

Mahdi began, and it continues until today. During the major occultation, the Imam is living behind covers and the Shias cannot directly access him or communicate with him. The Imam reaches out to the people, particularly the Shia scholars and the followers, directly or indirectly to guide them on their affairs and problems. There are many such stories which have been narrated throughout history since the Imam's occultation. It is mentioned that the Imam is like the sun behind the clouds, which means that, though we cannot see the Imam directly, we are still receiving the blessings of his presence. The Imam will be in the major occultation until a time that is only known by God. Upon God's Will, Imam Mahdi will reappear to fill the earth with justice and bring forth the peak of humanity and prosperity on earth. Prophet Jesus will also come after the reappearance of Imam Mahdi, and will follow the Imam in establishing justice on the earth.

12-4-Common Questions and Answers about Imam Mahdi

12-4-1-Are the Shias the only people who believe in a savior?

No. The concept of a savior, referring to the one who will come to save the people from oppression and injustice, is common amongst various theologies, though they differ about who the savior is. The savior in Zoroastrianism is known as "Sosyant", in Hinduism as "Kalki", in Buddhism as "Maitreya", in Judaism as "Moshiach", and in Christianity as "Messiah". The savior in Islam is known as "Mahdi", and all the Muslims, regardless of their sects, believe in him. There are frequent narrations from the Prophet about the Mahdi in 'Kutub al-Sittah', the primary books of narrations in the Sunni sect of Islam. Also, various books have been authored throughout history by non-Shia Islamic scholars about the Mahdi. All of the Muslims believe in the Mahdi, who is from the progeny of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and has the same name as him. The Shia Muslims believe in the Mahdi as their 12th Imam, who was born in the year 256 Hijri in Samarra, and is still alive.

12-4-2-Is the Mahdi a concept made-up by the Shia scholars?

Due to the importance of this concept, there are thousands of narrations from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and each of the Shia Imams about Imam Mahdi, his occultation, and his reappearance. The belief in Imam Mahdi has been an essential part of Shia theology since the time of the Prophet. There are many historical records and narrations to validate his Imamate and occultation. The Shia scholars had spread the narrations about Imam Mahdi even before his birth. Some of them also authored specific books about Imam Mahdi and his occultation. The names of about 30 such books, written before the birth of Imam Mahdi, are available in history. For example, Fazl ibn Shazan, a great scholar in Khorasan who passed away during the Imamate of Imam Askari, wrote multiple books about Imam Mahdi and his occultation.

The belief in the Mahdi is not just specific to the Shia Muslims; all the Muslims believe in the Mahdi, who is from the Prophet's descendants. There are various narrations from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) about the Mahdi, which have been recorded in top narration books of the Sunni sect of Islam. The Sunni scholars have also authored various books about the Mahdi throughout history. Many non-Shia Muslims have tried to misuse the concept of the Mahdi to their own benefit throughout history. They would not have tried to misuse this concept if it was not important and well-known to the Muslims. For example, Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph, named his son Muhammad and called him by the title of Mahdi. Mahdi then replaced his father as the third Abbasid Caliph. Other examples of famous people who falsely claimed to be the Mahdi in our contemporary time are Muhammad Ahmad in Sudan, Ali Muhammad Bab in Iran, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in India, and Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Qahtani in Saudi Arabia.

12-4-3-How can Imam Mahdi live such a long life?

Although Imam Mahdi's long life of about 1,200 years is much more than the average life expectancy of a human being, it is not impossible based on current scientific theories and various current theological

beliefs. Scientists are actively researching elongating the life of human cells and protecting them from disease, aging, and other deteriorating factors. Some scientists believe that science has the potential to increase human life up to several hundreds of years. The natural world is full of wonders, where plant and animal species have been alive for thousands of years.

The mysterious stories of people with long lives of several hundreds of years have been mentioned in various cultures and religions. For example, the longevity of several people has been explicitly mentioned in the Torah, such as Prophet Adam's age of 930 years and Prophet Adam's son, Seth's age of 912 years. Some pre-Islamic Prophets are believed to still be living today, such as Prophet Elijah (Ilyas), who was raised to the sky according to the Old Testament. Muslims of various sects believe that the pre-Islamic Prophets Elijah, Enoch (Idris), Khizr, and Jesus (Isa) never died and are still alive.

The Holy Quran explicitly mentions a few examples of noble characters who were blessed with exceptionally long lives. For example, the prophethood of Prophet Noah amongst his people lasted for 950 years, and is mentioned in the Quran [29:14]: "And certainly We sent Noah to his people, so he remained among them a thousand years save fifty years". We thus deduce that Prophet Noah lived for more than 950 years. Prophet Jesus is another example of a prophet who did not die per the Quran [4:157,158]: "And for their saying, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God. In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise." We thus deduce that Prophet Jesus has been living now for over 2,000 years.

Another Quranic piece of evidence is the story of Prophet Ezra (Uzair), where God took his life away for 100 years and then made him alive again, as mentioned in the following verse [2:259]: "(Or have you heard)

of the one who, on passing through an empty and ruined town, said, 'How will God bring it to life?' God caused him to die and brought him back to life after a hundred years and then asked him, 'How long have you been here?' He replied, 'One day or part of a day'. The Lord said, 'No, you have been here for one hundred years. Look at your food and drink. They have not yet decayed.'" According to this verse of the Quran, God not only elongated Prophet Ezra's life for 100 years, but He also miraculously preserved his food and drink, which would have naturally decayed in a day or two.

The companions of the cave are another Quranic story in which a few believers took shelter in a cave and slept there for 309 years, as mentioned in the following verse of the Quran [18:25] "And they stayed in their cave for three hundred years, adding nine." During these long years, they were sleeping, and their body was functioning without any need for water or food.

The Shias believe that the long life of Imam Mahdi is a miracle of God, and nothing is impossible for The Creator. God can elongate the life of His chosen savior and prevent him from aging. According to the narrations from the Shia Imams, when Imam Mahdi will reappear, he will look like a 40-year-old or younger.

12-4-4-How do the Shias interpret Islamic belief during the occultation?

The Shias refer to their scholars to interpret Islamic beliefs during the occultation. The Shias follow the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the essential part of their belief. They also follow the 12 Shia Imams from the progeny of the Prophet, who continued the message of the Holy Prophet. There are no differences or contradictions between the teachings and the traditions of the Prophet and the 12 Shia Imams. Thus, the Shias are blessed to have divine guidance and teachings from the generations of 12 Imams who lived among the Muslims for about 250 years after the demise of the Prophet. There are countless narrations from the Shia Imams about every aspect of the Islamic teachings and laws. The history of these 12

holy individuals is full of wisdom for any person's life, with lessons for overcoming any challenges. The Shia theology is unique among the other Muslim sects in having access to the precious historical resources from the Prophet and the 12 Imams. As a result, the Shias are proud of having a doctrine in every aspect of the Islamic sciences.

The massive collection of the narrations and historical records from the Prophet and the 12 Shia Imams have survived through history. They are used by Shia scholars in seminaries to defend the Islamic principles and to respond to any new questions regarding Islamic laws. The Shia Imams would always encourage their followers to refer to the trusted Shia scholars for their Islamic affairs. The efforts of the Shia Imams in training scholars, spreading their knowledge, and establishing a network organization of their representatives among the Shia communities were all towards preparing the Shias for their future. This policy was also approved and prescribed by Imam Mahdi. In one of his letters during the minor occultation, Imam Mahdi explicitly referred his Shia followers to the scholars by writing, "In the events that happen, refer to the narrators of our traditions (scholars), because they are my proof upon you, and I am God's proof upon them." Thus, the Shias refer to their scholars to acquire their Islamic knowledge and interpretations during the occultation.