In the Name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

The Promised Savior, Common Grounds and Challenges

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Promised in religions

The belief in the coming of a great savior at the end of history is one of humanity's deepest and most widespread beliefs. This idea that a divine or chosen person will come in the future to save the world from oppression and corruption has existed since ancient times in most religions and ancient cultures. This common belief shows that the expectation of a savior is rooted in human nature, and all people, regardless of their culture, nationality, or religion, sincerely desire the realization of peace, friendship, and justice throughout the world and nurture the expectation of such conditions.

The news of the appearance of a savior in the end times is one of the common teachings of Abrahamic religions. In Christianity, the belief in the return of Jesus Christ (as) and his final judgment over human deeds and the establishment of God's Kingdom is accepted as a definite belief. In Judaism, the Messiah is presented as a person from the lineage of David (as) who will restore the governance of the Children of Israel and rebuild Solomon's Temple (as). Eastern religions have also spoken about the coming of a promised savior. In Hinduism, it is said that Kalki, the tenth and final incarnation of Vishnu, will come riding a white horse and will

destroy evil and darkness. In Buddhism, Maitreya is spoken of as the future Buddha and teacher of truth and salvation, who will bring peace, harmony, kindness, and liberation from suffering for all. In Zoroastrianism, the promised savior is called Saoshyant and is presented as being from the lineage of Zoroaster and the final victor in the battle between good and evil, who will revive purity and truth.

In Islam, belief in the promised savior is one of the essential beliefs about which there is no disagreement, and even Sunnis consider the appearance of a person named Mahdi (aj), who is from the descendants of Prophet Muhammad (s) and from the progeny of Fatima (sa), as certain.

The Common Belief of Muslims

The belief in the appearance of a savior and the expectation of the rise of a promised personality named Mahdi (aj) is one of the authentic and deep-rooted beliefs of the Shia and forms part of the identity and common ideal of the followers of Ahlul Bayt (as). The importance and centrality of this belief has caused the enemies of this school and those who strive to create discord and conflict among Muslims to focus on this subject and attempt to undermine this fundamental belief by fabricating baseless stories or exaggerating unimportant details and aspects, accusing Shias of superstition and irrationality.

This is while the logical arguments for this belief, its deep history in all divine religions, and the numerous credible evidences in Sunni narrative sources have transformed the expectation of the promised savior and the ideology of Mahdism into an unshakeable foundation that not only has the necessary capacity to create unity and harmony between Islamic sects but can also provide the basis

for coexistence and cooperation between followers of all divine religions.

The large number of hadiths related to Mahdism in reliable Sunni sources and the narration and confirmation of this subject by major Sunni scholars leaves no doubt that belief in the appearance of the promised Mahdi (aj) is not exclusive to Shias and all Islamic sects have accepted it as a necessary and definite belief. This is clear not only in dozens of independent books and treatises about Imam Mahdi (aj) written by Sunni scholars but is also explicitly emphasized in the six canonical books (Sihah Sitta) which are considered their most important and reliable hadith sources.

Of course, the vision of Islamic sects is not identical in all aspects and details of the belief in Mahdism. Some aspects of this belief are identical and common between the main Islamic schools, and in some parts there are differences of opinion. For a better understanding of the subject, it is necessary to know these points of convergence and divergence and to answer the questions and doubts surrounding them.

Points of Agreement

The teaching about Mahdi and the expectation of a saving savior is a common belief among all Muslims, and except for rare individuals like Ibn Khaldun, none of the Muslim scholars have opposed this principle. The common beliefs of Islamic schools in this area are:

1. The Promised Savior

In all narrations about Imam Mahdi (aj), there is a kind of glad tidings and prediction of favorable conditions for the Islamic community and indeed for all humanity. The way these predictions are expressed is in complete harmony with what is presented in

other divine religions about the period of the promised savior's appearance.

2. From the Prophet's (s) Lineage

Usually, along with the emphasis by hadith narrators that the hadiths about the announcement of Imam Mahdi's (aj) appearance and rising are mutawatir and authentic, it is also mentioned that he is from the children of the Prophet (s) and is among his Ahlul Bayt. Additionally, many Sunni scholars have explicitly declared that Imam Mahdi (aj) is from the descendants of Fatima and Ali (as).

3. Successor of the Prophet (s)

In Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and many other Sunni canonical and hadith sources, a hadith is narrated from the Prophet (s) in which he announced that the number of his successors would be twelve. Many of the narrators who have claimed the authenticity or tawatur of the hadiths related to Imam Mahdi (aj) have considered him to be the twelfth successor among the Prophet's (s) successors.

4. His Name is Muhammad

Although there are differences of opinion regarding the name of Imam Mahdi's (aj) father, there is no doubt or disagreement that he himself bears the same name as the Prophet (s). In addition to this being explicitly mentioned in one of the six canonical books, in the speeches of some scholars who have claimed the tawatur of belief in Mahdism in Islam, his name is considered a certain and mutawatir fact.

5. His Title is Mahdi

In Islamic sources and texts, more than referring to the name of the promised Imam, his most famous title, which is Mahdi, is mentioned. The naming of hundreds of books and treatises with the name Mahdi, the explicit mention of this name in hundreds of

hadiths and historical texts, the use of this title in naming chapters and sections of reliable Sunni sources, and the attempt of false claimants to take advantage of this name, shows that no one has had doubts in this regard.

6. His Appearance in the End Times

Most narrations and texts related to Imam Mahdi (aj) that are narrated in reliable sources of Islamic sects indicate that he will appear and rise in the end times. By end times is meant the final period of world history and before the occurrence of the Day of Judgment. In some of these narrations, his appearance or some events coinciding with the appearance of the promised one are mentioned as signs of the occurrence of the Day of Judgment.

7. His Rising, Victory, and Dominion

The narrations and glad tidings regarding the rising of Imam Mahdi (aj) speak of the certainty of his rising and victory over enemies and obtaining a powerful government. Some of these narrations consider the scope of his governance as global. In any case, there is no doubt or disagreement that the leadership and governance of the Islamic community will be in the hands of the promised Mahdi.

Points of Difference

1. The Name of Imam Mahdi's (aj) Father:

One of the most important controversial issues about the promised Mahdi (aj) is his father's name. What has caused this controversy is an expression that appears in some narrations according to which the Prophet (s) declared that the promised savior will bear his name and his father will bear the name of the Prophet's father. Therefore, the dominant opinion among Sunnis considers the promised Mahdi to be a person named Muhammad bin Abdullah. This is while all Twelver Shias believe without any doubt that the

promised Mahdi (aj) is the son of Imam Hassan al-Askari (as), because this has been emphasized in numerous narrations from Ahlul Bayt (as).

Many researchers believe that the part about his father's name did not exist in the Prophet's original hadith and was later added by supporters of two claimants to Mahdism whose names were Muhammad bin Abdullah. They consider the narration of these hadiths, without the part about the father's name, in the books of major narrators like Tirmidhi and Ahmad bin Hanbal as evidence for their view.

2. His Genealogy:

As mentioned, there is no doubt or disagreement that Imam Mahdi (aj) is from the lineage of Ali and Fatima Zahra (as); but whether this lineage reaches him through Imam Hassan (as) or whether he is in the line of descendants of Imam Hussein (as) has become a controversial issue between Shias and a group of Sunnis. The most important factor that caused this controversy is a hadith that is narrated in an interrupted form in Sunan Abu Dawud according to which Imam Ali (as) said that the promised Mahdi (aj) would be from the descendants of his son Hassan (as).

This is while in numerous narrations, Ahlul Bayt (as) have explicitly emphasized that he is from the descendants of Imam Hussein (as), and it appears that in that hadith, either intentionally or by mistake in writing, an error occurred in the word "Hussein".

3. Birth and Longevity:

The Shias believe that the promised Mahdi (aj) was born in the middle of Shaban in the year 255 AH, and that despite the passage of more than 1200 years since his life, he is still alive by divine will and hidden from people's sight. Beyond the mutawatir and certain evidence such as the hadiths of the twelve caliphs and the hadith of Thaqalayn which, without belief in the birth and existence of

Imam Mahdi (aj), would lose their main message, namely the continuity of the imamate of the twelve successors of the Prophet (s) until the Day of Judgment, from the Shia perspective, there are documents attesting that Imam Hassan al-Askari (as) and others who had the privilege of meeting him have testified to the birth of such a son.

However, the dominant opinion among Sunnis is that the promised savior has not been born yet and that in the future, a person with those characteristics will be born from the descendants of Fatima (sa) and will fill the earth with justice. Nevertheless, a number of major Sunni scholars have mentioned in their works the birth of the son of Imam Hassan al-Askari (as) and have accepted this fact.

Is Imam Mahdi (aj) Alive?

Although we have hadiths and historical reports about the birth of Imam Hassan al-Askari's (as) son as the twelfth imam from the Prophet's (s) lineage, which is consistent with the narrations of different schools about the Quraishi descent of the twelve successors, many Muslims do not trust these reports and do not consider such documents sufficient for accepting religious beliefs.

But if we base our understanding of religion on the Quran instead of hadith, we find teachings about whose authenticity we have no doubts. The Quran in verse 73 of Surah Al-Anbiya and verse 24 of Surah As-Sajdah presents the position of imamate as a spiritual position and guidance through "divine command," and in the last two verses of Surah Ya-Sin considers what belongs to the world of "command" as a celestial matter beyond the causes and factors of the material world.

On the other hand, in verse 124 of Surah Al-Baqarah, reference is made to the continuity of the position of imamate in the progeny of Prophet Ibrahim (as), and verse 28 of Surah Az-Zukhruf speaks of

the preservation of the position of guidance in this lineage. When we put these points alongside verses such as verse 7 of Surah Ar-Ra'd which includes this favor for all communities, we reach the conclusion that the Quran speaks of the continuity of inner guidance in all periods.

Now we must answer this question: Who took charge of this inner position after the Prophet (s)? By examining the answers of different schools to this question, we find that the only solution compatible with Quranic teachings is the view that considers the chain of imamate as remaining and continuing in Ahlul Bayt, and which, while acknowledging the ambiguity in the birth and longevity of the last imam, accepts that he is alive.

In this view, instead of taking questionable hadith or historical narratives as a basis, we consider the Quran as the reliable and definitive religious document, and without wanting to judge the details of what came in the narrations, we use their valuable insights for a better understanding of Quranic teachings and give credibility to hadiths that are in harmony with the Book of God.

Thus, the Quranic argument about the existence of Imam Mahdi (aj) can be summarized as follows:

1. The Quran presents imamate as a spiritual position for the inner guidance of all communities that remains in the progeny of Prophet Ibrahim (as).

2. Among the proposed theories about the succession of the Prophet (s), only what the Twelver Shias say is in harmony with the Quran.

It is interesting that in Sunni canonical books there are hadiths with this content that the Prophet (s) announced his true successors as twelve caliphs, and this point is only compatible with the view of Twelver Shias about the number of imams and the longevity of the last successor of the Prophet (s).

What Is Important

Although belief in the existence of a living imam who is the intermediary of divine favor and guidance creates a more beautiful and dynamic perspective and relationship towards spiritual matters, but considering the consensus of all Muslims about the appearance and rising of the promised Mahdi (aj), and even considering the identical perspective of followers of Abrahamic, divine, and spiritual religions regarding the coming of a savior, it seems that debate and dispute about the differences and details of this subject brings no benefit and in practice produces no change in our life today.

Whether they are Twelver Shias or followers of any of the Sunni schools, and even those who consider themselves followers of religions other than Islam, anyone who believes in God's promise about the final victory of truth over falsehood and the appearance of humanity's savior, if they truly think about peace, justice, and morality and consider the main reason for their waiting to be achieving such values, must manifest the tangible effect and result of this belief in their life and behavior, and their effort and pursuit in the field of peace, morality, and justice will not be very different from followers of other schools.

Therefore, the first step in the path of waiting for the savior's appearance is that those who await him should be kind to one another and, while remaining faithful to their own beliefs, respect the beliefs of others and instead of engaging in fruitless debates and disputes about controversial details, focus their attention on human and spiritual commonalities. Then each person, based on the beliefs they have in this field, should strive to prepare for the coming of the promised one whom all truth-seekers in the world await and prepare themselves to help him. In this context, certainly those who consider their imam alive and aware of their condition

will make more effort and benefit from the spiritual connection with him.

Challenges to watch out for

Every correct and beneficial belief is subject to distortion, misuse, and dangers that can transform it into something harmful and dangerous. Belief in the ideology of Mahdism is no exception to this rule, and since the early centuries of Islam, it has been subject to ignorant and incorrect interpretations and instrumental uses for achieving purposes such as power, fame, and wealth, and it can still be subject to such dangers. The most important dangers and deviations that we must be careful not to fall into are:

1. Claiming Contact and Meeting

Even if we accept the possibility that some chosen individuals have had contact with Imam Mahdi (aj) under special conditions, or that he sometimes, from behind the veil of occultation, has shown special guidance and attention toward a person, we still cannot have complete trust in any claim in this area. Because, beyond the possibility of lying and abuse, we usually face problems in such matters such as misinterpretations, errors in application, unwanted illusions, and other ambiguities that can distance us from the truth.

The Quran and Ahlul Bayt (as) have repeatedly warned about relying on conjecture and following guesswork, and have considered that the main factor in the deviation of most who have gone astray was trust in something other than knowledge and understanding. In the matter of Mahdism, we must also be careful not to be deceived by sacred names, titles, and appearances, and even from great personalities and people in whose good intention we trust, we should neither accept nor reject anything without evidence and documentation.

2. Claiming Representation

According to the belief of Twelver Shias, the current era is the period of occultation of Imam Mahdi (aj). In these conditions, benefiting from his existence is like using the light of the sun when it is hidden behind clouds; meaning that although we don't see him and don't have contact with him, the light of his existence shines upon our hearts and we receive spiritual blessings through this path.

But we must be mindful that in the period of occultation of the Imam of Time (aj), we are deprived of his direct guidance and have no right to attribute any opinion, whether in religious or social or non-religious matters, to him. Because no specific person or group has been designated as the representative or deputy of the Imam during the period of occultation, and essentially, the position and authority of the infallible Imam is not of such nature that a non-infallible person could take over his representation.

3. Applying Signs and Setting Times

Although in Shia hadith sources numerous traditions about the signs of the appearance of the Imam of Time (aj) are narrated, firstly, the manner of narration of none of these hadiths is such that it can be definitively attributed to religious leaders, and secondly, assuming such matters are correct, the possibility of error in determining examples is very high.

In addition to the frequent abuse that power currents have made in different periods of hadiths about the end times and signs of appearance, and whose examples can be found in written history, numerous errors have also been reported in this field from scholars

and personalities in whose good intention we do not doubt and whose analyses we do not consider linked to political interests.

4. Passive Waiting

Another error that occurs in interpreting the concept of waiting for the savior is avoiding the fulfillment of one's duties and responsibilities and postponing them to the future. Some believe that because we have been promised that all problems will be solved with the appearance of the Imam of Time (aj), until then there is no need for effort for personal progress or combating social anomalies, or that these efforts lead to no result, and thus they avoid what reason and logic puts on their shoulders.

This is while according to Islamic traditions, waiting for relief has been presented as "the best of deeds" which shows that real waiting is a kind of effort and action in the direction of getting closer to what we are eager to achieve, not inactivity and passivity. The true awaiter is one who strives for the reform of himself and society, does not remain silent in the face of oppression and injustice, and through learning and acquiring skills prepares himself to help the Imam of Time (aj); he, while hoping for a bright future, does not neglect his current duties and knows that preparing society for appearance requires continuous effort and struggle.

5. Promoting Superstitions

The existence of ambiguity and complexity in the matter of occultation and appearance of Imam Mahdi (aj) and the concealment of many of its secrets has created fertile ground for speculation and promotion of unfounded aspects in the field of Mahdism. This vulnerability includes many aspects such as the fabrication and narration of false and weak traditions, giving

credibility to dreams and imagination, attributing false miracles and wonders to different people, belief in the effect of specific acts on hastening or delaying the appearance, and mixing non-Islamic beliefs with authentic teachings of Mahdism.

To deal with this problem, it is necessary that while referring to authentic and reliable Shia sources and benefiting from the opinions of religious scholars in understanding traditions, we refrain from unconditional acceptance of people's claims and through strengthening critical thinking and limiting ourselves to what is clear and certain, prevent the spread of these superstitions in society.

In hope of the realization of the promise of prophets and divine saints and the appearance of humanity's savior and establisher of peace, justice, and freedom.

In the hope of the fulfillment of the promises of the prophets and divine saints and the emergence of the savior of mankind and the establisher of peace, justice, and freedom.

اللهم عجل لوليك الفرج