

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAHDI: ISLAM'S AWAITED MESSIAH

Among the Major Signs, the most anticipated and central sign that Muslims await is the coming of a man known as “the Mahdi.” In Arabic, *al-Mahdi* means “the Guided One.”¹ He is also sometimes referred to by Shi’a Muslims as *Sahib Al-Zaman* or *Al-Mahdi al-Muntadhar*, which translated mean “the Lord of the Age” and “the Awaited Savior.” The Mahdi is the first of the Major Signs. This is confirmed by Ibn Kathir, a renowned Muslim scholar from the fourteenth century:

After the lesser signs of the Hour appear and increase, mankind will have reached a stage of great suffering. Then the awaited Mahdi will appear; He is the first of the greater clear signs of the Hour.²

The coming of the Mahdi is the central crowning element of all Islamic end-time narratives. So central to Islamic eschatological expectations is the coming of the Mahdi that some Muslim scholars do not even refer to the Minor Signs as such, but instead refer to them as “the signs accompanying the Mahdi.”³ While there are some variations of belief between the Sunni and Shi’a sects of Islam, and while certain quarters of Sunnis reject him altogether, general belief in the Mahdi is not a sectarian issue within Islam, but is universal among most Muslims. According to Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, “The coming of the Mahdi is established doctrine for both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, and indeed for all humanity.”⁴

Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr and Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, both Shi’a Muslim scholars, in their book, *The Awaited Savior*, describe the Mahdi this way:

A figure more legendary than that of the Mahdi, the Awaited Saviour, has not been seen in the history of mankind. The threads of the world events have woven many a fine design in human life but the pattern of the Mahdi stands high above every other pattern. He has been the vision of the visionaries in history. He has been the dream of all the dreamers of the world. For the ultimate salvation of mankind he is the Pole Star of hope on which the gaze of humanity is fixed.... In this quest for the truth about the Mahdi there is no distinction of any caste, creed, or country. The quest is universal,

exactly in the same way as the Mahdi himself is universal. He stands resplendent high above the narrow walls in which humanity is cut up and divided. He belongs to everybody. For all that and much more, what exactly is the Mahdi? Surely that is the big question which the thinking people all over the world would like to ask.⁵

Indeed, just who is this “awaited one” that the Islamic world longs for, and what will he do that has Muslims in such a state of anticipation? This chapter will attempt to thoroughly answer this question primarily by citing various Islamic traditions and the interpretations of Muslim scholars that study them. I would like to encourage you to take the time to read each and every quote. It is in these references that we find an articulation of one of the central beliefs and passions of many of the 1.5 billion Muslims with whom we presently share the earth. Those of us who desire a greater understanding of one of the primary underlying spiritual factors affecting the world today should pay very close attention.

ISLAM’S MESSIAH

In the simplest of terms, the Mahdi is Islam’s messiah or savior. While the actual terms *messiah* and *messianism* have very clearly Judeo-Christian roots, University of Virginia professor Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina agrees that these terms are appropriately used in an Islamic context when referring to the Mahdi. In his scholarly work on the subject, *Islamic Messianism*, Sachedina elaborates thusly:

The term “messianism” in the Islamic context is frequently used to translate the important concept of an eschatological figure, the Mahdi, who as the foreordained leader “will rise” to launch a great social transformation in order to restore and adjust all things under divine guidance. The Islamic messiah, thus, embodies the aspirations of his followers in the restoration of the purity of the Faith which will bring true and uncorrupted guidance to all mankind, creating a just social order and a world free from oppression in which the Islamic revelation will be the norm for all nations.⁶

Thus it is fair to say that the “rising” of the Mahdi is to the majority of Muslims what the return of Jesus is to Christians. While Christians await the return of Jesus the Messiah to fulfill all of God’s prophetic promises to the people of God, Muslims await the appearance of the Mahdi to fulfill these purposes. Sheikh Kabbani likewise identifies the Mahdi as Islam’s primary messiah figure: “Jews are waiting for the Messiah, Christians are waiting for Jesus, and Muslims are waiting for both the Mahdi and Jesus. All religions

describe them as men coming to save the world.”⁷

A MAN FROM THE FAMILY OF MUHAMMAD

The first and most often cited Islamic belief with regard to the Mahdi is the tradition that states that the Mahdi will descend from the family of Muhammad and will bear Muhammad’s name:

The world will not come to pass until a man from among my family, whose name will be my name, rules over the Arabs.⁸

The Prophet said: The Mahdi will be of my family, of the descendants of Fatimah [Muhammad’s daughter].⁹

A UNIVERSAL LEADER FOR ALL MUSLIMS

Throughout the Islamic world today there is a call for the restoration of the Islamic caliphate. The caliph (*khalifa*) in Islam may be viewed somewhat as the Pope of the Muslims. Muslims view the caliph as the vice regent for Allah on the earth. It is important to understand that when Muslims call for the restoration of the caliphate, it is ultimately the Mahdi that they call for, for the Mahdi is the awaited final caliph of Islam. Muslims everywhere will be obligated to follow the Mahdi:

If you see him, go and give him your allegiance, even if you have to crawl over ice, because he is the Vice-regent [*Khalifa*] of Allah, the Mahdi.¹⁰

He will pave the way for and establish the government of the family [or community] of Muhammad... *Every believer will be obligated to support him.*¹¹ (emphasis mine)

THE RULER OF THE WORLD

The Mahdi is believed to be a future Muslim world leader who will not only rule over the Islamic world, but the non-Muslim world as well. The Mahdi is said to lead a world revolution that will establish a new Islamic world order throughout the entire earth:

The Mahdi will establish right and justice in the world and eliminate evil and corruption. He will fight against the enemies of the Muslims who would be victorious.¹²

He will reappear on the appointed day, and then he will fight against the forces of evil, lead a world revolution, and set up a new world order based on justice, righteousness, and virtue...ultimately the righteous will take the world administration in their hands and Islam will be victorious over all the religions.¹³

He is the precursor of the victory of the Truth and the fall of all tyrants. He heralds the end of injustice and oppression and the beginning of the final rising of the sun of Islam which will never again set and which will ensure happiness and the elevation of mankind.... The Mahdi is one of Allah's clear signs which will soon be made evident to everyone.¹⁴

The Mahdi's means and method of accomplishing this world revolution will include multiple military campaigns, or holy wars (jihad). While some Muslims believe that most of the non-Muslims of the world will convert to Islam peaceably during the reign of the Mahdi, most traditions picture the non-Muslim world coming to Islam as a result of conquest by the Mahdi. Abdullrahman Kelani, author of *The Last Apocalypse*, describes the many battles of the Mahdi:

[A]l-Mahdi will receive a pledge of allegiance as a caliph for Muslims. He will lead Muslims in many battles of jihad. His reign will be a caliphate that follows the guidance of the Prophet. Many battles will ensue between Muslims and the disbelievers during the Mahdi's reign...¹⁵

Even Harun Yahya, a moderate and very popular Muslim author, refers to the Mahdi's invasion of numerous non-Muslim lands as "the Mahdi will invade all the places between East and West."¹⁶

THE ARMY OF BLACK FLAGS

The Mahdi's ascendancy to power is said to be preceded by an army from the East carrying black flags or banners of war. Sheikh Kabbani states:

Hadith indicate that black flags coming from the area of Khorasan will signify the appearance of the Mahdi is nigh. Khorasan is in today's Iran, and some scholars have said that this hadith means when the black flags appear from Central Asia, i.e., in the direction of Khorasan, then the appearance of the Mahdi is imminent.¹⁷

Another tradition states that:

The Messenger of Allah said: The black banners will come from the East and their hearts will be as firm as iron. Whoever hears of them should join them and give allegiance, even if it means crawling across snow.¹⁸

Islam waves two flags. One is white and one is black. Written across both flags in Arabic are the words, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger.” The white flag is called *Al-Liwaa* and serves as the sign for the leader of the Muslim army and is the flag of the Islamic state. The black flag is called *Ar-Raya* and is used by the Muslim army. It is also called the flag of jihad, and is carried into battle. One flag is governmental and the other is military.¹⁹ When Muhammad returned to his home city of Mecca after eight years of exile, he returned as a conqueror. With him marched ten thousand Muslim soldiers. They carried with them black flags. On the flags was one word written in Arabic: *punishment*.²⁰

I was once talking to a group of young Muslim men and asking them some questions. I asked them if the obviously superior militaries of America and Israel, compared to the militaries of any Islamic nations, were a source of difficulty for Muslims. One of these men grew very angry at my question and snapped out, “You Americans and Zionists better get ready, because the black flags are coming!” At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about. Later I learned the meaning.

THE CONQUERING OF ISRAEL

Islamic tradition pictures the Mahdi as joining the army of Muslim warriors carrying black flags. The Mahdi will lead this army to Israel and re-conquer it for Islam. The Muslims will slaughter Jews until very few remain and Jerusalem will serve as the location of the Mahdi’s rule over the earth:

Rasulullah [Muhammad] said: “Armies carrying black flags will come from Khurasan. No power will be able to stop them and they will finally reach Eela [Baitul Maqdas in Jerusalem] where they will erect their flags.”²¹

It is important to note here the reference to *Baitul Maqdas*. In Arabic this means “the holy house.” This is referring to the Dome of the Rock Mosque located on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In a particularly venomous manner, Egyptian authors Muhammad ibn Izzat and Muhammad ‘Arif comment on this tradition:

The Mahdi will be victorious and eradicate those pigs and dogs and the idols of this time so that there will once more be a caliphate based on prophethood as the hadith states.... *Jerusalem will be the location of the rightly guided caliphate and the center of Islamic rule, which will be headed by Imam al-Mahdi....* That will abolish the leadership of the Jews...and put an end to the domination of the Satans who spit evil

into people and cause corruption in the earth, making them slaves of false idols and ruling the world by laws other than the *Shari'a* [Islamic law] of the Lord of the worlds.²² (emphasis mine)

A very famous tradition often quoted throughout the Islamic world speaks of the Mahdi's military campaign against Israel. The tradition is both sickening and very sobering:

The Prophet said...the last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him.²³

THE MIRACULOUS PROVIDER WHO WILL BE LOVED BY ALL

It is said that the Mahdi will have control over the wind and the rain and the crops. Under the Mahdi's rule, the world will live in prosperity. Islamic tradition relates that Muhammad once said:

In the last days of my *ummah* [universal Islamic community], the Mahdi will appear. Allah will give him power over the wind and the rain and the earth will bring forth its foliage. He will give away wealth profusely, flocks will be in abundance, and the *ummah* will be large and honored...²⁴

In those years my community will enjoy a time of happiness such as they have never experienced before. Heaven will send rain upon them in torrents, the earth will not withhold any of its plants, and wealth will be available to all. A man will stand and say, "Give to me, Mahdi!" and he will say, "Take."²⁵

As a result of the numerous benefits that the Mahdi brings, it is said that all the inhabitants of the earth will deeply love him:

Allah will sow love of him in the hearts of all people.²⁶

Al Mahdi appears; everyone only talks about Him, drinks the love of Him, and never talks about anything other than Him.²⁷

THE TIMING OF THE MAHDI'S REIGN

While there is more than one tradition regarding the nature and timing of the Mahdi's ascendancy to power, one particular hadith places this event at the

time of a final peace agreement between the Arabs and the Romans. (“Romans” refers to Christians, or, more generally, the West.) Although this peace agreement is made with the “Romans,” it is presumably mediated through a Jew from the priestly lineage of Aaron. The peace agreement will be made for a period of seven years.

Rasulullah [Muhammad] said: “There will be four peace agreements between you and the Romans [Christians]. The fourth agreement will be mediated through a person who will be from the progeny of Hadrat Haroon [Honorable Aaron—Moses’s brother] and will be upheld for seven years.”²⁸ (emphasis mine)

It appears that the period of this seven-year peace agreement will likewise be the period of the Mahdi’s reign. While a few traditions specify that the Mahdi will reign on the earth for as much as eight or possibly even nine years, most traditions state that his reign will last seven years:

The Prophet said...He will divide the property, and will govern the people by the Sunnah of their Prophet and establish Islam on Earth. *He will remain seven years, then die, and the Muslims will pray over him.*²⁹ (emphasis mine)

The Prophet said: The Mahdi...will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and tyranny, and *he will rule for seven years.*³⁰ (emphasis mine)

AL-MAHDI, THE RIDER ON A WHITE HORSE

The Mahdi is believed to ride on a white horse. Whether or not this is symbolic or literal is hard to say. Quite interestingly, this tradition comes from the Muslim interpretation of Christian Scriptures. Despite the fact that Muslims view the Bible as changed and corrupted by Jews and Christians, they claim to believe that some portions of the “original” inspired books remain within the “corrupted” Bible. A tradition within Islamic scholarship seeks to extract those portions of the Bible that Muslims feel may be untainted by the corrupting influence of Jews and Christians. Muslims call these Judeo-Christian traditions *isra’iliyyat*. One such transmitter of biblical traditions is Muslim scholar Ka’b al-Ahbar, viewed among Muslims as a trustworthy transmitter of hadith as well as *isra’iliyyat*.³¹ Ka’b al-Ahbar’s view, that this description of the rider on the white horse as found in the Book of Revelation is indeed the Mahdi, is supported by two well-known Egyptian authors, Muhammad Ibn Izzat and Muhammad ‘Arif. In their book,

Al Mahdi and the End of Time, they quote Ka'b al Ahbar as saying:

I find the Mahdi recorded in the books of the Prophets.... For instance, the Book of Revelation says: "And I saw and beheld a white horse. He that sat on him...went forth conquering and to conquer."³²

Izzat and 'Arif then go on to say:

It is clear that this man is the Mahdi who will ride the white horse and judge by the Qur'an [with justice] and with whom will be men with marks of prostration on their foreheads [marks on their foreheads from bowing in prayer with their head to the ground five times daily].³³

Some claim this is the reason Saddam Hussein painted numerous murals all over Baghdad portraying himself as a Muslim knight on a white horse with sword drawn, doing valiant battle against the infidels.³⁴

AL-MAHDI THE MIRACULOUS ARCHAEOLOGIST

In one final very interesting series of traditions regarding the Mahdi we find that he is said to produce some previously undiscovered Bible scrolls—even the Ark of the Covenant itself:

Ka'b al-Ahbar says, "He will be called 'Mahdi' because he will guide [*yahdi*] to something hidden and will bring out the Torah and Gospel from a town called Antioch."³⁵

As-Suyuti mentioned in *al-Hawi* that the messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "He is called the Mahdi because he will guide the people to a mountain in Syria from which he will bring out the volumes of the Torah to refute the Jews. At the hands of the Mahdi the Ark of the Covenant will be brought forth from the Lake of Tiberias and taken and placed in Jerusalem."³⁶

Ad-Dani said that he is called the Mahdi because he will be guided to a mountain in Syria from which he will bring forth the volumes of the Torah with which to argue against the Jews and at his hands a group of them will become Muslim.³⁷

Apparently, the purpose of finding these "lost" portions of the Old and New Testaments as well as the Ark of the Covenant is to help the Mahdi win converts from both Christianity and Judaism prior to "eradicating" the remainder who do not convert to Islam. We will discuss this aspect of Islamic tradition further in later chapters.

SUMMARY

After reviewing the various Islamic traditions and opinions of the Muslim scholars, let's now review and walk through a list of what we have learned about the person and the mission of the Mahdi as he exists in the minds of the 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide. Remember, this is the man that the Muslims of the world eagerly await:

1. The Mahdi is Islam's primary messiah figure.
2. He will be a descendant of Muhammad and will bear Muhammad's name (Muhammad bin Abdullah).
3. He will be a very devout Muslim.
4. He will be an unparalleled spiritual, political, and military world leader.
5. He will emerge after a period of great turmoil and suffering upon the earth.
6. He will establish justice and righteousness throughout the world and eradicate tyranny and oppression.
7. He will be the caliph and imam (vice regent and leader) of Muslims worldwide.
8. He will lead a world revolution and establish a new world order.
9. He will lead military action against all those who oppose him.
10. He will invade many countries.
11. He will make a seven-year peace treaty with a Jew of priestly lineage.
12. He will conquer Israel for Islam and lead the "faithful Muslims" in a final slaughter/battle against Jews.
13. He will establish the new Islamic world headquarters from Jerusalem.
14. He will rule for seven years (possibly as much as eight or nine).
15. He will cause Islam to be the only religion practiced on the earth.
16. He will appear riding a white horse (possibly symbolic).

17. He will discover some previously undiscovered biblical manuscripts that he will use to argue with the Jews and cause some Jews to convert to Islam.
18. He will also rediscover the Ark of the Covenant from the Sea of Galilee, which he will bring to Jerusalem.
19. He will have supernatural power from Allah over the wind and the rain and crops.
20. He will possess and distribute enormous amounts of wealth.
21. He will be loved by all the people of the earth.