

Introduction

Muslim belief in the *Mahdi* is reflected in a vast and complex literature. While Shi'ite Messianism and the myriad aspects of the *Mahdi* have been described and analysed in a number of works, the purpose of this particular study is to explore the Messianic ideas implicit in the Qur'an in the light of both classical and contemporary Shi'ite commentaries on the Qur'an.

According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an has a universal character and its message is the continuation of that contained in the earlier Revelations made to Abraham, David, Moses and Jesus. It contains a wealth of information that has served throughout Muslim history as a basis, or code, of living, intended for mankind in general and Muslims in particular. The Qur'an embodies God's final Revelation imparted to mankind through Islam's last Prophet.

Moreover, according to the Islamic faith, and in particular to the Shi'ites, the Qur'an is believed to contain profound underlying significance, quite apart from its face-value meaning. Indeed, according to Shi'ite beliefs, only the Prophet and his Household (his daughter and the twelve Imams) possess knowledge of both outer (*zahir*) and inner (*batin*) meanings as well as the deeper underlying significance of the writings of the Qur'an.

According to such beliefs, therefore, the true science of Qur'anic *tafsir* and *ta'wil* lies exclusively within the reach of these fourteen personages, and it is only through their teachings that people can find answers and solutions to problems in the Qur'an.

Concerning the *Mahdi*, the Qur'an does not mention him explicitly, either by name or by description. The time of his reappearance is also not mentioned. According to the Shi'ites, the reason for this is that the Qur'an is not a historical or political treatise addressing a specific readership or community or affecting a particular period in the history of mankind; rather, it is a universal discourse addressed to the whole of mankind from the dawn of humanity until the Day of Judgement.

In fact, the Qur'an also makes reference to certain events in the future and to the end of time: the victory of Good over Evil in the world, and the coming to power of the Righteous over their oppressors. Also, the Qur'an alludes several times, albeit indirectly, to the society's need for the *Mahdi* and his government.

Apart from the hundreds of *hadith* (traditions) concerning the *Mahdi*, there are many that provide an exegesis of these verses through both Shi'ite as well as Sunni chains of transmitters, in order to explain the Qur'anic stand vis-à-vis belief in *Mahdawiyyah* (Mahdism). These traditions clearly state that the verses refer to the *Mahdi*. According to some Shi'ite scholars, more than one hundred and twenty Qur'anic verses have been recorded that refer to the *Mahdi*, as interpreted in the Shi'a traditions.¹

For example, the Qur'an explains that the moral and spiritual improvement awaited by mankind can become a reality according to the traditions under the government of the *Mahdi*. Indeed, the Shi'ites claim that the universe is a harmonious system based on order and balance, where corruption, oppression and injustice are the consequences of society's misdeeds.

However, these man-made imperfections are considered as accidents and exceptions, to be erased finally by the appearance of the *Mahdi*. Also according to the Qur'an, God promises to restore earthly power to those believers who, although weakened by injustice, remain praiseworthy and basically sincere. The traditions (*hadith*) explaining these verses remind that they concern the government of *Mahdi*.

According to the Qur'an, people are not abandoned to their own devices but God, through His wisdom and justice, will save Man by replacing unjust governors with pious and just ones. These verses are said to be about God's Will to put an end to the era of Satan's rule, annihilating his partisans, and restoring power to God's Righteous Servants throughout the universe.

The first chapter of this study will attempt to clarify terms such as Messianism as generally understood in Islamic belief, and the concept of the eschatological figure of the *Mahdi* in both Sunnism and Shi'ism.

The second chapter will present a brief survey of the origin, principles and development of Shi'i *Tafsir* as well as the lives and works of the commentators dealt with in this research.

The third chapter will be devoted to a limited comparative study between classical and modern works of Shi'i *Tafsir* dealing with the specific subject of the *Mahdi*, in order to see how the *mufasssin* interpret the presence of the *Mahdi* in the Qur'an. Among modern references, the works of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (*Tafsir al-Mizan*), and Banu Amin Isfahani (*Tafsir Makhzan al-'Irfan*) will be used for this purpose, while the *Tafsir Majma' al-Bayan* of Shaykh Tabarsi (d.548 AH/1153 AD) will be studied as classical reference.

¹. Seyyed Hashem Bahrani : Sima-ye Hazrat-e Mahdi dar Qur'an, p.23

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