



# FUTURE OF THE WORLD

**World War or  
Global Peace?**

Compiled by  
Sareh Taromirad

# Future of the World

World War or  
Global Peace?

A Brief Treatise Based on Dr. M. Pakravan's Study:

The Way of the Promised Savior: World War or Global Peace?

Compiled by

**Sareh Taramirad**

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

**In the Name of Allah**

the All Compassionate, the All Merciful



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# Introduction

## Introduction

“And one day, the world will be filled with justice.”

This humble sentence reflects a magnificent idea, which was established by the Prophet of Islam as an essential part of the Muslim belief and diligently promoted afterwards by the 12 Imams of the Shia school of thought. This is why the idea of the coming of a savior and a better world has lived through history in various Muslim societies, particularly in the Shia traditions. Mahdi, the Savior, has a number of characteristics: his given name is Muhammad, which is also the Prophet's name; he is from the progeny of Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet; he will promote justice in the world; and he will be accompanied by Jesus. These are some of the most widely accepted characteristics of Mahdi across different Muslim denominations.

Among the large body of hadiths about Mahdi quoted from the Prophet himself, justice is the most frequent topic. Some other topics include Mahdi's resemblance to the Prophet, his lineage, his characteristics and traits, his disappearance (Occultation), events before his appearance, his victories, his rule, and the appearance of Jesus to support him.

Another group of later hadiths about Mahdi paint a different picture: he is described as contrasting the Prophet in his conduct; one should be wary of his coming; he will wage global wars; he will kill ruthlessly, not excluding pregnant women; he is merciless; he will annihilate certain tribes and races.

Studied alongside each other, the two groups present contradicting profiles of Mahdi and raise a number of serious questions. For example,

how can someone who resembles the Prophet both in looks and manners be so merciless? How can he be so uncompromising towards different groups of people? And, most importantly, how would he bring peace and justice to the world through massive bloodshed?

Such contradictions point to a certain possibility: can the later hadiths about Mahdi be “skewed” in some sense, for example as a result of complicated socio-political situations? As we will see later in the book, some of the later hadiths on Mahdi (attributed to the Shia Imams) blend well into a background of a politically turbulent and dissected society. In other words, an analysis of the context and documentation of such hadiths raises questions about their originality.

We discuss the above issues in this book.

- 1 **Chapter 1**, sheds light on that Mahdi is an established figure for all Muslim denominations but there are two general narratives of him. We also document a number of western studies to show how the apocalyptic narrative has crept into some academic spaces.
- 2 **Chapter 2** looks at Mahdi’s mission from six perspectives that form the foundations of his character and mission. We make references to the Quran and authentic hadiths to discuss them and show why the apocalyptic representations are wrong.
- 3 **Chapter 3** discusses how the principles from Chapter 2 can be used as criteria for evaluating hadiths. It also presents a brief discussion of the socio-political contexts that allowed some questionable hadiths creep their way into hadith collections.


It should be noted that this book is based on Dr. Mahdiye Pakravan's extensive study, originally published in persian and translated to English under the title “The Way of the Promised Savior: World War or Global Peace?”. Her work has greatly contributed to our understanding of the future prospects for our world - whether it will be marred by global conflict or blessed with lasting peace. we extend our appreciation to Dr. Pakravan for her exceptional research and insights that have shaped this book into what it is today.

We sincerely hope that this humble effort will be noticed favorably by Imam Mahdi, the awaited savior whose presence is veiled and whose character will only be correctly understood when he reappears.



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What are Imam  
Mahdi's Mission  
Objectives?

## Chapter 1: What are Imam Mahdi's Mission Objectives: World War or Global Peace?

### Mahdi, an Established Character

Most denominations of Islam believe that a savior is to come at the End of Time. An abundance of hadiths across various Muslim sources state that his name is Mahdi and give a number of characteristics about him. Some of these characteristics are so frequently and widely reported that they can be considered the established characteristics of Mahdi. They include:

- Mahdi's given name is Muhammad; he is named after his grandfather, the Prophet of Islam.
- Mahi is a son to Fatimah (daughter of the Prophet); he is of her progeny, a few generations away from her.
- He will restore justice across the world; he rebuilds societies and revives Islam.
- He will be accompanied by Jesus. Jesus supports him.

The Shias, particularly, believe that he is the son of Imam Hasan al-Askari, the eleventh Imam, and that he was born in 867 CE. He is still living, hidden from people, waiting for the time that God permits him

to introduce himself to the world. The twelfth Imam will then carry out his mission, which is reviving the true religion and establishing world justice. That day a lot of people will be amazed that how different Islam is from what they believe or practice. He ends a lot of religious disputes by bringing hearts together. He knows how to speak to different groups of people from different religions and backgrounds. For example, he is carrying the staff of Moses, which is meaningful and precious to Jews. Moreover, he is accompanied and supported by Jesus himself. This will be a sign for Christians.

We would like to make a point here. One might ask: why Jesus? Only God knows the answer, but perhaps it has to do something with the fact that, like Mahdi, Jesus is alive by the will of God:

“And for their saying, ‘We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of Allah’—though they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them. [...] and certainly, they did not kill him.”  
(the Quran, 4: 157).

Unlike Mahdi, however, Jesus is not living on earth. But when Mahdi comes, he will also come to support him. It appears that they are kept alive to carry out the final stage of guidance together – when the right time comes.

One might then ask: when will that right time be? What is Mahdi waiting for? We discuss some possible answers to this question in Chapter 2, under the section Social Continuity.

What else do we know about him? There is also a plethora of hadith further describing details about Mahdi and his mission. This abundance might give the impression that we are dealing with a straightforward topic. But this is not the case. Let us discuss why in the next section.

## Contradictory Images of Mahdi

Mahdi is the promised savior of Islam. As we noted above, there are common beliefs about him across all denominations. Apart from the common beliefs, which are based on the most frequent themes and the most reliable hadiths, we face a variety of hadiths that present other



themes, which are sometimes conflicting.

Among the large body of hadiths about Mahdi quoted from the Prophet himself, justice is the most frequent theme. Some other themes include Mahdi's resemblance to the Prophet, his lineage, his characteristics and traits, his disappearance (Occultation), events before his Appearance, his victories, his rule, and the appearance of Jesus to support him.

Other themes, present a set of totally different themes: he is described as contrasting the Prophet in his conduct; one should be wary of his coming; he will wage global wars; he will kill ruthlessly, not excluding pregnant women; he is merciless; he will annihilate certain tribes and races.

The two contradictory images painted by hadiths present Mahdi in two contrasting ways:

- A compassionate Imam, who will lead humanity towards a better life
  - A war-minded fearsome character, who will ruthlessly shed blood and bring destruction to the world
- 
- ***Mahdi, the Savior of Mankind***

The idea of a savior seems to be an old one. Many religions introduce a savior of mankind, for example, Judaism has the Messiah, Christianity talks about the Second Coming of Jesus, Hinduism is waiting for the last Avatar, and Zoroastrianism speaks of Saoshyant. The saviors are going to start the final chapter of human life on earth, which will be built upon goodness and virtue. This is the case with Islam as well. Islam, like other religions, presents a savior narrative. A large number of the hadiths about Mahdi, the Last Imam, give a sense of an ideal world, a utopia. We have quoted many of these hadiths all throughout the book.

- ***Apocalyptic Narratives of Mahdi's Mission***

There are alternative readings of Mahdi's character and mission among some groups. The image they are presenting is far from that of a savior. The character they are describing is not going to "save" the mankind or the world; he is going to destruct them. The first question that comes to

the mind is that: why would the Islam's savior be so different from other saviors presented in other religions? It sounds absurd and curious.

These apocalyptic narratives are based on some hadiths that are quoted in both Sunni and Shia sources. It is unfortunate, but early hadith collections contain some so-called "weak" hadiths too. Islamic theologians have meticulous criteria for identifying a hadith as weak or rigorous, but they also discuss the reasons why weak hadiths exist at all. A detailed discussion of this topic is clearly outside the scope of this book, but we briefly refer to some of these reasons in Chapter 3.

However, a consequence of relying on weak hadiths is that the apocalyptic narrative of Mahdi's mission has been reflected in a considerable number of western academic studies on the Shia. Excerpts from some of such representations are presented below. We believe that a lot of these studies are academic efforts made in good faith, but we encourage researchers to furnish their studies by studying additional sources as well.

Investigating these studies, we can sort them into two main groups: "the Uprising of Imam Mahdi" and "the Image of Imam Mahdi as the Promised Savior". The former mainly emphasizes militant characteristics of Imam's final battle, and the latter describes the just government of Imam Mahdi.

The examples of above-mentioned studies are as following:

- *The uprising of Imam Mahdi*

Denis McEoin calls the Imam's uprising a militant one:

"...as the belief developed that the hidden twelfth Imam was the Mahdi or Qa'im who would appear at the end of time to end the rule of injustice, it became possible to attribute to him increasingly militant characteristics, and it is out of this that one of the most fundamental paradoxes of Shiism was created...However, his hiding was only a temporary measure adopted until the time would come for him to rise up with the sword."<sup>1</sup>

Kamada believes that Imam shows violence against believers of any

1. McEoin, D. (1984). «Aspects of militancy and quietism in Imami Shi'ism. British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. Bulletin 11(1): 18-27.

other religions:

“Believers in any other religions cannot survive in this world unless they are introduced to Islam and confess their faith in it. [...] For example, when some 10,000 people attacked him on his way to Kūfa from Makkah, he stabbed every one of them to death with his sword, and in Kūfa, he killed all the hypocrites who doubted him and he destroyed their fortresses. During his reign, he will bring justice to the world while resorting to armed forces if necessary to establish order in the community... Mahdi is portrayed as a man who has a will to change the world into a completely new one where righteousness and justice governs, and who without hesitation resorts to armed forces if necessary to expel enemies.”<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel Reynold in his article “Jesus, the Qaim, and the End of the World” mentioning the contradictory role of Jesus and Imam Mahdi, writes:

“The Shia Jesus, then, can be quite dramatically contrasted to the figure of the Qā’im, who will come not to speak of enlightenment, but to speak with his sword.”<sup>2</sup>

However, Zeki Saritoprak, In his book *Islam's Jesus* tells that the eschatological scenario in the Islamic tradition is a peaceful one:

“One may arguably conclude that this eschatological scenario in the Islamic tradition, unlike the expectations of some fundamentalist Christians and some radical Muslims, has strong elements of nonviolence that will find its zenith in the descent of Jesus, a symbol of peace foretold by the Prophet of Islam more than 1,400 years ago.”<sup>3</sup>

- ***The image of Imam al-Mahdi as the Promised Savior***

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1. Kamada, S. (2012). «Mahdi and Maitreya (Miroku): Saviors in Islam and Buddhism.» *Journal of the interdisciplinary study of monotheistic religions: JISMOR* 8: 59-76.

2. Reynolds, Gabriel Said. “JESUS, THE QĀ’IM AND THE END OF THE WORLD.” *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75, no. 1/4 (2001): 55–86

3. Saritoprak, Zeki. *Islam’s Jesus*. University Press of Florida, 2014

Hermansen focuses on social justice during Imam Mahdi's rule:

“This righteous individual is said to be one who “will fill the earth with justice after it has been filled with injustice and tyranny.” The Mahdi's coming will lead the forces of good in a final apocalyptic battle, where the good will triumph.”<sup>1</sup>

Halverson considers aspects other than justice:

“Thus, the Mahdi master narrative promises Muslims that God will send a righteous guide to lead the ummah and bring justice to the world by destroying the unjust power (e.g., armies) of the unbelievers. ...In short, the Mahdi master narrative promises that the “correct” order of the world will one day be restored with a purified Islam reigning supreme over the entire earth.”<sup>2</sup>

And Saritoprak concentrates on universal peace established by Imam Mahdi:

“Some envisage Christians and Jews living peacefully and following their religions under a divine global government conducted by Imam Mahdi, whereas others believe that to survive non-Muslims will have to convert to Islam”<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

We saw how two contradictory images exist of Mahdi. Chapter 2 will examine them by drawing on the teachings of the Quran and reliable hadiths. It shows how the apocalyptical narrative of Mahdi's mission contradicts some of the basic foundations of Islam.

1. Hermansen, M. (2004). Mahdi. In R. C. Martin (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (Vol. 2, p421). MacMillan.

2. Halverson, J. R., et al. (2011). *The Mahdi. Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*. J. R. Halverson, H. L. Goodall and S. R. Corman. New York, Palgrave Macmillan US: 108-95.

3. Saritoprak, Zeki. *Islam's Jesus*. University Press of Florida, 2014.



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Six  
Perspectives on  
Mahdi's Mission

## Chapter 2: Six Perspectives on Mahdi's Mission

In this chapter, we will look at Mahdi's mission from six perspectives, that shape the most fundamental beliefs about his mission. Foundational beliefs are important, because they portray the general picture for us, and they enable us to be critical when dealing with suspicious claims. To establish these foundations, we have drawn on verses from the Quran, established hadith, and a number of social and psychological theories that describe basic rules of the world we live in. The six perspectives are as follows:

- Justice
- The inter-relatedness of the periods of the advent
- Legacy of prophets
- Legacy of Prophet Muhammad
- Mercy
- Forgiveness

Each perspective is, independently, a counter-argument against the apocalyptic narrative of Mahdi's mission.

## Justice

*“The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”*

*The Book of Malachi 4:2*

Justice is heavily associated with Mahdi's mission. It can be argued that, if the goal of his mission was to be summarized in one word, that word would be justice. Everything he will do will serve this purpose.

- ***The notion of justice is universal***

A savior is often associated with a utopia. The idea of a utopia goes back a long way in human history. In ancient Greece, Plato sketched the structure of an ideal city, built upon reason, knowledge, virtue and justice. Saint Augustine's *City of God* was a place where humans could live based on a set of higher values. In old Persia, Farabi described his *City of Virtue* as a place where humans are in perfect harmony with the universe, and where this harmony brings happiness to mankind. Ibn Sina presented yet another utopian version, a *City of Justice*, which operated under the principles of fairness. In a sixteenth century war-stricken England, Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, characterizing a city where the ideal order is established and people no longer suffer.

The above are only a handful among the plethora of writings concerning utopia across countries and nations. Human mind has always been attracted to the idea of perfection. Of course, every depiction of the ideal place is different. This is due to the differences in environments, religious texts and human experiences. However, the very existence of them reflects a universal characteristic in humans, which has to do with fascination with the future. People are always thinking about how different events and actions in their lives will unfold. Many of them are also concerned with broader futures, including the future of the world: where is the world headed? What is its destiny? This fundamental question is addressed in all religions.



In fact, many religions introduce a savior of mankind, for example, Messiah in Judaism, Jesus in Christianity (the Second Coming), Vishnu (the last Avatar) in Hinduism, Saoshyant in Zoroastrianism, and Mahdi in Islam. The Savior, who will start the final chapter of human life on earth, will build a world free of sorrow and suffering. The aspiration to realize the earthly paradise has formed a number of movements throughout history in different religions. They are generally studied under the term millennialism.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to religions, the longing for an ideal world is found in many nations and schools of thought. Even Marxism imagines a period in history when the Marxist ideals will realize and then the time will end.<sup>2</sup> These dreams and wishes are reflected in numerous philosophical and literary works.

- ***Justice is central to Mahdi's mission***

Many of the Islamic sources that describe Mahdi's mission and the world that he will build highlight the notion of justice. Interestingly, this notion is central to many other religions and schools of thought as they characterize the era of the savior. It seems safe to claim that justice is a universal idea. All people have a general sense of it. All people know it when they see it.

It is for this very reason that many people find the violent narratives of Mahdi's mission objectionable: excessive bloodsheds, brutal massacres, indiscriminate killing of soldiers and civilians, unbelievable cruelty. Injustice is readily noticed. Even the description of it makes people uneasy. Can cruelty and blood nurture justice and equity? Certainly not. But let us look into it in more detail.

- ***How violent narratives of Mahdi's mission contradict justice***

Social exchange theory describes how different factors influence the

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1. Hamilton, M. B. (2002). *The Sociology of Religion: An Introduction to Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*. (n.p.): Taylor & Francis.

2. Stanford, M. (1998). *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. United Kingdom: Wiley.

relationship between two parties, including the hierarchical relationships in an organization. Studies show that if individuals perceive fairness in how they are treated by their managers, they will have better performance.<sup>1</sup> The opposite also holds true.<sup>2</sup>

The larger society is comparable to an organization in this sense. Leaders of a society can reinforce feelings of fairness and justice in the people, or, in contrast, trigger insecurity and unhappiness. If the violent narratives were true, the world would witness bloody massacres and massive destructions. The people who would survive would have experienced terrible losses. They would have seen and heard about the brutal militarist leader. Their perception of the leader would be a cruel and unjust ruler. Would all this create the right context for seeds of fairness to sprout? The violent narratives are clearly preposterous. The final savior of the world is well aware that society is only improved with justice.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, building a utopia is not the task of a single man. It needs shared vision and collaboration. People need to trust their leader, perceive him as just, and feel inclined to model his attitude and actions. People need to be impressed by their leader and find him tolerant and inclusive. This is the only way that the ideals of the people and the leader will resonate with each other and impact every corner of the society. And this is the only way that a lot of enmities will be resolved even before being expressed. Mahdi surely knows that “a ruler’s fairness is better than a long fertile season<sup>4</sup>” and that “fairness defeats enemies<sup>5</sup>”.

- ***Mahdi will promote justice inside and out***

In addition to world justice, a number of hadiths about Mahdi's era also

1. Walumbwa & Cropanzano & Goldman, “How Leader-Member exchange influences Effective Work Behaviors: Social Exchange and Internal-External Efficacy Perspectives”, *Personnel Psychology*, v. 64, I. 3, p. 2011, 770-739.

2. Lind & Tyler, “The social psychology of procedural justice”, Plenum Press, 1988; See. Hooi, *Organizational Justice and Citizenship Behavior in Malaysia*.

3. Laythi Wāsiti, *Uyūn al-Hikam wa al-Mawā'iz*, p. 48.

4. Ibn Abi al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah*, v. 17, p. 124; Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 75, p. 10.

5. Sayyid Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, hikmah 224, p. 508.

mention that people's hearts will be full of contentment.<sup>1</sup> This means that Mahdi's mission does not just aim to bring social justice to the world, but also to bring equilibrium to the inner state of humans. This can be called inner justice, as opposed to the outer justice, or social fairness.

The importance of people's inner state for justice is that if people do not have a sense of balance inside, they cannot contribute to building justice in the world outside. The Quran explains that the reason God sends messengers is that people learn to build a fair society:

“Certainly, We sent Our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice” (the Quran, 57: 25).

In addition to fair social structures, a fair society is possible when individuals have an idea of fairness, and they feel balanced inside.

Now, how is a sense of fairness promoted? Certainly not with force and bitterness. In the Quran, God asks Prophet Muhammad an important rhetorical question:

“Would you compel the people in order that they become faithful”?! (the Quran, 10: 99).

This clearly shows that coercion is not a tool to be used by a leader who is going to promote the religion of God. It requires dialogue, patience, and other “soft” tools for nurturing the growth of intellect and emotion.

What about the outer justice, or the right social structures that need to be in place? Do they justify exercising force? As we have already established in the previous section, war will never be a first choice for Imam Mahdi (or for any Imam or prophet, for that matter), but there might be cases where individuals and groups stand against justice or do harm to the society. This might call for a war, of course after other means have failed, but that war will be another exercise of justice. It will not target people outside the war, nor will it involve cruelty to the enemy.

“Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed, God does not like transgressors” (the Quran, 2: 190).

One of the meanings of transgression in war is massacre.<sup>2</sup> Mahdi is

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1. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, v. 17, p. 427. Toubi, *al-Amāli*, p. 513-512. Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 52, p. 390.

2. Tabātabā'i, *al-Mizān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, v. 2, p. 62. Makārim Shīrāzī, *Tafsīr-e Nemūneh*, v. 2, p. 19.

aware more than anyone else that:

“whoever kills a soul, without [its being guilty of] manslaughter or corruption on the earth, is as though he had killed all mankind” (the Quran, 5: 32).

It is therefore only reasonable to imagine that he will instruct his representative to be patient and discerning, just as Imam Ali advised Malik, when sending him off to govern Egypt. He clearly states that innocent blood will overthrow a ruler.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sayyid Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, letter 53, p. 443.

## THE INTER-RELATEDNESS OF THE PERIODS OF THE ADVENT

- *Social Continuity*

As we saw in Chapter 1, there are two narratives about Mahdi: a violent narrative and a peaceful narrative. Each narrative is based on a group of hadiths, that provide some descriptions of Mahdi's character and mission.

However, we should not forget that even if the positive details were not given, or even if those hadiths were not rigorous, many positive notions would still be inferred from other beliefs about Mahdi. We already established in the previous section that justice is indeed a pivotal notion in Mahdi's mission. The promise of justice already portrays a utopia and a better future.

The fundamental question that remains is that: can a utopian life be the extension to a global war and brutal bloodshed? Or, put in chronological order, can widespread war and destruction create the ground for peace and justice?

In this section, we look at three different social periods, related to Mahdi's mission, from the perspective of social change. The questions we focus on are: how does a social period transition into another? Do periods of time blend into each other or change abruptly? How does a period of time relate to the previous period? How does a period of time transform into another period? These questions are particularly important, because they provide yet another reason as to why violent narratives of Mahdi's mission cannot be valid: Periods of time are not isolated entities.

- *Mahdi's mission marks three social periods*

Past, present and future are not separate episodes. Present is influenced

by the past events, and future is impacted by the events of today. Just as footprints of time form archeological layers on earth, they mark societies too. In his theory of social causation, Max Weber describes how social events are related in a causality relationship<sup>1</sup> and that every event is influenced by a set of other events.<sup>2</sup> Other sociologists have elaborated on this notion as well.

From the perspective of Mahdi's mission, we can outline three main time periods:

**Occultation period** – the period of time before his reappearance

**Establishment period** – from the moment he comes until he prevails

**Ruling period** – when his rule is already established

These time periods mark social eras in societies, and they follow each other. Let us take a closer look at them.

- *How would the occultation period connect to the establishment period?*

To answer this question, let us look at a theory of history.

### **Evolutionary theory of history**

Is the world collapsing? Are we heading downwards? Or, is there a positive future in store for us? Philosophers of history have proposed a number of theories and models to predict how the future will unfold, including cyclical theories, linear theories (progressive theories), spiral theories and modern cyclical philosophies.<sup>3</sup>

Most philosophers of history and society believe that history is progressive; which means that the world is generally moving forward<sup>4</sup>. However, this movement is not necessarily linear. This belief seems to be ancient. A proof to this claim is the case of religion. Religions, whether old or new, are generally positive about the destiny of the world.

1. Ritzer, G., Stepnisky, J. N. (2017). Sociological Theory. United States: SAGE Publications.

2. Freund, J. (1968). The sociology of Max Weber: Julien Freund. United States: Pantheon Books.

3. Stanford, M. (1998). An Introduction to the Philosophy of History. United Kingdom: Wiley.

4. Motahhari, *Majmū'eh-ye Āsār*, v. 15, p. 212-211.

The evolutionary theory of history believes in a general positive orientation of the world, evolution of the course of history, and a bright ending. A number of Persian Shia scholars, including Allameh Tabataba'i and Shahid Motahari, have drawn on the theory of social evolution to argue that Mahdi's mission cannot be destructive.<sup>1</sup>

Some research studies have intended to show that the direction of the world is positive. In his book, *Factfulness*, Hans Rosling provides a plethora of statistics and evidence to show that, despite all the shortcomings, the world is actually a better place than we think. He delineates ten cognitive failures that lead many of us to see the world worse than it really is. Negativity of the media in presenting the world plays an important role in our negativity. He provides statistics to show that the world is less bad in sixteen areas, for example: battle deaths, HIV infections, nuclear arms, children dying, and hunger. Another set of statistics show that the world has progressed in sixteen areas, for example: environmental protection, women's right to vote, science, and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Mahdi's mission and evolution of history**

When we argue for the evolution of history, two questions are usually raised:

1. If the world is generally getting better, will a savior be necessary at all?
2. Some reliable hadiths state that the world will be "filled with oppression and injustice" before Mahdi comes. Doesn't this contradict history's positive direction?

#### **1. Is a savior necessary?**

One might argue that if the world is headed towards a positive direction, it will mature in its time, regardless of whether a savior comes or not. Then what is the need for a savior?

Two points can be made here.

There is a difference between evolutionary and ideal. Of course, the general direction of the world is positive, but as we all witness every day, unfairness exists around the world and it is likely to continue to exist.

1. Motahhari, *Majmū'eh-ye Āsār*, v. 15, p. 406-405.

2. Rosling, H., Rosling, O., Rönnlund, A. R. (2018). *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World--and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. United Kingdom: Flatiron Books.

Creating an ideal world requires conscious human effort. An evolutionary course does not automatically culminate in the ideal state. History witnesses how certain efforts introduced new intellectual or spiritual pursuits to societies, and opened up new avenues for human development, although they have been limited. Only men of God with comprehensive knowledge know the right actions for realizing the best for everyone in the world. The last of them will be Mahdi.

## 2. What does “filled with oppression” mean?

There is a famous hadith that reads:

“[Mahdi] will fill the world with justice, just as it was filled with oppression and injustice”<sup>1</sup>.

Doesn't it imply a negative direction and an excessive number of bad people?

A number of points can be made here:

The metaphor used here is a vessel that wrong-doing and injustice are poured into it; then the Savior will come and pour justice into it. This does not mean that the amount of wrong-doing just before Mahdi comes will be more than any other time in history.

There is a nuance here: according to the hadith, world will be filled with wrong-doing, but this does not mean that world will also be filled with wrongdoers. In other words, it cannot be inferred that just before Mahdi comes, the number of good people will be minimal and the number of bad people maximal.

Injustice, or *zulm*, in the teachings of Islam, has three types:

- 1) injustice to other people
- 2) injustice to one's self
- 3) injustice to God

Therefore, injustice includes a wide range, from murder to ingratitude, from theft to laziness in prayer. In fact, almost every person commits some kind of wrong-doing. Therefore, a world filled with wrong-doing does not necessarily mean a world full of crime and oppression.

1. Ibn Bābiwayh, *Al-Imāmah wa al-Tabsirah min al-Hayrah*, p. 120.



To be filled can be used to convey abundance of something; it does not necessarily refer to an absolute state. For example, if a street is full of crowd, it does not mean that there is nothing in it except people. In the same sense, a world filled with wrong does convey abundance of wrong, but it does not mean that there is nothing good or virtuous in the world.

If the hadith did indicate a condition for Mahdi's coming, it would point to an absurd direction: we had to do whatever we could to spread wrong and injustice across the world, to encourage Mahdi's coming. This is obviously wrong.

It should be clear from the above that the hadith is not indicating a negative course of history; nor is it stating a condition for the coming of Mahdi (the relationship is not causal). It is simply describing the state of the world before Mahdi comes. Furthermore, it does not mention a specific time, so it could be referring to just before the coming, or years prior to it.

- ***What might realize Mahdi's coming?***

An additional question to be raised concerns the conditions for the coming of Mahdi:

If a savior is necessary, and if promoting injustice is not the way to encourage him to come, then what are some of the right things that we should do? What brings near the perspective of the ideal world?

We discuss two lines of pursuit here: action and exigency. However, only God decides when the right time is for Mahdi to come. We can only know whatever our limited knowledge allows us to know, and do whatever our limited abilities allow us to do. For sure, however, as Shahid Motahari puts it, the right metaphor for the coming of Mahdi is a fruit that ripens on a tree, not a steam engine that explodes<sup>1</sup>.

### **Activity and improvement**

We learn from the Quran that if we aspire towards a better society, we need to take steps and improve ourselves:

**“Indeed, God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” (the Quran, 13: 11).**

1. Motahhari, *Majmū'eh-ye Āsār*, v. 24, p. 428.

The One who brings about change is God, and He does so through His own means, but the condition for the change to happen is decision and action on our part.

Mahdi will not change the world through supernatural means, that is, regardless of ordinary causes and dynamisms. Of course, some prophets did miraculous actions in certain occasions, for reasons that only God knows. But miracles are only occasional. They are not the way that humans are meant to approach different matters. God states in the Quran that:

*“If We wish, We could send down to them from the sky a sign before which their heads will remain bowed in humility” (the Quran, 26: 4).*

The verse is clear enough. Furthermore, if no action was needed from people, then what would justify this long pause? God could have sent the savior years and centuries before. What is He waiting for? A savior would not even be needed. The first, the second, or the last prophet could present the miracle and everyone would be guided. Wouldn't this delay be unfair to a lot of people?

In this regard, we can only say that the delay is because the society is not prepared. People are not looking for that worthy leader. Therefore, a condition for the coming of Mahdi is that people will generally be better than they are now. Indeed, he is coming to revive the teachings of the Quran. He is coming to have people exercise justice across the world:

*“Certainly, We sent Our messengers with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice” (the Quran, 57: 25).*

### Exigency

Roughly put, exigency is a strong sense of distress that makes someone fervently look for an alternative. Speaking in the context of Mahdi and his mission, what makes individuals and societies thirsty for change? What makes them desperate for a way out? What makes them long for a different leader? Some of the main reasons include:

**Oppression and discrimination** – they are for sure a major cause of distress and frustration.

**Social and political failures** – they can have serious consequences

and severely affect people.

**Spiritual thirst for meaning and growth** – it is a major source of perplexity

The latter deserves further discussion.

Wealth and technological advancements do bring about a more comfortable life, but they do not create inner peace and happiness. For happiness, humans need spirituality and meaning. In his book, *Man Made God: the meaning of life*, Luc Ferry observes that people in Europe's secular societies are looking for meaning and purpose more than ever before, and that absence of meaning is a serious problem. The French philosopher admits that modernity and secular humanism have not eliminated the need for meaning and the sacred. In *The Future of Technology*, Daniel Bell writes that technology cannot address the human need for spirituality, and that this sense is deep rooted in humans. Spirituality helps people get through hard times, and acts of worship create a transcendental sense in them. Social uprisings, political movements, states, empires, and economic systems have lived and died, but religions have survived. This shows that people need faith, of some kind.

Martin Seligman, one of the pioneers of positive psychology, reintroduced topics such as happiness, mental wellbeing, positive emotions, spirituality, creativity and virtues into psychology. In his book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, he argues that the post-World War II psychology placed too much emphasis on disorders and disregarded positive aspects of humans. Some of the twentieth-century psychologists claimed that religious tendencies would negatively affect mental health, but a large body of studies prove this to be wrong. Authentic religious tendencies, studies show, have an important role in preventing or reducing many mental disorders, drug abuse, divorce and antisocial behaviors.

The above only highlights spirituality as a fundamental element of humans. Lack of meaning creates anxiety and can even lead to pathological behaviors and suicide. However, if it is guided towards a constructive sense of exigency, anxiety for meaning can uplift humans to search for higher values and ways to fulfill them.

## Conclusion

If Mahdi was to appear into a society that was not ready for him, then the outlook was nothing but destruction, not happiness and not a utopia. The coming of Mahdi is delayed because people have to miss him before he comes. People have to care for higher values and lack someone who would be able to promote those values not only in individuals, but in societies as well. It is this yearning that creates a condition for the coming - while many people might not know Mahdi. Looking for general peace, justice and goodness means looking for Mahdi. When enough people are thirsty for it, he will come and introduce himself to the world.

- *How would the establishment period connect to the ruling period?*

What will happen when Mahdi comes? We do not know much. But we do know that the outcome of his coming will be an ideal society. In other words, one day the world will be introduced to him, a course of events will happen, he will become the world ruler, and he will promote justice across societies. Social events build on each other and create contexts for each other. Therefore, whatever happens in the period between his appearance and his rise to power (which we will call establishment period) cannot be unrelated to the period of his rule.

One of the narratives of Mahdi's establishment period is that of violence, war and destruction. The important question in response to this narrative is that: can the sheer violence and massive destruction that this narrative describes, miraculously, introduce people to an ideal world? Note that we are not denying that Mahdi will have to fight some wars. The confrontation of good and evil has always existed and will exist in Mahdi's era too. It is the scale of these wars and the attitude of the leaders that is the point of concern.

History abundantly accounts how wars spark, escalate and turn into unstoppable catastrophes for countries and continents. Theory of causation applies here as well. Wars are like a row of dominoes. They activate a chain of events and reactions.<sup>1</sup> They can even instigate other wars.

1. Ghafūri, *Sad Jang-e Bozorg-e Tārikh*, p. 12-11.

There is a large body of research on the negative consequences of war. Wars trigger mental disorders, anxiety, fear, hatred, jealousy, deceitful behaviors, and death, both in individuals and societies. Moreover, some negative consequences of war last for very long.

Children are particularly harmed by war. For example, a report observes that Syrian children are experiencing excessive anxiety as a result of the trauma of war, and that the long war might have had debilitating effects on a whole generation, which would be very difficult to repair.<sup>1</sup>

Today, many states and organizations are working towards minimizing military actions and their devastating consequences. Confrontations can have different motivations, both negative (such as hegemonic aspirations) and positive (such as fighting against oppression). However, the world appears to be averse to military measures more than ever before. As a result of this aversion, other types of confrontation have formed, for example, economic wars, sanctions, cyber wars, cold wars. These confrontations generally involve fewer deaths and tend to be more effective. But even these “softer” forms of confrontation are bad and harmful to the societies if they are used for hegemonic intentions. However, they highlight an important fact: today’s world increasingly despises scenes of dead bodies lying in blood on the battlefield, engulfed by blazing flames. It is increasingly horrified by the consequences of such destructions.

John M. Collins, American politician and strategist, writes that humans are for the first time in history more concerned with how to prevent wars rather than how to wage wars. The reason, he argues, is that military arms are so destructive today that they leave little room for wrong strategic decisions. So political aims have to be pursued through other means, rather than military measures.<sup>2</sup> The 1955 Mainau Declaration, signed by Nobel laureates, reads, “All nations must come to the decision to renounce force as a final resort. If they are not prepared to do this, they will cease to exist.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Al-Naba’ Center for Strategic Studies, *Asarāt-e Ravāni-ye Jang bar Sūriyeh*.

2. Collins, J. M. (1973). *Grand Strategy; Principles and Practices*. United States: Naval Institute Press.

3. *Mainau Declaration 1955*. (2023, July 1).

<http://www.lindau-repository.org/permadocs/MainauDeclaration1955EN.pdf>

Back to our topic, if the wars that some questionable hadiths claim were going to happen, what would the outcome be other than destruction and annihilation? Furthermore, would the survivors of such a bloody religious war still have any hope in that religion? Of course, Islam permits wars in the way of God in specific situations. However, a war is always the last choice, and it is strictly regulated in order that deaths and destruction will be as minimal as possible. But what these hadith describe is not a regulated or minimal war. How would a warmonger wage a destructive global war and then build a world full of peace?

Some of the consequences of World War II, the most destructive war in the documented history, haunt societies even today. In his book *The Fear and the Freedom: How the Second World War Changes Us*, Keith Lowe writes, "The Second World War was not just another crisis – it directly affected people more than any other conflict in history. Over 100 million men and women were mobilized. [...] For the first time in history the number of civilians killed vastly outweighed the number of soldiers, not just by millions, but by tens of millions. Four times as many people were killed in the Second World War as in the first. For every one of these people there were dozens who were indirectly affected by the vast economic and psychological upheavals that accompanied the war".<sup>1</sup>

Social scientists discuss how a violent behavior can trigger a violent response, which is often more violent. This can easily turn into a chain of rage. Dealing with rage can be very difficult and energy-draining for other people. Furthermore, rage can overwhelm even the more sensible individuals and have them react with violence. Uncontrolled violent disrupts development. Violent environment cannot nurture development, even over the long run.<sup>2</sup> War is a form of political violence with detrimental consequences in terms of population, economy, society, and culture.

None of these promises a utopia – even remotely. Those who insist on reporting such hadiths and promote a violent narrative of Mahdi's mission will have to ask themselves: how would blind massacre and destruction build peace? After all, grudges of wars remain in people's memories, even after centuries, and instigate new wars.

1. Lowe, K. (2017). *The Fear and the Freedom: How the Second World War Changed Us*. United Kingdom: St. Martin's Publishing Group.

2. Fokūhī. *Khoshūnat-e Siyāsī*. p. 7-6.

- *Summary*

Mahdi's mission marks three important periods. He is going to navigate societies through these periods towards justice and peace. How will he transform them from one period to the next? Today's rational humans are becoming increasingly spiritual, too. They need a wise, inclusive leader who is both strong and compassionate, capable of navigating people from the darkness of perplexity to the brightness of knowledge.

## LEGACY OF THE PROPHETS

*“To be in one heart is better than to be in one tongue.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Rumi*

God sent prophets to promote His message among different people. All prophets followed the tradition of God. Mahdi shares the same mission (with the caveat that he does not receive revelation). Some hadiths tell us that he will be carrying signs of the prophet.<sup>2</sup> Some of these signs will include objects, like the ring of Solomon and the staff of Moses. But he will also have the attitude of prophets and will follow their approach.

In this section, we look at two aspects of the legacy of prophethood. Of course, the shared principles that prophets followed are not limited to these two.

- ***All prophets spoke the language of understanding and empathy***

“Common language” was always a prerequisite for prophethood:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ

“And we did not send any messenger except with the language of his people, so that he might make [Our message] clear to them” (the Quran, 14: 4).

Of course, every prophet sent to a people spoke their language. But language does not just refer to a set of vocabulary and syntax; it also involves the way we communicate and convey meaning, which is influenced by historical and cultural factors. The above verse, obviously, does not intend to merely say that prophets and their people spoke the same tongue. In addition to the same tongue, it refers to the understanding and communication that prophets established between themselves and their people, in order to guide them to the right path.

1. Mawlavi, *Masnavi*, chapter 1, verse 1207.

2. For example, Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, v. 1, p. 232-231.



Prophets pursued the path of effective communication, in order to be able to make the right impact. This is not a trivial task. An effective communication involves a deep understanding of the audience, or, in other words, meeting the audience where they are. God would want His messengers to have the right tools for communicating His message, because He deeply cares for humans:

**“Certainly We have honored the children of Adam”  
(the Quran,17: 70).**

As quoted from Quran that God says, “We did not send any messenger except with the language of his people”, it is understood that the messenger would understand the people’s culture and they, too, could understand his. Common language is a prerequisite to solving cultural problems. Indeed, prophets were cultural healers of their societies. The word language, in this verse, does not merely refer to a tongue or dialect. It also refers to the culture of the people.

After mentioning the “same language”, the verse explains the reason behind it: “so they may make [Our message] clear to them”. In other words, common language is a context for clear communication and explaining ideas. Dialogue is indeed the preferred way for improving people’s thinking. The Quran abounds with examples of dialogues between various individuals and groups, including between prophets and their people. Derivations of the root *qa-wa-la*, which means to say or to express, have occurred 17426 times in the Quran, which makes it the second most frequent root in the Quran (the first is the root *a-la-ha*, which refers to Allah, Arabic phrase for God).

Prophets pursued improving their societies, and they targeted relationships both between people as well as between a person and different ideas. They used the best communicative tools to explain and exchange. They would consider social contexts, and adjust their discourse to address people’s gaps and needs. The way they spoke to their people made perfect sense in that particular place and time.

- ***Mahdi also has a common language with people***

Considering this long tradition, there is no reason to think that Mahdi, the Savior of mankind, would follow a different approach. Mahdi

is introduced to us as the heir to legacy of prophets<sup>1</sup>. It only makes sense to say that he will start a dialogue with the people of his era, of course in a way that best suits their culture and intellectual level. Mahdi and people will indeed have a common language.

The language of Mahdi, however, will also have another important quality. Since he is sent not to a single people but to all people of the world, he will speak to the basic elements of human nature. In other words, a large part of his discourse will be shaped around notions that every person understands regardless of religion, race, time and place. These include, for example, worship, justice, honesty and disapproval of wrong.

- ***The world is increasingly averse to war***

Every prophet had a miracle, or a special way to impress his people. Moses, for example, had his staff turned into a serpent and his hand glow in pale white. Jesus healed the sick. The miracles suited the culture, lifestyle and circumstances of the people that they targeted. Today's world is different. People are now more sophisticated, both intellectually and emotionally. Media, in the sense of multiple possibilities for communication, has dominated the world. The long history of wars and conflicts has made many people averse to war. Most people value dialogue, harmony and peace.

Even political leaders have changed their discourse. Many states have joined global organizations and signed conventions to stop proliferation of arms, promote peace and regulate wartime actions. There is a World Peace Day in the global calendar (September 21). Hegemonic powers often feel compelled to participate in "talks" rather than starting wars in the first place. They know that showing off a warmongering mindset is detrimental to them in today's world. Wars that do take place generally get negative reactions from various individuals, groups and states across the world. Moreover, today, despite extraordinary advancement in military technologies, people generally have more composure than most societies of the past. God only knows what destructions would be brought about if impulsive leaders of history had today's warfare.

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1. Sadūq, *Man lā Yahzuruhu al-Faqīh*, v. 2, p. 610.

As much as today's humans long for global peace and justice, as much as they cherish dialogue and understanding, and despite all the efforts, that aspired world is not yet realized. However, the crucial point to consider is that today's people will not be impressed by a war-minded leader. If Mahdi were to come to start the most brutal bloodshed of history, as some narratives want people to believe, he would not be a hero in a world that increasingly hates violence. Mahdi will definitely not speak the language of war.

- *All prophets were extremely patient and tolerant*

There is no example of a prophet who would invite people to God with bad temper and coercion. Prophets were very reliable in conveying God's message: that people should stop worshipping objects or other humans, that they needed to live decent and ethical lives, that they had responsibilities towards God, their family and their community, that there was a Day of Judgment, that they would be generously rewarded for good actions, and that punishment was also a possible consequence if they chose to rebel against God. But they were also extremely patient with their people, even to the point that some people would be sarcastic about their patience. Noah, for example, invited his people to God for many years. Some of them got weary and scolded him.

“They said, ‘O Noah, you have disputed with us already, and you have disputed with us exceedingly. Now bring us what you threaten us, should you be of the truthful’ (the Quran, 11: 32).

All prophets experienced hard times in dealing with nonbelievers. God acknowledges this:

“We already know [O Muhammad] that your chest is constrained with what they say” (the Quran, 15: 97).

God also reminds us that Prophet Muhammad and all other prophets were patient:

“So [O Muhammad] be patient just as the most determined messengers were” (the Quran, 46: 35)

“So for your Lord be patient” (the Quran, 74: 7).

It might not be easy to imagine what a prophet's responsibilities looked like. They had to deal with a wide range of people all the time. Patience and tolerance were incumbent upon them.<sup>1</sup> They were instructed by God to invite people to Him by presenting ideas to think about, and if people challenged the ideas, prophets had to have decent conversations with them. This obviously requires great tolerance.

“Invite [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best”  
(the Quran, 16: 125).

God elsewhere explains that when a bad behavior is responded by a good behavior, it is likely that it will turn an enemy to a friend:

“Good and evil [conduct] are not the equal. Repel [evil] with what is best. [If you do so,] the one between him and you there was enmity will then be as though he was a sympathetic friend” (the Quran, 41: 34).

When Moses was sent with God's message, he prayed that God would give him patience:

“He said, ‘My Lord, expand for me my chest’”  
(the Quran, 20:25).

Moses was going to face Pharaoh, who had declared himself the great lord of his people:

“He said, ‘I am your exalted lord!’” (the Quran, 79: 24).

Inviting an arrogant ruler to God is a daunting task. God gave patience to Moses and reminded him that he needed to use a clear and nonaggressive language: “And speak to him with gentle speech” because, God only knows, that this is the best way that a tyrant might be guided:

“so he might take admonition or fear [God]”  
(the Quran, 20: 44).

This last point needs more discussion. First, who would have thought that the first preferred way to invite a tyrant to God would be using a gentle language? Thankfully, God knows better. Second, the Quran contains a large number of stories but we know that it is not an anthology

1. 610.  
, *al-Amālī*, p. 521. Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 72, p. 53.

of tales; it is a book of guidance. The stories of the Quran contain many lessons about human nature, how the world works, the right and wrong ways to think and act in different situations, and nuances of human relationships in groups and societies. It is absurd that some narratives insist that Mahdi would follow the exact opposite approach. Do the advocates of such narratives not ask themselves: why are we told in the Quran about centuries of guidance and the prophethood tradition? Mahdi is going to revive the same Quran. It is obvious that he will practice its very teachings.

- ***How will Mahdi deal with opposition?***

Imam Mahdi will, for sure, face opposition. Tyrants like Pharaoh have always existed and stood against truth. There are plenty of hadiths that tell us he will carry signs of prophets and that he is an heir to their tradition. The only way to portray this is that he will have the same tolerant attitude: war never precedes patient dialogue. If a war does need to take place, it means that no other way is left and that the adversary is inflicting harm on others by transgressing boundaries of fairness. Even in this case, the war will be only with the transgressors, not with people. This is the way of prophets.

One might rightfully ask: what about other verses of the Quran that highlight the importance of war (*jihād*) in the way of God? What about the wars that a number of prophets, including Prophet Muhammad, fought? Two points are worth noting here. First, when we study history, we find that military action was always the last solution of a prophet.

Second, the Quran and hadiths stress that military action has its own rules and limits. For example, if a group of enemies attack a Muslim land, Muslims should take arms and defend themselves, but they should never exceed moderation:

**“Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed, God does not like transgressors”  
(the Quran, 2: 190).**

We understand from the Quran and hadith, as well as the practice of prophets, that brutality and massacre are strongly condemned. No man of God is a vengeful militarist.

## LEGACY OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD

*“His name is the same as mine, and his honorific title is the same as mine.”*

*“His visage and character are the closest to mine.”*

*Prophet Muhammad*

In addition to the past prophets, Mahdi is also an heir to the legacy of the Prophet of Islam. He is carrying out the final stage of a mission that was started by the Prophet and pursued by the Imams.

- ***The Prophet's tradition***

The Prophet's tradition, as is understood in the Islamic culture, includes his way of life. The Arabic word, *sunnah*, literally means *a decent way*. The Prophet's tradition is an important benchmark in understanding and explaining proper Islamic practice. Proper Islamic practice is, indeed, the tradition of God. In some of the Shia duas, or prayers, we address the Imams as follows: “You practiced the tradition of God”<sup>1</sup>.

- ***All Imams followed the Prophet's tradition***

Some critics reason that since humans are different, the Imams could have had their own different traditions. For example, they say, Imam Hassan signed a peace pact and Imam Hussain engaged in war. This argument is wrong. There are two main reasons:

First, context is important. Imams lived in different times, with their own socio-political circumstances. Different events would obviously call for different engagements, but there are extensive studies that show that all Imams, despite living in different contexts, operated within the same tradition. In other words, a set of common principles govern the actions of all the Imams.

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1. Sadūq, *Man lā Yahzuruhu al-Faqīh*, v. 2, p. 612.

Second, there is a large body of authentic hadiths that highlights how all the Imams followed the same tradition and attitude. Imam Sadiq, for example, states that his words are the words of his father, and his father's words are the words of his father, and he continues to name the Imams backwards until he mentions the Prophet.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he expresses that he wishes his followers would quote his words from his father instead of him, because Imam Baqir has already said the same things<sup>2</sup>. The shared attitude of Imams is not just reflected in their words. They followed each other in actions too. Imam Baqir, for example, says, "I obey whatever Ali has ordered and keep away from whatever he has banned, because obeying Ali is obeying the Prophet"<sup>3</sup>.

The Imams were, of course, different individuals living in different times, but there was a certain unity among them. This was because all of them were connected to the same source. The same set of principles governed their attitudes and actions. They were examples of the hadith that reads, "The believer sees [everything] through the light of God."<sup>4</sup>

### One tradition, twelve manifestations

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ

"There is certainly a good example for you in the Messenger of God" (the Quran, 33: 21).

This verse encourages Muslims to follow the example of the Prophet. In the Shia belief, Imam Ali and eleven men of his generation (who are also the Prophet's generation through his daughter, Fatimah) have the responsibility to promote the Prophet's message. The Imams are, therefore, examples to follow in the same way that the Prophet is. In other words, all of them are the same example for people. So their attitudes are the same and they operate within the same tradition.

Unfortunately, however, as history witnesses, some shallow people or political actors have tried to convince others that the Imams had

1. Kulayni, *al-Kāfī*, v. 1, p. 53.

2. Kulayni, *al-Kāfī*, v. 1, p. 51.

3. Kulayni, *al-Kāfī*, v. 1, p. 198.

4. Saffār Qomī, *Basā'ir al-Darajāt*, v. 1, p. 80.

different set of principles. Different actions of Imams, for them, are the only criteria for judgment. It would be such a big loss for the Shia if they were right. Fortunately, they are far from truth. A deeper analysis of the life and actions of Imams reveals a number of governing principles. Here, of course, we cannot go into an extensive discussion. We only mention some examples.

All the Imams wanted guidance for people. Imam Reza agreed to succeed an Abbasid caliph for the same reason, and Imam Kazim went to jail for the same reason. All Imams were averse to massacre. Imam Hussain, who was forced into war with Yazid, hated military cruelty as much as Imam Hassan did, who was going to fight Muawiya but his comprehensive understanding of the socio-political circumstances brought about a peace pact.

### Necessities of time and differences of action

Actions respond to necessities of time, but principles do not. There is a lot of hadiths that show how the Imams would invite people to follow the tradition of the Prophet.<sup>1</sup> They, themselves, would always carefully follow that tradition, and even explained how their special role called for a full adherence to the principles of the Prophet<sup>2</sup>. This means, from another perspective, that each Imam actually carried on the tradition of the previous Imam, which is the tradition of the Prophet.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, the socio-political circumstances of different periods of time can differ drastically. For example, when Imam Ali succeeded the Prophet, the time called for a different set of actions than the time of the Prophet, but Imam Ali would closely follow the same principles. He instructs his followers, including us living in this day and age, to follow the tradition of the Prophet. Does this mean that people have to imitate every single action of the Prophet? No. Even the Imams did not do so. But they closely followed the tradition and approach of the Prophet.

In other words, all of the Imams lived the same principles but each of them adjusted his decisions and actions to the people's culture and the

1. Harrānī, *Tuhaf al-Uqūl*, p. 183.

2. Sayyid Radī, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 169, p. 255.

3. Saffār Qomī, *Basā'ir al-Darajāt*, p. 259.



social and political environment of the time. The Quran teaches us that we should not make distinctions between God's prophets:

“Say, ‘We have faith in God and what has been sent down to us, and in what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets were given from their Lord; we make no distinction between any of them and to Him do we submit.’” (the Quran, 2: 137).

“The Messenger and the believers have faith in what has been sent down to him from his Lord. Each [of them] has faith in Allah, His angels, His scriptures and His messengers: ‘we make no distinction between any of His messengers’” (the Quran, 2: 285).

“Say, ‘We have faith in Allah and in what has been sent down to us, and in what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus and the prophets were given by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.’” (the Quran, 3: 84).

We know that prophets lived in very different times and places but all of them followed the same principles and promoted the same message. This is what “no distinction between them” refers to, and the same applies to the Imams as well.

- ***Mahdi and the Prophet's tradition***

There are hadiths that claim Mahdi's attitude will be drastically different from that of the Prophet, so much so that people will wonder, “Is he really of the progeny of Fatimah?!”<sup>1</sup>. Textual and contextual studies can easily show that such hadiths are inauthentic. An example is presented in the next chapter. Here, however, we present evidence from the Quran and hadith to show that Mahdi does follow the tradition of the Prophet.

**Evidence from the Quran that shows Mahdi will follow the Prophet's tradition**

As we saw earlier, the Prophet is introduced in the Quran as an example:

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1. Thaqaḫī, *al-Ghārāt*, v. 1, p. 12.

“There is certainly a good example for you in the Messenger of God—for those who look forward to God and the Last Day, and remember God much” (the Quran, 33: 21).

Imam Mahdi is a leader to us but he is also a devout Muslim who loves and remembers God and believes in the Day of Judgment. How can anyone say that he would not follow the example of the Prophet?! Any such claim is indeed objectionable.

Elsewhere in the Quran, everyone is called to obey the Prophet:

“And obey God and the Messenger so that you may be granted [His] mercy” (the Quran, 2: 132).

“Take whatever the Messenger gives you, and refrain from whatever he forbids you” (the Quran, 59: 7).

These verses speak to Imam Mahdi as well as all the other Imams and everyone else. Of course, his time will be very different from that of the Prophet. Presenting the message of guidance to a different world will require different sets of action. However, based on the above verses, he will do whatever the Prophet permits and not do whatever he bans. It is wrong to claim that his attitude towards different issues, including war, would contrast the Prophet's attitude. Indeed, if the Prophet condemns cruelty even to one's enemy, which he does, so will Mahdi.

### **Evidence from the hadith that shows Mahdi will follow the Prophet's tradition**

In the following hadiths, which have strong documentation evidence, it is stated that Mahdi follows the Prophet's tradition:

Muhammad ibn Muslim says, I asked Imam Baqir about Qā'im [Mahdi], “When he rises, what approach will he follow to deal with people?” Imam said, “The same approach that the Prophet followed to spread Islam”. “What was the Prophet's approach?” I asked. He said, “He casted away whatever belonged to the Age of Ignorance, and he treated people with fairness. Qā'im will do the same. When he appears, he will cast away [a lot of] what has become habitual among people, and he will treat them with fairness.”<sup>1</sup>

Imam Sadiq quoted his fathers that they quoted the Prophet as

1. Tūsi, *Tahzīb al-Ahkām*, v. 6, p. 154.

saying: Mahdi is one of my children. His name is the same as mine, and his honorific title is the same as mine. He is the closest to me in looks and manners than anyone else. He will have a period of occultation, in which there will be perplexity and many people will go astray from their religion. Then he will come, like a piercing flame, and fill the world with justice, just as it was filled with wrong and injustice.<sup>1</sup>

There are other hadiths that might have weaker documentation evidence, but since they endorse the above strong hadiths, they contribute to making a strong case for the idea.

The Prophet said:

“Mahdi is one of my children. His name is the same as mine and his honorific title is the same as mine. He is the closest person to me in looks and manners more than everyone else. He will have a period of occultation, in which there will be perplexity and many denominations will go astray. Then he will come, like a shining star, and fill the world with justice, just as it was full of wrong and injustice”.<sup>2</sup>

Imam Ali said:

“Earth will retrieve its hidden yield for him and give the keys [to its treasures] to him. He will show you how a just rule looks like, and he will revive God’s book and the Prophet’s tradition, which will have been abandoned prior to that day”.<sup>3</sup>

Imam Sadiq said that the Prophet said:

“Qa’im is one of my children. His name is the same as mine, his honorific title is the same as mine, his looks is the same as mine, and his tradition is the same as mine. He will reintroduce people to my religion and sharia [law]”.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Saduq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 1, p. 287.

2. Ibn Babiwayh, *al-Imāmah wa al-Tabsirah min al-Hayrah*, p. 120. Saduq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 1, p. 286.

3. Sayyid Radi, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 138, p. 196.

4. Saduq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 2, p. 411.

“A man from my ahlul-bayt (family) will come and he will follow my tradition. God will send down blessings for him from the heavens, and earth will retrieve its blessings for him. By his means the world will be filled with justice, just as it was full of wrong and injustice”.<sup>1</sup>

Imam Baqir said:

“Knowledge of God’s book and the Prophet’s tradition grows from the heart of our Mahdi, like a plant that thrives in the most perfect form”.<sup>2</sup>

Imam Sadiq said:

“When God Almighty gives permission to Qā’im [Mahdi] to come out, he will rise on a platform and call people to him, he will implore them in the name of God and invite them to the right [path], and he will treat them based on the Prophets approach and act as the Prophet himself would.”<sup>3</sup>

Imam Hassan al-Askari [Imam Mahdi’s father] said:

“Thanks and praises to God for keeping me in this world and showing me my successor, who is the closest to the Prophet in looks and manners”.<sup>4</sup>

Someone inquired Imam Sadiq about Imam Mahdi’s occultation and asked, “What will his approach be?” He said:

“He will do what the Prophet did. He will cast away past habits, as the Prophet did with the habits of the Age of Ignorance, and he will continue with Islam [but] as a new chapter”.<sup>5</sup>

Someone asked Imam Baqir, “Tell us about the Qā’im [Mahdi]”. He said:

“I swear to God, Qā’im is not me; nor is he a person that

1. Irbilī, *Kashf al-Ghummah fī ma’rifah al-Ummah*, v. 2, p. 472.

2. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 2, p. 653.

3. Mufīd, *al-Irshād*, v. 2, p. 383-382.

4. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 2, p. 409-408.

5. Nu’mānī, *al-Ghaybah*, p. 231-230.

you would turn your necks towards [i.e. you will not see him among you]. His birth will take place in secrecy”. “How will he act?” I asked. He said, “Just as the Prophet acted. He will cast away the habits of the past and build a new future”.<sup>1</sup>

The Prophet said:

“A man will come from my ahlul-bayt [family], whose name is the same as mine and whose manners is the same as mine. And he will fill the world with justice”.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Nu'mānī, *al-Ghaybah*, p. 169.

2. Irbilī, *Kashf al-Ghummah fī ma'rifah al-Ummah*, v. 2, p. 471.

## MERCY

*“And We have not sent you [O Muhammad] except as a mercy to the worlds.”*

*The Quran, 21: 107*

*“Mahdi's given name is that of the Prophet, and he is the closest to the Prophet in looks and manners.”*

Mercy is a fundamental notion in Islam. Our Prophets and Imams are characterized with their compassion. Mahdi will likewise be compassionate both in attitude and action.

- ***The breadth of God's mercy is beyond imagination***

We read in a hadith that, “It is not a surprise that people are saved [from punishment or fire]; what surprises, though, is how some people end up doomed, given God's vast mercy!”<sup>2</sup> God wants us to have faith in His mercy. All chapters (surahs) of the Quran (except one) begin with the words “In the name of Allah, the All-Beneficent, the All-Merciful”, as if each surah reflects a different shade of God's mercy. He has invoked the world to take the path of His love<sup>3</sup>. His mercy encompasses everything<sup>4</sup>. He has made mercy incumbent upon Himself<sup>5</sup>. In us, mercy is usually an emotion provoked in reaction to a touching situation, but this is not the case with God's mercy. His love already includes everything in the world, beyond interactions and influences<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, He wants us to have mercy on each other as a way

1. Ibn Babiwayh, *al-Imamah wa al-Tabsirah min al-Hayrah*, p. 120. Saduq, *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah*, v. 1, p. 286.

2. Sayyid Murtada, *al-Amali*, v. 1, p. 162.

3. Imam Sajjad, *Sahifah al-Sajjadiyyah*, dua 1#.

4. The Quran, 156 :7.

5. The Quran, 12 :8.

6. Sayyid Radi, *Nahj al-Balaghah*, sermon 179, p. 258.

to invite His special mercy on ourselves<sup>1</sup>. He has made it a rule that one who does not have mercy on people will be deprived of mercy of God<sup>2</sup>. But if a person shows mercy to something even as insignificant as a dead bird, God will show mercy to him or her<sup>3</sup>. He says, “If you want My mercy, have mercy on each other”<sup>4</sup>.

- ***The Prophet was an unending source of mercy***

God also wants everyone to know Prophet Muhammad as a mercy, not only to the humans, but to the entire world<sup>5</sup>. The Prophet is also the most kind and gentle human being<sup>6</sup>, and his compassion is extraordinary. The Prophet encouraged everyone to have mercy to each other, and described lack of compassion for people as a big loss<sup>7</sup>.

The Prophet’s kindness did not include just people but animals too. Once he gave a man a number of sheep and told him, “Tell your children to keep their nails clipped so they will not hurt the sheep while milking them”<sup>8</sup>. The Prophet considered everyone and everything. His teachings were inclusive and he himself was a lovely person. A true religious leader has two main characteristics: inclusive attitude and beautiful conduct. God would not send an ill-mannered person with His message. He says to His Prophet,

“It is by God’s mercy that you are gentle to them. Had you been harsh and hardhearted, they would have surely scattered from around you” (the *Quran*, 3: 159).

- ***Imam Mahdi is a mercy to the world***

We already mentioned that the Prophet and the Imams operate in

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1. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, v. 11, p. 33.

2. Nūri, *Mustadrak al-Wasā’il*, v. 9, p. 55.

3. Reyshahri, *Hukm al-Nabi al-‘A’zam*, v. 4, p. 400.

4. Reyshahri, *Hukm al-Nabi al-‘A’zam*, v. 4, p. 54.

5. The *Quran*, 107 :21.

6. Bayhaqi, *Dalā’il al-Nubuwwah*, v. 1, p. 270-269. Tabrisi, *Makārim al-Akhlaq*, p. 18.

7. Ibn Hijr ‘Asqalāni, *al-isābah*, v. 4, p. 505.

8. Ibn Sa’d, *al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā*, v. 7, p. 34.

the same spirit, so if the Prophet is a mercy to the world, which he is, so are the Imams. That is why the Imams are sometimes referred to as the “mine of mercy” or the “continuous mercy”<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, this applies to Imam Mahdi, the last Imam, too. In other hadith we learn that he resembles the Prophet in looks and manners more than anyone else. He introduces himself as an heir to the legacy of all God’s prophets and he says, “I am kind to you more than yourself”<sup>2</sup>. In another hadith, he is called the “flowing water” or the “clear water”<sup>3</sup>, and we know that water symbolizes life, not death. A stream of water encourages growth, life and vitality all around it. Of course, it also is capable of moving big rocks. Clear water also symbolizes purity and tenderness. Other hadiths call Mahdi the “rescuer” and the “expansive mercy”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, Imam Mahdi is obviously a mercy to the world, just as the Prophet was, but people have to feel the need for him before he comes. He should be missed in people’s lives. This is partly achieved when people are mature enough to willfully look for a worthy leader to follow. This is, hopefully, when Mahdi will come and he will establish a society that everyone was longing for. Shaped around maturity, free will and choice, the coming of Mahdi is yet another mercy of God to people, which allows the world to enjoy the lead of an inclusive leader with beautiful conduct.

- ***People learn from their leader***

A merciless leader cannot build a society around fairness and compassion. A number of psychologists and social scientists have studied how leaders and influential figures impact other people’s behavior. Bandura<sup>5</sup>, most famously, discusses that a large part of human behavior is shaped through observation and modelling. However, people do not just randomly imitate each other. A number of factors, including respect, social status, competency and power, play an important role in whether a person’s behavior will be picked by others or not. Bandura proposes that most people tend to be influenced by figures who they consider

1. Sadūq, *Man lā Yahzuruhu al-Faqīh*, v. 2, p. 613 ,610.

2. Qutb al-Dīn Rāwandī, *al-Kharā’ij wa al-Jarā’ih*, v. 2, p. 714.

3. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 1, p. 326-325.

4. Tabrisī, *al-Ihtijāj*, v. 2, p. 493.

5. Albert Bandura (December 1925 ,4 – July 2021 ,26) was a Canadian-American psychologist



prestigious in some way.

However, what makes Bandura's theory significant for this discussion is the emphasis he puts on the importance of social situations for learning. A society with ethical leaders tends to generally be more ethical. In contrast, unethical leaders encourage unethical conduct in the society.<sup>1</sup> The same idea is well-known in the Islamic culture: "People have the same attitude as their leaders"<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the Shia Imams would remind their followers that "Behave in a way that would be an adornment to us and attract people to us [i.e. to the religion]"<sup>3</sup>.

The same mechanism of observational learning played a pivotal role in shaping the Islamic society in its early days. People would see the Prophet's beautiful conduct and be inspired by it. They would try to imitate those high standards, and in a short time, a rough community that had just experienced the so-called "age of ignorance" took a giant leap forward. The Prophet would want people to capture the spirit of ethical behavior, so he would delightfully explain the reason behind his actions to those who asked. A lot of people, believer and nonbeliever, were in awe of how different his conduct was, and his followers tried to imitate his example.

- ***A utopia built upon violence?!***

It is reasonable to think that, in Mahdi's era, the society will move forward in a positive direction if the leader pursues a common good. Only this way will he be able to influence and encourage the society to honor ideal values like mercy and justice. On the contrary, if he were to be a source of rage and bitterness, the same attitude would be adopted by people.

Bandura further argues how a leader's aggressive behavior is quickly adopted by the followers. A leader, then, who is known for his brutal war-mongering, cannot build a society based on compassion, even when war is over. History provides plenty of examples of how the experience of war makes ordinary people hardhearted and insensitive.

Skinner, one of the founders of the behavioral psychology, highlights

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1. For more information, see: Olson, M. H. (2015). Introduction to Theories of Learning. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

2. Ghazzālī, *al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Nasīhah al-Mulūk*, p. 57. Irbīlī, *Kashf al-Ghummah fī ma'rīfah al-Ummah*, v. 2, p. 21.

3. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, v. 2, p. 219.

how inflicting violence reinforces aggressive behavior in the injured person in the same and other situations<sup>1</sup>. This explains why brutality and unfairness in battle can affect societies and propagate warlike behavior among ordinary people. With this attitude, a society will never pursue ideal values.

However, it should be noted that a person can be very merciful and, at the same time, very firm in face of enemies. The Prophet, for example, who was known for his compassion, was also very strong and valiant in war. Yet, as history witnesses, never did an enemy describe him as cruel. A lot of his enemies would actually praise him. In the conquest of Mecca, when his political and military power was at peak, the nonbelievers were amazed by his magnificent conduct towards them. Being prisoners of war, they could have been made slaves. But the Prophet had asked them, "O people of Quraysh [tribe]! What do you expect that I will do to you?" They had thought for a moment about how they had always found him, and then replied, "Goodness! You are a good brother and the son of a good brother." He did not brag, nor did he say a single word to reproach them for all their wrongs to the Muslims. He simply said, "Go! You are free."<sup>2</sup>

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1. For more information, see: Olson, M. H. (2015). Introduction to Theories of Learning. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

2. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, v. 2, p. 412.

## FORGIVENESS

*“Because of Mahdi, people will be well and happy.”<sup>1</sup>*

Islam places much emphasis on the notion of repentance. In this section, we examine the notion in the Quran, the approach of the Prophet and the Imams to it, and how it would apply to the context of Mahdi’s mission. If forgivingness is a fundamental characteristic of the leaders of our religion, which it is, Mahdi will have the same attitude.

- *What does the Quran say about repentance and forgiveness?*

The Arabic word *tawbah*, often translated as repentance in English, means to go back or to return. Derivations of this word are used in the Quran in reference to both God and humans. A *tawbah* in case of humans means that a person is ashamed of a sin, turns away from it and reorients his or her heart towards God (repentance). If God find the person sincere in their repentance, He accepts them. So a *tawbah* in case of God means that He reopens the door to His mercy, and places that person in His loving embrace<sup>2</sup>. In English, this can be roughly referred to as forgiveness.

The word *tawbah* and its derivations have occurred 87 times in the Quran. In 11 of them, God refers to Himself as the *tawwāb*,<sup>3</sup> which means the One who accepts a repentance, the Forgiver. God’s forgiveness is inclusive. It is not saved for a particular group of people. The only conditions for it are to be sincere, to determine to change, and to correct the wrong inflicted on others<sup>4</sup>.

One might ask: are there any cases in which a person will not be

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1. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’mah*, v. 2, p. 647.

2. Tabātabā’i, *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, v. 4, p. 237.

3. 3 :110 .12 :49 .10 :24 .118 ,104 :9 .64 ,16 :4 .160 ,128 ,54 ,37 :2.

4. Sayyid Radi, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, hikmah 417, p. 550-549.

forgiven? According to the Quran, a repentance will not be accepted in two cases:

In the deathbed, when a person faces the end and realizes that there is no going back (the Quran, 4: 18): This makes sense because a repentance is supposed to be an exercise of free will, and to get a person back on the right track, so they may reorient themselves in the rest of their life. However, if a person knows they are doing wrong and delays repentance, repenting out of urgency at the finishing line can hardly be sincere.

When facing the final punishment (the Quran, 40: 84-85): Final punishments are generally saved for the Day of Judgment, but the Quran tells us about cases where a person or group of people faced the final punishment in this world, like the Pharaoh<sup>1</sup>. When they started to realize that it was the end and that they would not get away, they expressed penitence, but it was not accepted from them. Of course, they used to have plenty of opportunities for repentance prior to that, which they refused to use.

- ***What do the Prophet and the Imams say about repentance and forgiveness?***

Prophet Muhammad and the Imams would ardently clarify that the way to repentance and atonement for one's sins is never blocked:

The Prophet said, "I would not give this verse for the world and what's in it: 'O My servants who have committed excesses against their own souls! Do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed God will forgive all sins. He is the All-Forgiving, All-Merciful (the Quran, 39: 53)'"<sup>2</sup>

Imam Baqir said:

"One who repents is like one who has committed no sin"<sup>3</sup>

Imam Sadiq said:

"God is pleased when a believer in Him repents, just as you are pleased when you reunite with a missing person"<sup>4</sup>

1. The Quran, 18 :4.

2. Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, v. 24, p. 12.

3. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, v. 2, p. 435.

4. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, v. 2, p. 436.

Imam Sadiq said that the Prophet said:

“My people need to do four things [to one another]: show love to one who repents, help someone who is doing good, pray that a sinner will be forgiven, pray for people”.<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous accounts about how graceful the Prophet and the Imams were towards repenting people. An example is the story of Akrama, son of Abu Jahl, the Prophet’s sworn enemy. Akrama fled the city when the Prophet and his army victoriously entered Mecca. His wife, Umm Hakim, went to the Prophet and requested that he would spare him. The Prophet agreed. She then set off after her husband and found him at a port, about to board a ship. She encouraged him to return and told him that the Prophet was merciful and forgiving. Akrama agreed to return. When he was on his way to Mecca, the Prophet said to his companions, “Akrama, son of Abu Jahl, is coming to you as a believing person who is immigrating [to the land of Islam]. Do not insult his father, as cursing a dead will have no effect on them, but it will irritate the son - who is alive”. When Akrama came to visit him, the Prophet cheerfully received him. After some conversation, Akrama said the *shahada* and converted to Islam. Then the Prophet asked if he needed anything from him. Akrama, admitting that he had never stopped practicing animosity towards the Prophet, said that he needed nothing but prayer from the Prophet, so God may forgive his sins. The Prophet said nothing about his past, nor did he speak a word of scorn. And he prayed for him.<sup>2</sup>

- ***Mahdi is indeed forgiving***

Mahdi is on the same religion as his forefathers – the Imams and the Prophet. He will rise to promote a religion across the world that preaches, “Do not despair of the Mercy of God” (the *Quran*, 39: 53). His conduct towards sinners and repenting people will also be that of his forefathers. He comes to revive the true teachings of Islam. Therefore, the hadiths that attribute intolerance and un-forgivingness to him cannot be true.

On the contrary, other descriptions about Mahdi’s coming lead us to believe that Mahdi will encourage repentance. He is coming to elevate life

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1. Tabrisi, *Mashkat al-Anwār*, p. 151.

2. Wāqidī, *al-Mughāzī*, v. 2, p. 852-851.

to its peaks. There will be no force or coercion in accepting the faith. The path of guidance, however, will be the easiest to spot and take. Mahdi's system of justice will build people's trust in him. It encourages them to accept his leadership, which is towards improving the individual and the society based on the right criteria. Of course, a process of improvement requires constantly looking back and making corrections. Isn't this the meaning of *tawbah*, repentance?

In other words, Mahdi is coming to turn the world into a better place, and this is not achieved except through turning hearts into better hearts. It would not, therefore, be unreasonable to assume that Mahdi will, as one of his first measures, reintroduce the idea of God's mercy and forgivingness into the hearts of people. Imam Ali says,

“In a time when people use faith as a tool to serve their whims, Mahdi will make whims follow faith; and in a time when they impose different theories on the Quran [to explain it], he will have theories and thoughts follow the Quran”.<sup>1</sup>

The above hadith and other similar hadiths show that a large group of Mahdi's audience will be ordinary people, those who would often follow their desires and use the Quran as a tool. It is not true to presume that everyone will be a victim to the blade of wrath except a selected minority, who have succeeded in controlling their whims. Moreover, the hadith indicates that a lot of ordinary people will literally change when Mahdi comes. They will accept him and start on the right path under his guidance. This is indeed *tawbah*, return, repentance.

There is a supplication to God about Mahdi that reads: “O God! Bring back to life, by his means, the hearts that are dead, and heal the hearts full of hatred”.<sup>2</sup> This is another evidence that shows people change as a result of the presence of Mahdi.

Based on verse 17 of chapter al-Hadid, it is understood that “Changing one's conduct is possible, even for those whose hearts have hardened”.

اعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا

“Know that God gives life to the earth after its lifelessness.”  
(the Quran, 57: 17)

1. Sayyid Radī, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon 138, p. 195.

2. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah*, v. 2, p. 515.

An example of this verse would be the human society during the occultation of Mahdi. God will give a new life to the society by his means, who is a source of justice and fairness. So even those people whose hearts are like a stone because of following their whims should have hope. God will give a new life to dead souls by sending Mahdi, just as He brings earth back to life by sending rain.<sup>1</sup>

The era of Mahdi will have many hallmarks, but perhaps one of the greatest achievements will be transformation of people's hearts and souls. In *Musnad*, Ahmad ibn Hanbal reports the following hadith:

“[Mahdi] will conquer the forts of darkness and the hearts that have locks on them”.<sup>2</sup>

Mahdi's extraordinary quality is not triumph over lands; it is triumph over hearts. This is what only men of God are able to do. In his time, the world and its inhabitants will get a taste of pristine life<sup>3</sup>; hatred and hostility will be wiped away from people's hearts<sup>4</sup>; different groups of people will befriend each other<sup>5</sup>; hearts will become kind and loving<sup>6</sup>; and inhabitants of heavens and earth will be happy of the presence of Mahdi<sup>7</sup>.

Social justice is indeed required for happiness, but it is not enough. True happiness is achieved only with a prosperous soul. Spiritual wellbeing is an essential part of human life, which cannot be substituted by wealth and assets. This is evident in today's societies. So, what really changes the world after Mahdi's coming is a system of justice (and material wellbeing) that is connected to a system of meanings (for life and other fundamental questions). Mahdi will lead the society in both pursuits, pursuit of justice and pursuit of meaning, and under his leadership, people will be well and

1. Javādi Āmoli, *Tafsīr-e Mozū'iy-ye Qur'ān-e Karīm*, v. 10, p. 100.

2. Tabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*, v. 4, p. 53. Khazzāz al-Qomī, *Kifāyah al-Athar*, p. 64. Irbilī, *Kashf al-Ghummah fī ma'rifah al-Ummah*, v. 2, p. 469.

3. Irbilī, *Kashf al-Ghummah fī ma'rifah al-Ummah*, v. 2, p. 493.

4. Sadūq, *al-Khisāl*, v. 2, p. 626. Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 52, p. 316.

5. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah*, v. 2, p. 647. Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 52, p. 384-385.

6. Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 52, p. 385.

7. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, v. 17, p. 427.

happy<sup>1</sup>. In that era, humans will return to their true selves, true identities, and this will be yet another instance of *tawbah*, return, repentance.

Some hadiths about the Mahdi's era refer to the retrieval of earth's seeds and treasures<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the literal meaning, this can be interpreted as cultivation of knowledge and understanding in humans, which is the element of true life and peace. In other words, the land of soul will thrive and hearts will be purified. As a result, conflict and hostility will be rare to find because, indeed, ill actions stem from ill hearts. It will therefore be a time full of prosperity and blessing, about which Imam Ali said the following, fourteen centuries ago:

“Earth will refresh, thrive and celebrate because of Mahdi, and it will have its rivers flow. There will be an end to chaos and war, and an abundance of every blessing. What else would I say? My greetings to that era!<sup>3</sup>

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1. Sadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah*, v. 2, p. 647.

2. Sadūq, *al-Amālī*, p. 632.

3. Qandūzī, *Yanābī' al-Mawaddah*, v. 3, p. 338.





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World War or Global Peace? ● ● ● ● ● ●



Examination of  
Violent Narratives  
of Mahdi's Mission

## Chapter 3: Examination of Violent Narratives of Mahdi's Mission

This chapter presents a brief analysis of dubious hadiths about Mahdi's mission.

In the first section, we discuss four main reasons why inauthentic hadiths about Mahdi's mission exist. These reasons are closely related to the socio-political circumstances of the early centuries of Islam.

In the second section, we discuss how the six perspectives described in Chapter 2 can be used as principles to evaluate the reliability of hadiths about Mahdi and his mission.

### A CAVEAT ABOUT HADITH

In addition to the teachings of the Quran and a plethora of authentic, reliable hadiths, Muslim sources also include a number of questionable hadiths. Unfortunately, the topic of Mahdi's mission has not been intact, either.

Researchers of religion and history have studied the reasons why inauthentic hadiths exist. Many of these reasons are associated with the complicated socio-political contexts in the first centuries of Islam. Of course, a full discussion of these reasons would be outside the scope of this book. However, below we briefly discuss four main reasons that appear to have played an important role in shaping false hadiths about Mahdi and the apocalyptic narrative of his mission.

- ***False saviors***

Political and social turbulences have always kept the hope for a savior alive in the hearts of many people. This very hope has encouraged some ill-intended individuals to exploit people's pure beliefs. Even today, false saviors appear someplace or another and try to attract followers. This was the case in the early centuries of Islam as well, and even more so.

A reason that made such false claims easier goes back to the Arabic grammatical structure of the word Mahdi. In other languages, including English and Persian, Mahdi is understood and used as a proper name. It is often so in Arabic too. Grammatically, however, Mahdi is a past participle. It means "the guided". It is also used as a present participle, which means "the guiding; the one who guides". It should be noted that the word Qā'im, which is another title for the Savior, is also a present participle, meaning "the rising one". Many of the hadiths about the Savior reported from the Prophet or the Imams, refer to him as Mahdi or Qā'im. In the first centuries of Islam, a lot of the false saviors would claim that they were the Mahdi or the Qā'im that was mentioned in hadiths.

The false saviors were too many, and they would also fabricate hadiths using the words Mahdi or Qā'im to persuade people that they were the promised savior. Many of them would eventually get killed, but the distortions that they had made would sometimes creep into the beliefs of some groups.

Furthermore, in the early decades after the Prophet, most people's understanding of the notion of savior was not as sophisticated as it is today. If it was not for the Imams, the notion could have been buried under piles of misunderstandings and wrong interpretations. The Imams persistently taught people about Mahdi and his mission. They for sure knew that their teachings would be picked and interpreted in erroneous ways by simple-minded or deceitful people, but they also knew that the effort was worth it. Mahdi was not even born in their time, but now, after centuries, all the authentic teachings have lived along history, even if some inauthentic claims have survived alongside them. We just need to be discerning.

- ***Political and sectarian battles***

Islam has witnessed sectarian conflicts, as other religions have. Not long after the Prophet, intellectual and political debates heated up in schools and political arenas. Debates sometimes got so fierce that the parties called each other blasphemous, and sometimes took arms against each other. Sectarian motivations have played an important role in forming distorted hadiths. Some researchers even argue that no other factor has ever had a stronger influence.<sup>1</sup>

Many of such hadiths can easily be mapped onto the conflicts of the time. Many of these hadiths claim Mahdi's retaliation against the opposing group, just in the same way that the enraged parties would threaten each other. It is absurd to think that Imam Sadiq, for example, would have said a hadith about how Mahdi would treat two opposing political groups in the second Hijri century. Imam Sadiq was well aware that Mahdi would not come for centuries, and when he does, those opposing parties would have long gone.

Furthermore, most Islamic denominations believed in Mahdi, because the Prophet had spoken about him in many occasions. However, given all the disagreements that existed between different denominations, it is hard to imagine they would not disagree on the idea of the savior, as this idea is clearly related to the disputed topics among Muslims.

- ***Racial and tribal supremacy***

Racial conflicts have always existed among people, but Islam is against ranking people by race or ethnicity. Skin color, race, ethnic group, language or gender cannot be a basis for judging whether people are good or bad, right or wrong. They cannot be an excuse for war.

In a sermon, the Prophet said the following and told those who were present that they had to convey his message to those who were absent. He said, "Humans are not different, as they are all from the same father and all have the same God. Being Arab, non-Arab, black or white are not [legitimate] criteria. What matters to God is who is righteous".<sup>2</sup> Anyone who lived after the Prophet, including us living in this day and age, are

1. Pākatchī, *Ṭal al-Hadīth*, p. 52-47.

2. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, v. 38, p. 474.

an audience to this teaching.

There are a number of hadiths that associate Mahdi with bloody racial or tribal wars. For example, they claim that he will kill all people from the Quraysh tribe, which was the most prominent Arab tribe in the wake of Islam. Researchers argue that, given their historical context, these hadiths are very likely to have been fabricated by non-Arabs as a defensive or offensive act.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some Arabs were blatantly racist against non-Arabs. Interestingly, they would also fabricate their own hadiths to defend their sense of privilege.<sup>2</sup>

The long history of racial discrimination against non-Arabs is also a scene for numerous upheavals and conflicts. As much as some Arabs had a sense of privilege, some non-Arabs had retaliatory ideations. In many cases, the oppressed groups would associate justice with a revenge on their behalf from the savior.

- ***Future prophecies***

For one reason or another, people are often fascinated with predictions of future. This fascination, as one might guess, can be used by bad actors as a tool to accomplish their intended purposes.

Sunni and Shia sources that were compiled over the first four centuries of Islam contain a body of hadiths on a topic called “prophecies of apocalyptic wars and battles”<sup>3</sup>. These hadiths describe events that would take place in a time after the hadith was reported. It should be noted that, in terms of their provenance chain, many of these hadiths are dubious. Researchers believe that sometimes these future-oriented hadiths were intentionally associated with Mahdi’s mission, in order to serve certain interests.

The majority of these hadiths describe an apocalyptic battlefield setting: sword, dust, fire, blood. Rasool Jafarian, historian and Islamic scholar, argues that these false hadiths were generated and used as a tool

1. Pākatchī, *‘Ilal al-Hadīth*, p. 55-52.

2. For example, “Love the Arab for three things: one, because I am Arab. Two, because the Qurān is in Arabic. Three, because people speak Arabic in Paradise”. Quoted from the Prophet in: Salehī Dameshqi, *Subul al-Mahdi*, v. 1, p. 230.

3. الملاحم والفتن

by false saviors or other political actors to encourage certain insurgencies.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, the aim was to attract people by convincing them that a political or social event was a sign of Mahdi's coming.

Jafariān further writes that these fabrications would then be compiled in books by less meticulous compilers of hadith. There are many cases that show how these problematic hadiths have troubled later hadith scholars with a strenuous task, or how they have given rise to further insurgencies.<sup>2</sup> Tracing the origins of such hadiths back in history is often tricky.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR DEALING WITH HADITHS ABOUT MAHDI'S MISSION

Establishing whether a hadith is reliable or not involves a sophisticated theological work. It includes studying the provenance chain for a given hadith, which means that every individual that has reported that hadith will be studied. Some reporters of hadith are more reliable than others. On the other hand, some reporters are very unreliable. Examining the reliability of a hadith also involves examining other similar hadith across different sources. This crucial task is, obviously, a dedicated area of expertise, which is outside the scope of this book.

Examining the provenance chain is not the only way to decide the reliability of a hadith. An alternative way to look at some of the historical, social and political contexts that existed at the time when a given hadith was reported. The above section briefly touched on this approach. Yet another way is to lay a set of unquestionable principles, or key concepts, of Mahdi's mission based on the *Qurān* and rigorous hadiths, and then use these principles to evaluate other hadiths that raise suspicion.

We already established six key principles in Chapter 2. They were as follows:

### Justice

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1. Jafariyān, *Mahdiyān-e Dorūghīn*, p. 36-35.

2. Jafariyān, *Mahdiyān-e Dorūghīn*, p. 39.

Social continuity

Legacy of prophethood

Legacy of Prophet Muhammad

Mercy

Forgiveness

This is how this framework can be used. For example, if we come across a hadith or narrative about Mahdi that contradicts the fourth principle, i.e., legacy of Prophet Muhammad, we can make a strong case that the hadith is most probably questionable or the narrative is built upon distorted hadiths. This is because we have already established that Mahdi will for sure follow the Prophet's tradition. If a hadith or narrative claims the opposite, it is unacceptable. Interestingly, as Pakravan<sup>1</sup> has painstakingly showed in her book, the provenance chain of the majority of such hadiths turns out to be weak. We encourage interested readers to refer to her book for detailed contextual analyses of hadiths.

## CONCLUSION

Quran and authentic hadiths are true sources of blessings to keep us on the right track. Since hadith sources unfortunately include some inauthentic reports, we need to be sophisticated in making distinction between the authentic and inauthentic or unreliable hadiths. Together, text-based and context-based approaches create a powerful tool for understanding the true teachings of Islam under any topic, particularly the important topic of Mahdi's mission. We hope that this collective intellectual effort will hasten his reappearance, Insha-Allah.

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1. Pakravan, Mahdieh, *The Way of the Promised Savior, World War of Global Peace?*





“And one day, the world will be filled with justice.”

This humble sentence reflects a magnificent idea, which was established by the Prophet of Islam as an essential part of the Muslim belief and diligently promoted afterwards by the 12 infallible Imams of the Shia school of thought. This is why the idea of the coming of a savior and a better world has lived through history in various Muslim societies, particularly in the Shia traditions. But how does this revered figure accomplish his holy mission? Does he rely on fighting and bloodshed, or does he employ logic and reasoning?

Drawing from authentic Islamic narrations and prophecies across different faiths, this work reveals that the Promised Savior is a compassionate guide who leads humanity towards peace, justice, and tranquility.

This book is based on *Dr. Mahdiye Pakravan's* extensive study, originally published under the title *"The Way of the Promised Savior: World War or Global Peace?"*

This enlightening book will challenge your preconceptions and inspire you to contemplate humanity's ultimate destiny – a world filled with justice, harmony, and everlasting tranquility.



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