

## **Messianism In Islamic Thought: An Analytical Study Of The Notion Of *Mahdiyya* In Islam**

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**Abstract:** The notion of the *Mahdiyya* (messianism) is one of the controversial and most complicated topics in the history of Islam, not just for its seemingly confusing features, but also for its unclear and vague characteristics. This ambiguous nature of the *Mahdiyya* invites several interpretations and misinterpretations from various Islamic sects, each asserting that his own version of the *Mahdiyya* is not only pure and authentic but also the most-followed. This article intends to study the notion of the *Mahdiyya* from historical perspective by critical examination of its meaning and the methods adopted by Muslim scholars in discussing and analyzing it. The paper also explores the political turmoil that revolved around the period of which this concept was developed into political movement. It concludes by presenting the views of scholars on the personality of the expected Mahdi or Messiah and the role he is expected to play. The article adopts qualitative and analytical methods in presenting, analyzing and interpreting data.

**Keywords:** *Mahdiyya, Islam, History, Islamic Thought, Muslim Scholars.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

After the fall of the Umayyad Dynasty (661-750CE) and its subsequent re-appearance in Spain (750-1031CE), coupled with the emergence of the Abbasids (1261-1517CE), socio-political and ideological turmoil sneaked into the Muslim world. This unremitting chaos had further degenerated to the emergence of several other City-States within the fold of Muslim nation, which eventually resulted in the decay and disintegration of the Caliphate. Thus, this scenario sparked the desire for the appearance of the Mahdi (Messiah), or a savior to rescue the Muslims from these catastrophes and restore their lost glory. In trying to address this huge challenge, several reform movements under the banner of the *Mahdiyya* appeared in the Muslim world. However, the most successful among them are those orchestrated and led by Muhammad ibn Tumart (1080-1130), the patron of the *Muwahhidun* State in North Africa, and Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdullah (1844-1885), popularly known as the Sudanese Mahdi, the architect of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898). This paper analyses the notion of the *Mahdiyya* from historical perspective by examining the method adopted by Muslim scholars in the study of the notion. In this article, the terms “*Mahdiyya*” and “Messianism” on one hand, and “*Mahdi*” and “Messiah” on the other would be interchangeably used.

### **II. MEANING OF THE MAHDIYYA**

*Mahdiyya* or Messianism, according to H. A. Ibrahim, (2004), is the belief in an “expected deliverer” or a “superhuman savior” who will come “from the unseen” towards the end of the world to fill it with justice after it had been permeated by injustice and tyranny. This version of the expected redeemer is not restricted to Muslim communities. In fact, it is a well-known concept in both heavenly and man-made religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, African Traditional Religions, but most importantly Judaism and Christianity, where this presumed deliverer or redeemer is known as the Messiah and the whole notion as Messianism. This Judeo-Christian Messianism appears to have influenced Muslim communities, who gave this concept the Arabic term of “*Mahdiyya*”, which is derived from the root “*Hada*” meaning to guide, and the *Mahdi* is accordingly the divinely or rightly guided-one. The idea of the *Mahdi* in Islam is, therefore, seemingly messianic and apocalyptic. Although, some similarities between the Islamic and the Judio-Christian messianism may be noted, the notion of the *Mahdiyya* in Islam has a distinctive Islamic coloring. The Islamic Mahdism does not consider man as being born with original sin and therefore he must be baptized and saved through spiritual regeneration. Rather, it holds that man is not drawn in sin, so he needs not any spiritual purification, nor does the notion conceive of its people’s salvation in nationalistic term, with assurance of the realization of salvation in the kingdom of God in a promised land by a unique and autonomous community. Abdulaziz A. S. (1981).

However, the notion of the *Mahdi* or the Messiah has been a subject of disagreement among Muslim scholars and intellectuals, largely because neither of these words, *Mahdi* or *Mahdiyyah*, is explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an. The whole notion of the *Mahdi* or the expected deliverer could only be found in some fifty

*Hadith* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad SAW) scattered in the books of *Ahmad*, *Abu Dawud* and *Tirmidhi*, but, interestingly, not in the collections of *Bukhari* or *Muslim*. Thus, the authenticity and validity of the notion has been questioned by some scholars and even doubted by others. Nonetheless, the notion of the *Mahdiyya* is known in Islam, even central to the Shiites doctrine, and has been quite popular in the history of Islam. Thus, a question may force itself here, namely, why is it that the Qur'an did not explicitly address it? Another point of contention is that the *Mahdiyya* is sometimes confused with the concept of Islamic reform, and to some scholars, the line is blurred between the Messiah and the Reformer. Ibrahim H. A. (2004).

### III. MAHDIYYAIN THE QUR'AN AND HADITH

The advocates of the *Mahdiyya* believe that the notion could be traced in the Qur'an, asserting that a personality as important as the *Mahdi* could not have been ignored by the holy book of Islam. Thus, in their effort to prove their points, they interpret certain verses in the Qur'an to support their view. Some of these verses are: Qur'an 28: 5-6, Qur'an 24:55 and Qur'an 3:104. But when scrutinized impartially, it becomes glaringly clear that these verses talk about general guidance and not the notion of the *Mahdiyya per se*. Moreover, beside the complete absence of the term "*Mahdi*" or "*Mahdiyya*" in these verses, one may also note that these verses never refer to one person but to persons or group of individuals who will undertake the task of enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong. In this vein, some scholars, like al-Qaradawi Y. (2013), give a broader interpretation of the term "Reform" as a task to be carried out by both individuals and groups, though he gives preponderance to the latter. He, further, maintains that the reformer maybe one or several persons; some from among the just rulers, others from the knowledgeable scholars and some from amongst pious and ascetic educators. Interestingly, these reformers may be dispersed in several parts of a country, or come from various countries. This could be why al-Imam al-Suyuti considered the role of the *Mahdi* and that of the reformer as two sides of the same coin.

Contrary to the above quoted verses of the Qur'an, all the *Hadith* that addressed the notion of the *Mahdiyya* such as Abu Dawud, *Hadith* number 4282, 2485 and 2486, and IbnMajah, *Hadith* number 4085 and 4039 do not refer to the *Mahdi* as "persons" or "group of individuals" but rather as a single individual from "*Ahl al-Bayt*" (the Prophet's household) with a clear forehead and a hooked nose. This, however, contradicts Qur'anic injunction where all the verses cited by the advocates of the *Mahdiyya* indicate that this task of purifying Islam from the impurities will be carried out by group of people, "*Ta'ifah*". Moreover, all other signs of the advent of the *Mahdi* mentioned in the *Hadith*, such as the world being filled with injustice and that the *Mahdi* will reign for seven years cannot be verified from these verses. Hence, a discrepancy between the contents of these verses and that of the *Hadith* is presumably visible. In other words, there is seemingly no clear link or connection between these verses and the *Hadith* on the notion of the *Mahdi* or *Mahdiyya*.

In addition, the description of the *Mahdi* in these *Hadith* is vague and confusing, as sometimes they describe him as one of the twelve Imams and that he will be their last, occasionally as *al-A'iz bi al-Bait* (a person who takes refuge in the *Ka'abah*), frequently as a man from the people of the House, and some others say he will come from the Quraish tribe. Yet another *Hadith* contradicts all the above descriptions of the *Mahdi* by reporting that "there will be no *Mahdi* except *Isa ibn Maryam*" (Jesus, the son of Mary). IbnMajah, (*Hadith* number 4039). Another query to be noted here is that the reliability of most of these *Hadith* is questioned by some scholars because their chain of transmitters does not reach the level of authenticity. After surveying and presenting many of them in his *Muqaddimah*, IbnKhalidun (2010) criticized most of them.

### IV. MAHDIYYAH BETWEEN HISTORIANS AND THE SCHOLARS OF HADITH

One of the factors that contributed in mystifying the notion of the *Mahdiyya* is the discrepancy between the two methodologies adopted by scholars when studying it, namely, the methodology of Muslim historians and that of the scholars of *Hadith*. Firstly, the latter focuses on the *Hadith* transmitters and their contents without looking at the socio-political state of the Muslims at the time these *Hadith* started floating around. However, many observations were raised in this regard, which, I believe, should be taken into consideration. Firstly, that Imam Malik, Bukhari and Muslim did not address the notion of the *Mahdiyya* in their books *per se* but rather they presented some of these *Hadith* in *Kitab al-Fitan* (the book of disorder towards the end of the Time), and as part of the signs of the Doomsday. Secondly, the compilation of the *Hadith* dealing with the notion of the *Mahdiyya* started in the third century after *Hijrah* in the books of Imam Ahmad, Abu Dawud and other books of *Sunan*. Thirdly, out of the eleven *Hadith* compiled by Abu Dawud in "*Kitab al-Mahdi*" only two recorded the name *Mahdi* clearly and vividly. These are the *Hadith* number 2485 and 4085. But the rest were metaphorically interpreted to refer to the *Mahdi* but not literally, and scholars may differ whether or not such interpretations are acceptable. Ibrahim, H. A. and Zain, I. M. (1996).

Conversely, the methodology of the Muslim historians views this whole concept from a different perspective. They argue that it is necessary to give due consideration to the socio-political state of the Muslims when these *Hadith* were reported. For this was an era of sharp political differences and conflicts that triggered the emergence of several sects within the fold of the Islamic state, such as the *Ithna Ashariyyah* who claims that *Mahdiyya* is part and parcel of *Usul al-qidah* (a major pillar of the creed). Furthermore, the political dimension of the notion, which manifests in the over-throw of corrupt regimes and the restoration of justice, may have encouraged some individuals to claim the Mahdship either to over-throw a corrupt and tyrant regime, or simply as a cover up to attain their own personal and political aggrandizement. Ibrahim, H. A. and Zain, I. M. (1996). To sum it up, depending on an unpublished memorandum of al-Sadiq al-Mahdi under the title “*My views on Mahdism*”, Ibrahim, H. A. (2004), records that Muslim religious and political thought has interpreted the *Hadith* of the *Mahdiyya* into various schools of thought. Firstly, the three Shi’ite schools namely: the *Twelvers*, who maintain that the *Mahdi* is the twelfth *Imam* in a specific line of succession from Ali ibn Abi Talib through his wife Fatima. The *Sevensers*, who maintain that the *Mahdi* is the seventh *Imam* in the line of succession. And the *Zaidis*, who think in terms of plurality of revolutions. i.e., the *Mahdi* may be any qualified descendent of Fatima who will stand up to injustice. Secondly, the Sunnite school which argues that the expected *Mahdi* will appear before the end of Time to restore Islam, and that, as maintained by Ibn Khathir (1998), he is the twelfth in a number of outstanding Muslim leaders starting with the four rightly-guided caliphs and other *Imams* who appear in the course of time. However, this is not in line with al-Razi’s view, who maintains that they are the leaders of the Islamic community who stand as witness to the truth of the Islamic message. Thirdly, the *Sufi* schools, which upheld that the *Mahdi* is the *Gawth* (the leader of the occult hierarchy of “saints”). Finally, the philosophical school, where al-Farabi records in his book “the Perfect City State”, that the *Mahdi* is the leader of this city-state. Quoted in Ibrahim, H. A. (2004).

## V. WHO IS THE MAHDI?

As I stated earlier, the notion of the *Mahdiyya* or Messianism has been a subject of disagreement among Muslim scholars and intellectuals, this is due to the fact that each sect views the notion from its own perspective. Al-Ahmadi, M. R. (2003), upholds that *Ahl al-Sunnah* argue that the *Mahdi* will be called Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Mahdi. His name and that of his father should tally with those of the Prophet and his father respectively. He should be a descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima. Contrary to the Shiites doctrine, *Ahl al-Sunnah* believe that the *Mahdi* will be born towards the end of the time, and that his appearance is one of the eschatological signs of the Doomsday.

Contrary to the above interpretation of the *Ahl al-Sunnah*, Jar Allah, M. (1955), asserts that the expected *Mahdi* according to Shiites is one of their hidden or concealed *Imams* who enjoins spiritual specialties and will re-appear before the end of time supported with miracles. His re-appearance will not only restore justice to the world, but also liberate *Ahl al-Bayt*, who suffered humiliation and dehumanization from their enemies. It should be noted that this presumed hidden *Imam* has arguably not been in complete isolation from his people, but rather the pious and the religious leaders have a direct link to him, instructing them on what to do and how to do it.

Consequently, his genealogy, according to Al-Qazwini, M. K. (2005), is Imam al-Hassan al-Askari ibn Imam Ali al-Hadi ibn al-Imam Muhammad al-Jawad ibn al-Imam Ali al-Rida ibn al-Imam Musa al-Kazim ibn al-Imam Ja’afar al-Sadiq ibn al-Imam Muhammad al-Baqir ibn al-Imam Ali Zain al-Abidin ibn al-Imam al-Hussain ibn al-Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib. And from his mother’s side, he is the son of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet peace be upon Him.

In another vein, the extremist sect of *Khawarij* did not believe in the *Mahdiyya* as they completely rejected the Shiites assumption of the return of the *Imam*. Exploring this concept further, Sa’ad M. H. (1953), emphasized that the latter group of this sect called “*Yazidiyya*”, had somehow accepted the notion of *Mahdiyya* albeit in a slightly different way, as they do not restrict it to a particular person. Consequently, they believe that the expected *Mahdi* will be a prophet and messenger of God, who will emerge from non-Arabs (*Ajam*). Basing their claim on the popular *Hadith* (Musnad Ahmad, *Hadith* number 23489), which says: “An Arab does not have superiority over non-Arab except with God consciousness (*Taqwa*)”, and the Qur’an 49:22, which states: “the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you”.

Based on the above views, the difference between *Ahl al-Sunnah* and the Shiites on the notion of the expected *Mahdi* is that it is central in the Shiites theology. This is particularly evident in the concept of *al-Imam al-Ma’sum* (the infallible *Imam*), *al-Ghaybah* (concealment of the *Imam*), *al-Raj’ah* (return of the *Imam*) and *al-Imam al-Gha’ib* (the hidden *Imam*). Unlike the Shiites, *Ahl al-Sunnah* do not consider the *Mahdiyya* as a basic pillar of Islam (*Usul al-Aqa’id*), but simply a way to return the faith to its original purity. Thus, the *Mahdiyya* in this sense is almost identical to the very well-known concept of *Islah* and *Tajdid* (Islamic Revival and Reform). Ibrahim H. A. (2004).

However, Ibn Khaldun (2010), stressed that the expected *Mahdi* will be from the People of the House (*Ahl al-Bayt*), he will be called the *Mahdi*, he will support the faith and restore the unity of Islam, and, most importantly, his manifestation will be one of the eschatological events preceding the Doomsday. In other words, the *Mahdi* is to appear in the world when the planet is filled with injustice and inequity. According to many traditions, Jason I. (2014), argued that chaos will eventually reign on earth and it will be filled with anarchy. This state of disarray is to precede the end of the world. Hence, the *Mahdi* will appear to restore order to the planet through the rejuvenation of faith and religious teachings.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the notion of the *Mahdiyya* or Messianism has been historically viewed from different sectarian perspectives. In other words, the notion has been a subject of disagreement among Muslims scholars, historians and intellectuals, largely due to its unclear and vague nature and characteristics. This is further established that none of the terms *Mahdi* or *Mahdiyya* is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Consequently, it is quite natural that the term is surrounded by several misinterpretations, misconception and misrepresentation. This is evidently clear in the discrepancy among the *Sunnites*, *Shiites* and *Sufis* on the actual meaning of the term "*Mahdiyya*" and the nature of the *Mahdi* and his specific role. While some intellectuals attribute the factors responsible for such misinterpretation to the methods employed by the scholars when studying the notion, others question the authenticity of the entire notion. To this end, one will be convinced that it will be very difficult for the notion of the *Mahdiyya* to be given one distinctive coloring owing to the various sectarian interpretations floating around.

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