The Concept of Mahdi in Shīʿī Theology

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Before being employed as a specifically eschatological term in Shīʿī theological doctrine, the term Mahdi was applied to "historical personages" who were considered as charismatic leaders such as al-Khilafāʾ al-Rāshidūn al-Mahdīyyūn (the divinely rightly guided khalifahs). The non-eschatological application of the term Mahdi was also employed as an honorific epithet for a leader who was regarded as successful in his leadership such as 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. In Medina, for example, the conservative religious view generally recognized him as the Mahdi. One of the prominent traditionists in Bashrah, Abū Kīlābā (d. 107/725), agreed with the view that 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz was the Mahdi. In addition, an eminent figure in Bashrah, al-Hasān al-Bāshī (d. 110/728), did not believe in the Mahdi, but said that if there were one, it would have been 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. Moreover, as "an honorific epithet without messianic significance, the term [Mahdi] was employed from the beginning of Islam.... Ḥasan b. Tsābit thus applied it to the Prophet .... Sulaymān b. Shurad referred to al-Ḥusayn, after his martyrdom, as Mahdi, son of the Mahdi...." With regard to the term Mahdi Sachedina has pointed out:

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The title al-Mahdi ... was, in the beginning, merely a designation for the ideal
Islamic ruler. But with the delay in the great social transformation under al-
Mahdi command, the title took on eschatological tones in Imami Shi’ism. The
Imamate of the twelfth Imam was unique in the sense that in him merged the
two ideas of Shi’ite messianism: the occultation and the return of the future
restorer of justice.¹

As Shi’i eschatological doctrine, thus the concept of the Mahdi
consists of the belief in the Imam Mahdi (divinely guided one) or the Hidden Imam who will reappear at the end of time as a savior
realizing sociopolitical justice and equity through which a peaceful
life based on the ideals of religious (Islamic) teaching may be
reached. In other words, it is believed of the Imam Mahdi that he will
realize an ideal religious society. “The belief in the Imam Mahdi
becomes not only a basic tenet of the creed, but also the foundation
on which the entire spiritual edifice of the Shi’ite rests.” In this
relation, thus the belief creates the Shi’i eschatological doctrine of
the expectation of a socioreligious and political situation in the future.
In the course of the history of Shi’i community life, one may
interpret that such an eschatological expectation helps to explain
the extraordinary resoluteness which, the Shi’ah have shown in the
face of unbearable sociopolitical circumstances. With respect to the
belief in the Imam Mahdi, Sachiedina has explained:

He is the victorious Imam who will restore the purity of the faith, which will
bring true and uncorrupted guidance to all mankind, creating an adequately
just social order and a world free from tyranny and wickedness. The chiliastic
vision of history in Shi’ism continues to be expressed, even today, in terms of
radical social protest in the face of political oppression. Had it not been this
deep sense of paving the way for the reappearance of the Imam, the Shi’ites
would not have felt the need to reevaluate their social circumstances and the
shortcomings of their present lives.²

As a matter of fact, from the very beginning the idea of the
Mahdi has served as an ideological basis of Shi’i political protest
against social dissatisfaction and socio-political oppression of both the Ummayad and the ’Abbasi. In addition, “the tradition of the
Mahdi grew and developed with the disintegration of the caliphate,
both Ummayad and ’Abbasi, and the flowering and disappoin
tment of successive hopes which the Shi’is had nurtured for
the establishment of the ideal rule.”³

Considering the Shi’ah as a latent force threatening their power,
the ’Abbasiids always controlled Shi’i socio-political activities and
the lives of the Shi’i Imams. In this political situation, the twelfth
Imam (Muhammad b. Hasan al-’Askari) was born in Samarra in the
mid-Sha'ban 255/868⁸—some sources vary by as much as one to
five years from this date—and until 260/872, when his father was
killed, lived under his father's care and tutelage.⁹ These circum-
cstances surrounding the birth of the twelfth Imām led al-'Askari to
save his successor from the oppressive political structure of the
'Abbasids. He decided to seek a place safer for his son in order to
avoid the interference of the 'Abbasids.¹⁰ After he died in 260/872,
his son (the twelfth Imām) went into occultation;¹¹ it was believed
of him that he was the Mahdi who will appear at the end of time in
order to fill the earth with justice, just as it had previously been
filled with oppression and injustice.¹²

The title Mahdi seems to have been employed by al-Mukhtar b.
Abi 'Ubayd al-Thaqafi for Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah, a son of
'Ali by a women other than Fāthimah, “in 66/685-686, in his rebel-
lion against 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr.”¹³ Since the movement was a
failure, when Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah died in 81/700, many
of the followers of his revolt did not recognize his death as a real-
ity, and instead continued saying that he was in concealment and
would return.¹⁴ Later the followers of Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah
were associated with the Kaysan-iyyah sect which held that he was the
promised Mahdi.¹⁵

The Kaysaniyyah seem to have been the first Shi'i sect to
employ Mahdistic terms for their Imām. This practice was after-
wards maintained by other Shi'i sects, primarily the Imāmiyyah,
in respect to their Imams. “This was the begin-
ing of the two
central beliefs in
idea of the Mahdi, the ghayba (occultation) and the raj'a (return) of the Islamic messiah at the appropriate time.”

In Shi'i eschatological doctrine, the return of the Mahdi was identified with the raj'a of the Hidden Imam.17

The term Mahdi in its eschatological significance was also applied by the Zaydiyyah to their leaders who rebelled against the Abbasids, such as Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah (d. 145/762), Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Shâdîq (d. 203/818), and Muhammad b. al-Qâsim al-Thâlqân who disappeared in the year 219/834.18 As for the Twelver Shi'a, it was al-Nawbakhtî—one of the leading Shi'i theologians who died at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century—who was the earliest to formulate the Twelver Shi'i eschatological doctrine of the concealment of the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi. Following al-Nawbakhtî, it was al-Mu'fîd (one of the leading Shi'i theologians of the tenth century who died in 413/1022) who developed and systematized the Shi'i point of view concerning the Mahdi.19

In Shi'i eschatological doctrine, in addition to al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam had many other titles such as Imam al-'Asr (the Imam of the Period), Shâhib al-Zaman (the Master of the Age), Shâhib al-'Amr (the Master of Authority), Mahdi al-Anâm (the Mahdi of the People), al-Qâ'im (he who will Rise), and al-Hujjah (the Divine Proof). All these Mahdistic titles had significances of eschatological expectation and gave expression to the social discontent and political deprivation of the Shi'a for centuries. In other words, these Mahdistic titles reflected and represented a myth of eventual Shi'i vengeance against their experience of social injustice and political inequity. So far as the Mahdistic titles are concerned, “the title al-Mahdi, with its eschatological connotation, had much wider recognition that the other titles used for the messianic Imam such as al-Qâ'im or al-Hujjah.”

In the case of the title al-Qâ'im (meaning he who will rise after his death for a great task), however, the title reflected obviously a myth of Shi'i eschatological revenge since al-Qâ'im “will rise with the sword.” He thus symbolized an avenger against those who had caused disturbances. According to al-Kulayni's report, “al-Qâ'im will rise with the sword as God's avenger those who caused troubles to 'Ali and his wife Fatimah. He would also take vengeance against those who were responsible for the suffering of the Imams and their followers, particularly against those who assassinated Husayn.”23 In addition, the Shi'a also associated al-Qâ'im with socio-economic issues such as their dissatisfaction with the feudal economic system of the 'Abbasid state.24

Abû Ja'far claimed that all land belonged to the Shi'i Imâms;
they had inherited the land from God through the Prophet. Thus, the Muslims must pay the kharaj (land tax) on all the land they cultivated. When al-Qāʾīm rises with the sword, the land tax must be paid to him. In this context, one may deduce that the appearance of al-Qāʾīm with the sword will mean that the socioeconomic inequity, like the sociopolitical, will be resolved with violence in order to bring about justice and equity. In Shiʿi eschatological doctrine, social justice and equity become the main issue of its idea of the return of the awaited Imām.

In this connection, the accumulation of Shiʿi discontent with the sociopolitical system of the Umayyads and the ʿAbbasids led them not only to revolt against the two dynasties, but also generated their eschatological expectations for the future. In other words, the Shiʿi eschatological expectations on which the doctrine of the Mahdi developed rested on their historical experiences in terms of sociopolitical and economic injustice. Thus, they entitled their last Imām al-Qāʾīm (he who will rise with the sword) and Shāhīb al-ʿAmr (the Master of Authority); these titles represented the functions which they attributed the Mahdi Imām. When al-Qāʾīm rises, he will rule and fill the earth with justice in his capacity as the Master of Authority. In this regard, the Mahdi Imām was called as al-Qāʾīm bi al-Imāmah (the one who carries out the duty of Imamate) and al-Qāʾīm bi al-Jihād (the one who carries out the duty of the holy war).

In addition to political functions, the Mahdi also has religious duties indicated by the title al-Hujjah (the Divine Proof). These religious functions of the Mahdi were inherited from the Prophet and his legatees (awshiyāʾ). Thus, the title al-Hujjah was not only the designation of him who became the vicegerent of God (khalīfah Allāh), but also that of the Prophet (khalīfah al-Rasūl) who guides mankind to the true path in order to give them the knowledge of God and His religion. The final goal of the religious functions of al-Hujjah is to bring about the religious society upon which social justice and political equity depend.

In Shiʿi tradition, it is believed that the Imāms have both esoteric and exoteric knowledge. Moreover, the Imāms possess knowledge of the past and of the future. These extraordinary capacities of the Imāms lead al-Hujjah to be an authority on religious matters. In this respect, Sachedina concludes that “the title al-Hujja, in contrast to other titles which are often used to designate the justice and political equity depend twelfth Imam, emphasizes the religious and spiritual aspects of his function, whereas al-Qāʾīm or Shāhīb al-ʿAmr convey his role as the ideal ruler of Islam who restores Islamic
justice in the world.”

Despite the fact that it is unlawful to call the twelfth Imām by his name, his various titles seem not to have been subject to that restriction; rather they were ways to indicate various aspects of mahdistic functions in terms of socioeconomic, political, and religious categories. In this respect, the title al-Mahdi is the central one of the twelfth Imām who will reappear at the end of time as the restorer and savior.

The Occultation of the Hidden Imam

In the course of Shi‘ī history, the death of each Shi‘ī Imām at every turn generated a serious problem of succession. The death of the twelfth Imām “produced what appears to have been the worst of the crises of succession” to the Shi‘ī imāmate. This crisis situation occurred not only because of theological debate in Shi‘ī ‘ulamā’ circles to determine who would be the successor of the eleventh Imām (Jasam al-‘Askārī), but also because of the ‘Abbasid political repression of the Shi‘ī Imāms and community. In this regard, Hussain has pointed out:

According to the early Imamite sources al-‘Askārī did not leave a publicly acknowledged son, nor did he determine upon or install his successor openly. As al-Mufid says, the Imamites were suffering oppression at the hand of the ‘Abbāsids, while the caliph, al-Mu’tamid, was searching for al-‘Askārī’s son and trying to arrest him by any means possible. Moreover, the views of the Imamite Shi‘a about him were being circulated, and it was becoming known that they were waiting for him to rise. For this reason al-‘Askārī had not revealed his son during his lifetime, not even to greater portion of his own adherents.

In this relation, when his son (Muhammad al-‘Askārī) was recognized as the twelfth Imām following his death, there appeared a new problem of political insecurity for the twelfth Imām. This political circumstances, thus, to a certain extent, led the Shi‘ī ‘ulamā’ to formulate a theological doctrine of the occultation (ghaybah) of the twelfth Imām.

In Shi‘ī eschatological doctrine, one of the most significant tenets is the doctrine of the occultation. This doctrine is a direct corollary, on the one hand, of the belief that earth cannot be devoid of an Imām (Hujjah from God) who will guide mankind to the right path and, on the other, of the political insecurity of the twelfth Imam. To protect his life and to continue his imamate, the twelfth imam had to remain in concealment. Thus, he was permanently able to apply his imamate functions of guiding his adherents through spiritual communication.

Before being accepted as a theological tenet, as has been noted,
the doctrine of the occultation become a serious issue of theological disputation among the Shi‘i ‘ulama’ over the problem of whether or not the eleventh Imam had left his son as his successor. In fact, from the very time of his birth until it came to be believed that he was the Hidden Imam, the status of the twelfth Imam made many Shi‘ah confused. Hence in a number of Shi‘i traditions, the Hidden Imam was well known as ghaybah wa hayrah (the occultation and the confusion). To authenticate his birth, Shi‘i traditions contain narratives to vindicate the existence of the twelfth Imam. To this point, Hussain has noted:

The possibility that the twelfth Imam was born and his birth was kept hidden is supported by a number of narrations. The fact that there were already narrations about the twelfth Imam as al-Qa‘im al-Mahdi gave rise to other narrations which can only be described as hagiographical. But from the time of al-Shadīq onwards, even these were accepted by the Imāmites as historical facts. Nevertheless, other early narrations present his birth as a purely historical fact without the embellishment of miraculous reports.

The historical obscurity of the twelfth Imam from his birth until the present time, reports Kūlaynī, is due to the political insecurity in which he lived. It seems to have been the repressive political system of the ‘Abbāsid restricting Shi‘i sociopolitical activities which compelled the eleventh Imam to conceal the birth of his son from the Shi‘i community in general. It was this state of affairs which may have led the Shi‘i traditionists to report various types of traditions narrating and justifying the birth of the twelfth Imam.

As for the occultation of the twelfth Imam, it is believed that he went into occultation in 260/872 following his father’s death. His occultation, in fact, was a continuation of his political insecurity under the ‘Abbāsid sociopolitical control. A number of Shi‘i traditions, therefore, report that the occultation of the twelfth Imam is appropriate before he rises for fear of his being killed. In this respect, al-Kūlaynī reports a theological justification of the occultation: the twelfth Imam went into concealment until he reappears as a severe religious trial from God in order to test His creatures and find out who would remain resolute in recognizing his imamate. This theological justification was applied not only to avoid offering a political idea of the occultation of the Hidden Imam, but also to supply a theological basis on which the doctrine of the occultation may rest.

Dealing with nature of the occultation, al-Thū‘lī holds that the twelfth Imam went through two forms of the occultation: al-ghaybah al-qashīrah (the shorter occultation) and al-ghaybah al-thawwīlah (the longer occultation). Other terms signifying two kinds of occultation are al-
ghaybah al-shughrā (the minor occultation) and al-ghaybah al-kubrā (the major occultation) or even al-ghaybah al-tamma (the complete occultation). As for the shorter occultation, al-Thūsí goes on, it was known where the twelfth Imām was, but during the longer occultation only God knows. Hence, some people speculated that the twelfth Imām died; some of them considered that he was killed; and some others said that he went away. On the contrary, al-Nu‘mān narrates from Abū ‘Abdallāh that those who knew where the twelfth Imām was during his shorter occultation were his special followers (khāshshah min shī‘atih), but it is only his elite religious patrons (khāshshah muwālāth) who know where he is during his longer occultation. Thus, there appeared a disagreement about the existence of the longer occultation among the Shī‘ī theologians. In addition, al-Nu‘mān says:

As for the first ghayba, it is that occultation in which there were the meditators (al-sifara‘) between the Imam and the people, carrying out (qiyamm) [the duties of the Imam], having been designated [by him] living among the people. These were the eminent persons and leaders from whose hands emanated cures derived from the knowledge and the recondite wisdom which derived they possessed, and the answers to all the questions which were put to them about the problems and difficulties of religion. This is the Short Occultation (al-ghaybat al-qasira), the days of which have come to an end and whose time has gone by.

The second ghayba is the occultation in which the exclusive mediators (askhas al-sifara‘) of religious affairs passed away for God’s will ... as He says [in the Qur‘an]: It is not (the purpose) of God to leave you in your present state until He shall separate the wicked from the good. And it is not (the purpose) of God to let you know the ghayba.


The period of the shorter occultation was some sixty-nine years. Since the twelfth Imām went into occultation when he was five years old (260/872), the complete occultation began when the age of the Imām was some seventy-four years (329/940-41). With respect to the doctrine of the occultation, it was believed that a week before the death of al-Sammārī the twelfth Imam issued a pronouncement (tawqī‘) predicting the time when al-Sammārī would die.
May Allah give good rewards to your brethren concerning you (i.e. on your death), for indeed you shall die after six days. So prepare your affairs, and do not appoint anyone to take your place after your death. For the second occultation has now occurred, and there can be no appearance until, after a long time when Allah gives His permission, hearts become hardened and the world becomes filled with injustice. And someone shall come to my partisan (Shi'a) claiming that he has seen me; but beware of anyone claiming to have seen me before the rise of al-Shufyānī and the outcry from the sky, for he shall be a slanderous liar.45

Thus, this pronouncement (tawqīf) of the twelfth Imam predicting the death of the fourth mediator functioned as a theological justification of the doctrine of the occultation. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the complete occultation began following the death of the fourth mediator. At that time the age of the twelfth Imam was some seventy-four years. This situation leads one to speculate that in all likelihood the twelfth Imam died following—if not before—the death of the fourth mediator. Consequently, not only did the mediator institution come to an end, but also there was generated a crisis of religious belief in the doctrine of the occultation. With regard to this point, Sachedina comments:

The period following the death of al-Sammarî marked the critical situation of internal resistance to the belief in ghaybû ...[in which] the situation was regarded as inconceivable. The explanation that the Imam had no mediators during the second occultation indicates the uneasiness felt by the Shi'ite leaders in their attempt to advance a longer than normal life-span for the Imam, who could not communicate with his followers through his personal representatives.46

Such a situation led the Shi'i leaders to formulate a theological justification of the occultation in order to vindicate that the twelfth Imam went into occultation following the death of al-Sammarî (the fourth mediator). The strongest theological argument which was employed to endorse the doctrine of the occultation was that the twelfth Imam went into occultation to satisfy God's will. Vindicating the occultation of the Hidden Imam, the Shi'i leaders employed not only scriptural and traditional proofs (al-dalîl al-sam'î), but also rational ones (al-dalîl al-aqlî). As for the Shi'i traditionists, such as al-Kulaynî and Ibn Bābūyāh, they applied mostly al-dalîl al-sam'î. However, Shi'i theologians, such as al-Syarīf al-Murtadhā, employed chiefly al-dalîl al-aqlî. In addition, Sachedina says, al-Thūfī developed a delicate compromise blending al-dalîl al-sam'î and al-dalîl al-aqlî.47

Whatever proofs and methods the Shi'i leaders employed to vindicate the occultation of the twelfth Imam they were endeavoring...
not only to justify, but also to rationalize it in order that the occultation become a theological doctrine. In this regard, al-Šyarīf al-Murtādah, for example, attempts to rationalize the obscurity of the occultation when he argues that:

"the mode of that [ghaybah] has not been known in detail, because that is one of the things the knowledge of which has not been imposed on us as a duty. If we have taken it upon ourselves to offer mentioning this, this is an act of supererogation." 48

In addition, to vindicate the occultation of the twelfth Imām, Ibn Bābūyah and al-Thāši report numerous traditions identifying certain Prophetic stories about Yūsuf, Mūsā, Yūnūs, 'Isā, Muḥammad, etc., who have disappeared from the sight of their followers for a period of time, with the occultation of the twelfth Imām. 49 Despite the fact that the stories of certain Prophetic disappearances did not occur in the context of the occultation, Ibn Bābūyah strives to justify and rationalize the matter as follows:

Sometimes a person goes into occultation from a city where he is well-known and whose inhabitants were used to seeing him; [at the same times] he is in occultation in respect to some other city [where he is not known or seen]. Sometimes a person is in occultation from one community while he is present for another, or, he is hiding from his enemies and not from his friends, but still he is said to be in occultation and in concealment. 50

Thus the occultation of the twelfth Imām was believed to be a reality, and its formulation as a theological doctrine was accomplished. In this connection, it was believed that the complete occultation would go on for an unlimited period of time with only God knowing the time when the Hidden Imām will reappear. During this period in which the Hidden Imām has no special mediators or representatives (nuwwāb al-khashsh), "the mediatorialship between the Imām and the followers was indirectly assumed by the ruwat, who perform the duties of the special agents of the Imām, without holding the office of the deputyship." 51 Hence the ruwat functioned as the general representatives (nuwwāb al-'āmm) of the Hidden Imām. As the nuwwāb al-'āmm, the ruwat were interpreted as being the mujahids or the marja' al-taqlīd. In fact, the institution of the ruwat itself has become a controversial theological issue between the two major groups of the Shī'ī 'ulamā': the Usūlīs and the Akhūnās. It was the Usūlīs who endorsed the institution of the ruwat during the period of the complete occultation of the Hidden Imām. 52

Apart from a theological controversy, the transformation of the nuwwāb al-khashsh institution into that of the nuwwāb al-'āmm during
the complete occultation indicates that the Shi'i community remains in need of certain institutions of the Imamate in order to perform sociopolitical and religious functions. This demand corresponds with its theological doctrine of the Imamate according to which the Imam must exist in every period. Thus, when the Imam disappears, or goes into occultation, a certain institution of his representatives is required. In this respect the nuwâb al-àmm institution is needed. This matter obviously has relationship to the authority of the 'ulamâ', something that is of great importance for the Iranian revolution.

Endnotes:
5. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, h. 9.
13. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, h. 9.
14. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, h. 10.
15. Hussain, The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, h. 14; Ibn Bâbûyâh, Kamâtî al-Dîn wa Ittrâm al-Nî'ma, h. 31-32.
16. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, h. 10.
20. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism, h. 69.
21. al-Thūsi, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 282.
22. al-Thūsi, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 280; al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 157.
27. al-Kulaynī, al-Ishā‘ī min al-Kaff, vol. 1, h. 260.
28. Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 68.
29. Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 67.
31. Hussain, The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, h. 57.
33. al-Mufid, Kitāb al-Irshād, h. 529; Ibn Bābūyah, Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni‘mah, h. 108.
34. Ibn Bābūyah, Ikmal al-Dīn wa Itimām al-Ni‘mah, h. 280-281.
35. Hussain, The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, h. 67.
37. al-Thūsi, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 101; al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 149-150.
40. al-Thūsi, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 101-103.
41. al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 170.
42. Quoted from Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 85-86; al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 173-174.
43. al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 174.
44. Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 86. See al-Ghafārī in his annotation to al-Nu‘mān, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 171.
45. Quoted from Hussain, The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, h. 134.
46. Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 99.
48. Sachedinā, “Treatise on the Occultation of Twelfth Imamite Imam,” h. 120.
49. al-Thūsi, Kitāb al-Ghaybah, h. 77-79; Ibn Bābūyah, Ikmal al-Dīn wa Itimām al-Ni‘mah, h. 317-318.
50. Quoted from Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 82-83.
51. Sachedinā, Islamic Messianism, h. 107.
52. For further information about the disputation between the Ushūlī and the Akhbarī ‘ulamā’, see for example Joseph Newman, “The Development and Political Significance of the Rationalist (Usuli) and Traditionalist (Akhbari) Schools in Imamī Shi‘ite History from the Third/Ninth to the Tenth/Sixteenth Century A.D.,” (Ph.D. diss. University of California, 1986).


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