will descend 'Isa ibn Maryam. And your Leader (*Amir*) will tell him: Come and lead the prayer for us. He will answer: No, for some of you are leaders of others, that is what God has granted to this Community."16

In the rest of the authoritative collections of traditions, the *Mahdi* and all that concerns his advent is explicitly mentioned in traditions from the Prophet, which allows us to think that the idea is not exclusively Shi'ite. Several compilers of *hadith* like Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.241 AH/857 AD), Ibn Madja (d.273 AH/887 AD), al–Tirmidhi (d.279 AH/892 AD), Abu Dawud al–Sajistani (d. 275 AH/889 AD), Ahmad al–Bazzar (d.292 AH/904 AD), Abu Ya'lah al–Mawsili (d.307 AH/919 AD), al– Tabarani (d.360 AH/971 AD), al–Hakim al–Naysaburi (d.431 AH/1040 AD), and al–Bayhaki (d.1077 AD) have specifically recorded traditions about the *Mahdi* in their collections.

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *Mahdi* traditions contained in the canonical Sunni *hadith* collections of Abu Dawud, al–Tirmidhi, Ibn Madja and al–Nassa'i as well as the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, were numerous enough to provide a solid basis for the popular belief in the *Mahdi* as well as in the post–classical collections of *hadith* like those of al–Tabarani, al–Hakim al–Naysaburi, and al–Bayhaki.

The eschatological role of the *Mahdi* became generally more pronounced, but it never became an essential part of Sunni religious doctrine and Sunni creed rarely mentions it. The view that the *Mahdi* would rule the Muslim community at the time of the descent of Jesus was commonly accepted 17.

Ibn Khaldun (d. 405 AD), who refutes the certainty of the majority of the *hadith* concerning the *Mahdi*, nevertheless accepts a minority of them. 18 In his *Muqaddimah*, he has summarized the Sunnite position on the question of the future restorer of the faith in the following terms:

"It has been well known (and generally accepted) by all Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time a man from the family (of the Prophet) will without fail make his appearance, one who will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. The Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm.

He will be called the *Mahdi*. Following him, the Antichrist will appear, together with all the subsequent signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgement), as established in (the sound traditions of the *Sahih*)" [authoritative collections of the prophetic sayings recognized by the Sunnites]. After the *Mahdi*, 'Isa (Jesus) will descend and kill the Antichrist. Or, Jesus will descend together with the *Mahdi* and help him kill (the Antichrist), and have him as the leader in his prayers."19

In spite of support for the belief in the *Mahdi* by some prominent traditionists, opposition to the belief in

him did not entirely disappear among the *hadith* scholars. 20 In the early period of the Islamic history, a minor group of Muslim scholars denied the appearance of the *Mahdi* and claimed that only Jesus would come.

Ibn Madja reports this *hadith* ("la Mahdi illa 'Isa; there shall be no Mahdi except Jesus") in his *Sunan* and says that it was reported by one person only, and that is Idris Shafi'i.21

Furthermore, Imam Qurtubi states that there are unknown transmitters in the chain of the narration of this *hadith* and that it is therefore weak. He also states that this *hadith* contradicts all the *hadiths* reported by the Prophet about the Mahdi, descended from the Prophet's family through Fatima.22

On the other hand, in the middle of the 7th/13th century, several Sunnite scholars supported the Shi'ite belief that the twelfth Imam was the expected Mahdi, relying solely on Sunnite traditions and countering Sunnite objections to the Mahdi-ship of the twelfth Imam.

Among them, Sibt ibn al– Djawzi, shortly before his death in 654 AH/1256 AD in Damascus, assembled reports from Sunni sources about the virtues of 'Ali and his descendants, and at the end affirmed that the Twelfth Imam was the expected Mahdi in his *Tadhkira khawas al–'umma bi– dhikr khasa'is al–a'imma*. Support of the Mahdi–ship of the Twelfth Imam by these Sunni authors, as also by later ones, was regularly noted by Imami apologists.23

Regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the traditions cited on this question, the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil in the Qur'an and the universal idea of hope in Islam is embodied in the figure of the *Mahdi*. The belief in a future Saviour and the Messianic concept has had a significant social and psychological impact on Muslims. In every crisis and in times of turbulence, these beliefs served to raise their hopes.

1-3 Mahdi in Shi'ism

In Imamite (Twelver) Shi'ism, the belief in the appearance of the *Mahdi*, the twelfth Imam descended from the Prophet who promised an end to corruption, has been a central aspect of the faith throughout its history, in contrast to the beliefs of Sunnism. This is not only a basic tenet of the creed, but also the foundation on which the entire spiritual edifice of the Imamite religion rests.

The belief in a temporary absence or occultation (*ghayba*) of the *Mahdi* and his eventual return in glory is also common. The idea of the *Mahdi* has a greater significance and presence in the lives of the Shi'ites than in any other religion and is the most important factor in the development of Shi'ism, where unshakeable belief in the advent of the *Mahdi* continues to be expressed in most of their daily prayers.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the spread of Western-style modernism, Messianic and eschatological aspirations largely disappeared from the mainstream Sunnite discourse, although important *Mahdi*-st movements emerged in the mid-nineteenth century to subsist well into the

twentieth century in different parts of the Islamic world.

On the other hand, in the Shi'ite world, the desire to create a true Islamic community with a Messianic deliverance was more intense than in the Sunni world. In the decade leading up to the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were some attempts to reassess such themes as the nature of the hereafter, the coming of the *Mahdi* and the order he is expected to establish. Topics such as the duties of believers during the Occultation were more assertively linked to the questions of political legitimacy and clerical leadership on behalf of the *Imam*.

There was a gradual distancing from the traditional narrative of the apocalyptic end in favour of portraying the *Imam*'s return as an all-embracing revolution with this-worldly causes and consequences.

According to Shari'ati, Messianism and futurism in Shi'ite Islam were the outcomes of a "synthesis between the ideals and the realities" of Islam, an ambition to restore the ideals of Ali's just rule... To reconstruct such an idealized past, Shari'ati believed, the disinherited (*mustad'afin*) of the earth should strive for a "classless society" in which justice and equality will triumph over exploitation, imperialism and tyranny.24

The difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism is a question of political succession and religious authority. There was the problem of the succession to the Prophet as leader of the community after his death. A small group backed Ali whom they believed to have been designated for this role by appointment (*ta'yin*) and testament.

They became known as his 'partisans' (*shi'ah*) while the majority agreed on Abu Bakr on the assumption that the Prophet left no instructions on this matter; they gained the name of 'The people of tradition and consensus of opinion' (*ahl al–sunnah wa al–jama'ah*). But more generally the Shi'ite of Ali, in the sense of those who backed and followed him among the Companions, already existed during the Prophet's lifetime and there are several references to them in prophetic sayings.

Only with the death of the Prophet did they become crystallized as a group distinct from the Sunnis. 25 They follow the family and successors of the Prophet (Twelve Imams) as their source for the understanding of the Qur'anic Revelation.

The Imam is the sustainer of the religious law and the guarantor of its continuation. The earth can never be devoid of the presence of the Imam, even if he be hidden or unknown. His duties are essentially to rule over the community as the Prophet's representative, to interpret religious science and law to men and to guide people in their spiritual life.

Like the Imams before him, the twelfth Imam is said to have had a miraculous birth. He was born on the fifteenth day of *Sha'ban* in the year 255 of the *Hijrah*. He came out of his mother's womb prostrate in the attitude of prayer, pure and circumcised, raising his voice in the profession of faith (*shahadah*).

His mother, called Narjis (Narcissus), is believed to be the grand-daughter of the Byzantine Emperor, who disguised herself as a slave girl, and was captured during a Muslim expedition against Byzantine territory.

Long before her captivity, she was visited in her dreams by Fatimah, the venerable ancestress of the Imams and daughter of the Prophet, who instructed her in the Islamic faith and prepared her for the great role she was to play.

Finally, the Prophets Jesus and Muhammad, with their vicegerents Simon Peter (Shim'un) and Ali, appeared to the girl. Muhammad asked Jesus for Narjis's hand, and Ali and Simon Peter acted as witnesses to the marriage contract. Fatimah and the Virgin Mary also came to bless the sacred marriage.

From that time on, the 11th Imam, Hasan al-'Askari, the girl's future spouse, came to see her every night in a dream. He finally ordered her to flee her country and allow herself to be sold into slavery. 26 Thus, the twelfth Imam's lineage combined both royalty and prophecy. More important is the direct presence of Christianity in the popular concept and history of the Imams in Twelver Shi'ism.

According to Imamite authors, none of the previous Imams had been spied upon as had the eleventh. Al-Hasan al- 'Askari attempted to hide the fact of the birth of his son from everyone but his closest friends.27

The caliph al-Mu'tamid and his entourage, as well as the majority of the partisans of the Imams, were even convinced that the eleventh Imam had passed away (in 260 AH/874 AD) without leaving any progeny.

a) Mahdi in Shi'ite traditions

The literature dealing with the *Mahdi*, his birth, concealment and return is vast and complex. Sachedina states, concerning this literature, that the primary sources in the study of the doctrinal evolution of the idea of the *Mahdi* in Imami Shi'ism28 can make an essential contribution to an understanding of the period in which the idea of the Hidden *Mahdi* became crystallized in Imamite dogma.29

M.A.A. Moezzi explains very clearly that the Imams passed on two kinds of traditions concerning the *Mahdi*: the first category contained confusing information, where the name of the *Mahdi* is not specified and was aimed at that large group of disciples who were involved in the writing down of traditions. In fact, the Imams prohibited the pronouncing of the latter's name (*al-nahy 'an al-ism, al-man' 'an al-tasmiya*). 30

According to the authors, this prohibition was maintained in effect up to at least the beginning of the minor Occultation. A second kind of tradition, aimed only at the closest of disciples, contained specific information about the identity of the *Mahdi*.

His name was included here, except that, in order to guarantee the safety of his life, this category of traditions was only to be transmitted orally until after the beginning of the Occultation; it could be put into writing only after the life of the son of the eleventh Imam was out of danger.31

Among the first Shi'ite compilers of traditions concerning the number of Imams, the twelfth Imam, his two occultations, his final Return and Rise, let us cite: Shaykh al–Kulayni, who died in 329 AH/940 AD, the same year as the beginning of the major Occultation, and who compiled his *Usul min al–Kafi* during the period of the minor Occultation; al–Nu'mani Ibn Abi Zaynab (d.circa 345 or 360 AH/956 or 971 AD); Ja'far al– Qummi (d.369 AH/979 AD); Ali ibn Muhammad al–Khazzaz al–Razi al–Qummi (d. in the second half of the fourth AH/tenth AD century); Ibn Bâbuye (d. 381 AH/991 AD) who, especially in his *Kamal(Ikmal) al–din,* seems to have collected the essentials of all the information from his predecessors; Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn 'Ayyash al–Jawhari (d.401 AH/1101 AD; Al–Shaykh al–Mufid (d. 413 AH/1022 AD), author of *Kitab al– Irshad*; id. *Al–Fusul al–'ashara fi al–ghayba;* Al–Murtada 'Alam al–Huda (d. 436 AH/1044 AD), a disciple of al–Mufid; Ali al–Karajaki (d. 449 AH/1057 AD), another of al–Mufid's disciples; and finally Muhammad ibn Al–Hasan al–Tusi (d.460 AH/1067 AD). All these authors' works preceded the minor Occultation.32

The Twelver Shi'ite doctrine on the Occultation, based on traditions attributed to the *Imams*, was authoritatively elaborated by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al–Nu'mani in his *Kitab al–Ghayba*, by Ibn Babuya in his *Ikmal al–Din*, and by Shaykh al–Tusi in his *Kitab al–Ghayba*. In Imami traditions, as in Sunni traditions, the *Mahdi* will rule the world, with Jesus praying behind him after his descent from heaven.

This did not raise a theological problem as it would in Sunnism, since the *Mahdi*, like all other *Imams*, according to prevalent Imami doctrine, exceeds all Prophets except Muhammad in religious rank.33

b) The Occultation

The Occultation (*ghayba*) is a period of concealment chosen by God for the Imam who will continue to live in this state as long as God deems it necessary. Then He will command him to reappear and take control of the world in order to restore justice and equity. The mysterious fate of the son of the eleventh Imam divided the early Shi'ite family into some eleven to fifteen different schisms.34

But the idea according to which the twelfth Imam was alive and hidden and would return at the End of Time, was later adopted by all Imamites due to the tenacious efforts of authors/compilers like al-Kulayni, al-Nu'mani and especially Ibn Babuye, who, through the great mass of traditions surrounding this belief, progressively managed to convince the population of the faithful.35

In fact, early Imamites attempted to present the Imamate and *Mahdi*-ism of the Twelfth Imam in occultation in a logical and rational way. 36 According to Imamite sources, Muhammad ibn Al-Hasan al-'Askari (*al-Mahdi*) had a first occultation when he was a child, in 260 AH/874 AD, at the time of his father's death, and it lasted nearly 70 years.

At Samarra in Iraq, beside the shrines of the tenth and eleventh Imams, is a mosque under which there is a cave from where the Imam *Mahdi* is said to have disappeared 37 when he was five years old. This cave was a place of retreat and meditation for the eleventh Imam and his son, and also a hiding place from the Abbasid agents 38 During this Occultation, the Imam communicated with his faithful via four successive Representatives ($n\hat{a}$ ib):

- 1. Abu 'Amr 'Uthman ibn Sa'id al-'Umari (or al-'Amri), representative from 260 AH/874 AD to 267 AH/880 AD.
- 2. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman al-'Umari (or al-'Amri), the son of the above, from 267 AH/880 AD until 305 AH/917 AD.
- 3. Abul-Qasim al-Husayn ibn Rawh al- Nawbakhti, from 305 AH/917 AD to 326 AH/937 AD.
- 4. Abul-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad al-Simarri, from 326 AH/937 AD to 329AH/941 AD.

This was "the minor Occultation" (al-ghayba al-sughra).

Then, around 329 AH/941 AD, came the beginning of "the major Occultation" (*al-ghayba al-kubra*) after the fourth representative received a last autographed note from the hidden Imam:

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful; Ali ibn Muhammad al-Simarri, may God increase, through you, the reward of your brothers [in religion; that is the Shi'ites]; your death will take place in six days. Prepare yourself and name no one as your successor [as representative] after your death.

This is the advent of the second Occultation in which there will be no more manifestation, except if it be with divine permission, and that will only take place after a long time, when hearts will be hardened and the earth filled with violence.

Among my partisans, some will claim to have seen me with their eyes. Beware! He who claims to have seen [me] with his eyes before the raising of al-Sufyani and [the sounding of] the Cry is a liar and an impostor. Greatness and Power belong to God alone."

Six days later al-Simarri, on his deathbed, was asked, "Who will be your successor?" He replied, "From this point on, the matter is in God's hands, He will arrange it Himself." Those were his last words. 39

The major Occultation is still in effect, and will not end until the End of Time (*akhir al-zaman*) when the *Mahdi* comes back to re-establish Justice on earth. The Imam is not completely cut off from his followers but has spokesmen, in the form of learned jurists (*marja' taqlid*), who can act on his behalf and guide the Shi'ites in their religious matters. Imamite traditions give four reasons for the Occultation.40

1. Safeguarding the life of the twelfth Imam.

- 2. Independence vis-á-vis temporal powers; through his Occultation, the *Mahdi* will owe allegiance to no temporal powers.
- 3. Putting the Imamites to the test; the Occultation serves as a long period of trial, a challenge to their faith.
- 4. Finally, there is a hidden reason for the Occultation, that is said to be the most important of all, although it will not be revealed until the Return of the *Mahdi*.

With the major Occultation, the secret life of the Twelfth Imam begins, whose occult presence has dominated the Shi'ite religious consciousness for more than ten centuries. The Twelver tradition illustrates this from as early as the fourth AH/tenth AD century, the hidden Imam living in his physical body, providentially endowed with a long life.

To support this claim, Ibn Babuye dedicates six chapters of his *Kamal al-din* to those known for their extraordinarily long lives in the Arabic tradition. It is also said in the Twelver tradition that the hidden Imam attends the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and that he sees people even if they cannot see him.41

He is visibly present and walks through their marketplaces and into their homes, and nobody recognizes him. 42 In this latter case, he is compared to Joseph (Qur'an, sura 12, *Yusuf*), seen but not recognized by his brothers. As in Joseph's case, God can allow him to be recognized by some people. The Prophet is said to have stated: "...His faithful are illuminated by his Light; they profit from his *wilaya* during his Occultation, just as one profits from the sun even when it is covered by clouds."43

The history of the twelfth Imam during his major Occultation is constituted of stories and narratives recounted by those who saw the *Mahdi* in their dreams or in reality.44

The compilations of al–Kulayni, al–Nu'mani, and Ibn Babuye, to name the oldest and the best known, and numerous other Shi'ite works throughout the centuries, contain a number of eyewitness accounts from even ordinary people who were in great distress or other unfortunate circumstances and who claim having met the twelfth Imam. "None of these mysterious appearances to his faithful suspends his Occultation but each of these appearances suspends for his faithful the common laws of time and space for Men who do not perceive the occult presence of the Imam."45

c) The concept of Intizar

Complementary to the doctrine of the greater Occultation is the notion of *Intizar*, or the expectation and awaiting of the Hidden Imam's return. *Intizar* is a state of expectancy for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam; it is a doctrine of hope and trust that he will one day reappear and establish an ideal Islamic society.

The expectation of release from suffering, grief and sorrow (Intizar al-faraj) is enjoined upon the

believers. The doctrine of *Intizar* has important connotations for the personal and political lives of the Twelver Shi'ite faithful during the Occultation of the Imam: their personal duties as believers vis-â-vis God and their attitude to the question of religious leadership and earthly government.

The most comprehensive collection of the Twelver Shi'ite narratives on *Intizar* was made by the Shi'ite scholar Muhammad Baqir Majlisi in his encyclopaedic work on Shi'ite traditions, *Bihar al–Anwar.* 46 The disappearance of the *Mahdi* and his Occultation are presented in the traditions as a severe test for the Shi'ite faithful, bringing with it much hardship and many schisms.

The Shi'ites will undergo a process of sifting in which the unbelievers will be rooted out from the believers. Several traditions mention the merit of *Intizar al-faraj* without specifying the nature and cause of suffering. In one tradition, the Prophet is reported to have said: "The best of all acts carried out by my people is their expectation of release from suffering, granted to them by God."47

Several of the eighty or so traditions on the excellency of *Intizar*, class it as the most noble (*afdal*) of all actions, and in one narrative as synonymous with worship ('*Ibada*). 48 Acts of worship must be carried out clandestinely during the *ghayba*, are more meritorious than those performed openly after the return of the Imam. One must strive to carry out all of the obligatory duties laid down in the Shari'a, which remain incumbent on the individual despite the absence of the Imam.

The Twelver Shi'ites during the occultation are superior to those in the company of the *Mahdi*, for the simple reason that the former must contend with tyrannical regimes, against which they move neither tongue nor hand nor sword in opposition.49

The expectation of salvation through the rise of the twelfth Imam is dominant throughout the Occultation. The persistent faith in freedom from grief through his appearance requires the Shi'ites to be on the alert at all times and also to pave the way for the Imam's reappearance.

Murtaza Mutahhari, a prominent student of Imam Khomeiny and a teacher of philosophy, in his essay on the uprising and the revolution of the *Mahdi*, no longer treated the advent of the Lord of the Age as a sudden, impromptu event, but as the final stage in an ideologically driven revolution to establish Islam's "ideal society".

Mutahhari conceived the coming of the *Mahdi* as the climax of a revolutionary struggle that in its primary stages requires the believers' active involvement50 during the Occultation.

Unlike the Marxist theory of revolution, Mutahhari believed that *Mahdi*'s revolution is divinely inspired and remains contingent upon the alertness and action of the community. Thus, the establishment of a just state became for Mutahhari and like-minded activists a legitimate first step toward the final revolution of the *Mahdi*.

The well-known work Wilayat-e fagih (authority of the jurist) was clearly meant to provide an answer to

the most urgent of these concerns. In this work, Imam Khomeiny advocated the necessity for instituting an Islamic government in the absence of the Hidden Imam in order to prepare the terrain for the Rise of the *Mahdi*.

He argued that while the Imam is in Occultation, preserving the essence of Islam and defending its sacred values should be accomplished by an Islamic government under a Guardian Jurist to be upheld as the Imam's vicegerent. In support of this doctrine, Imam Khomeiny cites one of the Hidden Imam's decrees in which the *'ulama* were upheld as "proofs" (*hujaj*) of the Lord of the Age.

Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977), a major ideologue of revolutionary Shi'ism, in a pamphlet entitled "expectation, a school of protest", regarded the End of Time as nothing but an "ultimate revolution" for humanity. The *Mahdi*'s revolution could not come about without Muslims arriving at a new understanding of expectation as a way of acquiring social responsibility, working toward a just and equitable order and rejecting political oppression and cultural degradation.

Complying with the Shi'ite prophecies, he repeated that the Lord of the Age will come when the entire lifespan of humanity reaches its lowest ebb of corruption, but until that time, he recommended that the community of believers should settle on the leadership of a democratically elected jurist (*faqih*) to serve as the Hidden Imam's general deputy (*na'ibe 'aam*).

A true understanding of the End, he stated, will evolve only when Muslims abandon troubling theological entanglements concerning circumstances of the resurrection (and in effect, the Occultation) and instead, develop a perspective conforming to modern social and human sciences, and based on a sociological analysis of class conflict. Shari'ati's ideological dimensions of expectation go so far as to endorse a Marxist-inspired Islamic revolution.

True expectation, according to Shari'ati, is "believing that in the life of humankind on this very earth and before death, not in the resurrection after death, history will bring about the triumph of the oppressed and destruction of the oppressors".

d) The Return and the Rise

The future Return and Rise of the *Mahdi* constitutes the most frequent of the Imam's predictions and has been described in numerous traditions from the early times in Imamite history. It is believed that the *Mahdi* will come to fulfill the mission of all the prophets before him, and complete the task of Imam Husayn (the third Imam), the great martyr of Karbala.

He shall appear, according to many traditions, on the day of 'Ashura, the day on which Imam Husayn, son of Imam Ali, was killed, 51 showing himself first in Mecca, Islam's holiest city, where he will be joined initially by 313 believers, the number of the martyrs of Badr, then he will make his headquarters in Kufah where Imam Ali was killed and buried.

The Return as well as the Rising of the *Qa'im*, will be preceded by signs. The theme of 'Signs of the Return' is one of the most developed of those that occur in collections of *hadith*, in both Sunnite and Shi'ite literature. Sometimes a number of chapters are dedicated to the subject. 52 The universal sign of the Return consists in the generalized invasion of the earth by Evil. There are also a great number of more specific signs listed in the compilations.

- 1. "Messiah and Messianic Movements" in the New Encyclopaedia Britannica P. 1017-1022
- 2. A.A. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, P.1.
- 3. Shari'ati, Intizar, p.4
- 4. W. Madelung: "al-Mahdi" in El2, p. 1230
- 5. Ibid, p. 1231
- 6. "al-Mahdi" SEI, p.311
- 7. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, P.14
- 8. "al-Mahdi", El2, p. 1234
- 9. "al-Mahdi", SEI, p.311
- 10. "Messiah and Messianic Movements" p. 1020
- 11. R. Hasan: "Messianism and Islam", p.262
- 12. Ibid, p.267
- 13. Fazlur Rahman , Islam , p.245
- 14. Concerning the Mahdi, Hafez Abu Abdullah Ganzi Shafei (d. 658 A.H.) reports in his book al-Bayan: تواترت الأخبار و الأخبار و (M.R. Hakimi, Khorshid-e Maghreb, p. 81)
- 15. M. ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Sahih Bukhari, Bab. Nuzul 'Isa ibn Maryam
- 49, Vol. 4, p. 143:
- عن أبي هريرة قال: قال رسول الله (ص)، كيف أنتم إذا نزل ابن مريم فيكم وامامكم منكم؟...
- 16. Muslim ibn Hajjaj, Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Iman, num. 247, Vol. 1, p. 137: ... (ص) يقول، سمعت النبي (ص) يقول، ... المحتلفة على المتول أميرهم: تعال صل بنا، فيقول: لا، إن بعضكم على الاتزال طائفة من أمتي يقاتلون على الحق ظاهرين إلى يوم القيامة، قال فينزل عيسى ابن مريم (ع) فيقول أميرهم: تعال صل بنا، فيقول: لا، إن بعضكم على التزال طائفة من أمتي يقاتلون على الحق ظاهرين إلى يوم القيامة، قال فينزل عيسى ابن مريم (ع) فيقول أميرهم: بعض أمرا تكرمة الله هذه الأمة ...
- 17. "Al-Mahdi" in El2, p. 1234
- 18. A. Amin, al-Mahdi wal-Mahdawiyah, p. 108
- 19. Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah, vol. 2, p. 156
- 20. "Al-Mahdi", El2, p. 1234
- 21. Ibn Madja, Muhammad Ibn Yazid al-Qazwini (207-275 A.H.) Sunan Ibn Madja, Kitab al-Fitan, Bab Shiddat al-Zaman, Vol. 3, p. 434
- 22. Imam al-Qurtubi, Al-Tadhkirah Fi Ahwal al-Mawta wa umur al-Akhira, Bab Fi al-Mahdi
- 23. "Al-Mahdi", El2, p. 1237
- 24. Shari'ati, Expectation: a School of Protest, p. 15
- 25. H. Nasr, Ideals and realities of Islam, p. 149
- <u>26.</u> Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din , Bab 41 Ma ruwi'ah al-Narjis umm al- Qa'im, vol.2, p.418-423. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, Kitab al-Ghayba, Bab wiladatihi wa ahwal al-ummihi, num. 12, vol. 51, pp.6-7-8
- 27. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din, vol 1, pp.474
- 28. Imami (or imamate); the Shia who believe in twelve imams
- 29. Sachedina, "A treatise on the Occultation...", p. 110
- 30. al-Kulayni, Usul, "kitab al-hujja", b,b fi al-nahy ëan al-ism, hadith 1 and 3, vol. 1, p.332-333
- 31. M.A.A. Moezzi, The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism, p. 106
- 32. M.A.A. Moezzi, The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism, p. 101
- 33. "Al-Mahdi", El2, p. 1236
- 34. Cf. A.A. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, pp. 42-55, see also an- Nawbakhti, les sectes shiites (Kitab Firaq al-shi'a),

pp. 109

- 35. M.A.A.Moezzi, The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism, p. 105
- 36. Sachedina, "A treatise on the Occultation...", p. 111
- 37. M. Momen, An Introduction to Shi'i Islam, P.161
- 38. H. Corbin, En Islam Iranien, vol.4, p. 322
- 39. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din, vol. 2, ch. 45, p.516, num.44
- 40. Al-Kulayni, Usul, Kitab al-Hujja, bab nadir fi hal al-ghayba, vol. 1 pp. 333-335, bab fi l-ghayba, vol. 2 pp. 132-45. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din, vol. 2, ch. 44, PP .479 82, num 1, 2, 6, 8
- 41. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din, Bab Dhikr man shahada al-Qa'im wa raâhu 43, vol.2, pp.351, num.8
- 42. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-din , vol. 2, ch.33, p.341, num.21. also, al- Kulayni, Usul, Kitab al-Hujja, bab Nahi ëan al- Ism, vol. 1, num 1 & 3 , p. 332-333 ; Al-Nu'mani, Kitab al-ghayba, p.257
- 43. Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-dÓn, vol.2, ch.43, p.253, num.3
- 44. H. Corbin, En Islam Iranien, vol.4, p. 304
- 45. H. Corbin, En Islam Iranien, vol.4, p.306
- 46. Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 52, Bab Fazl al-Intizar va madh al-Shi'a fi zaman al-ghayba, pp. 122-127
- 47. Bihar vol.52, P. 122
- 48. Ibid
- 49. Ibid
- 50. Mutahhari, p.5-10
- 51. Mufid, p.341
- 52. Al-Nu'mani, Kitab al-ghayba, ch. 14, 15, 18, 21; Ibn Babuye, Kamal al-Din, ch. 47, 57, 58.

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