

Chapter 3: Mahdiism, the Jews, and the Iranians

People were slowly assembling at Dr. Fahimi's residence. After the usual welcome and hospitality, the session began at eight o'clock. This time it was Engineer Madani who opened the discussion.

Engineer Madani: I remember reading a book some time ago in which the author's thesis was that Mahdiism and the divinely ordained messiah were ideas held by the Jews and pre-Islamic Iranians which spread among the Muslims. Iranians believed that a man named Saoshyant from the descendants of Zoroaster would one day appear and destroy Ahriman, the force of darkness, thereby clearing the earth from corruption. As for the Jews, because they had lost their homeland and had been enslaved by the Chaldeans and Assyrians, one of their prophets had predicted that a messiah would rise, deliver the Jews, and return them to their promised land in the future. Since the origins of the idea of the future savior and deliverer were found amongst the Iranians and the Jews, we may say that this notion came to Muslims through their channels and, hence, cannot be anything more than a legend.

Mr. Hoshyar: I agree that this notion was and is prevalent among other peoples and religious communities. However, its mere prevalence among other communities does not render it a legend! For Islamic notions and rulings to be authentic is it necessary that they ought to be in disagreement with the past religions? Any person wishing to investigate any topic without prejudicial understanding has to begin his research in the primary sources of the particular tradition that deals with the subject in order to assess its validity or lack thereof. It is not proper to begin this investigation in the sources of the traditions that existed before it and then claim that one has discovered the origins of that superstitious belief! Is it possible to say that since the ancient Iranians were believers in Yazdan, the God, and regarded honesty as part of good conduct, that therefore divine worship must be a legend and honesty cannot be part of good morals? Hence, just because other peoples are also awaiting the arrival of a deliverer and a messiah does not disprove the belief among Muslims; nor can it be used as a proof for the belief's veracity.

The Reasons for the Emergence of Belief in the Mahdiism

Dr. Fahimi: One of the authors has adequately narrated the origins of the idea of the future messianic figure. If I may, I would like to relate it in brief for you.

The audience: Please do!

Dr. Fahimi: I am going to restate it in brief. The original legend about the messianic Imam was adopted by the Shi'is from other religious communities, to which they added their own details until it reached its present form. This was done for two reasons:

First, the belief about the birth and emergence of a divine savior was and remains well established among the Jews. They believed that Elijah had ascended to the heavens and would descend at the End of Time to deliver the Children of Israel.

In the early days of Islam, a group of Jews had converted to Islam both for material reasons and in order to destroy Islam from its very foundation. Some among them attained high positions among the Muslims through treachery and dissimulation. Indeed, their sole purpose was to divide the Muslim community and spread dissension among them. The most outstanding example of this subversive character was 'Abd Allah b. Saba.

Second, following the death of the Prophet, his family members, especially 'Ali b. Abi Talib, used to regard themselves as more worthy of the caliphate than other leading Muslims. A small number of the Prophet's companions were also sympathetic to their claims. However, against their expectations, the caliphate was assumed by others rather than by family. This caused bitterness and distress among them until the time when, following the murder of 'Uthman, the caliphate reverted to 'Ali. His supporters were pleased and hoped that the caliphate would not slip out from the hands of the Prophet's family. Engulfed by the civil wars, however, 'Ali could not achieve much and finally was killed by Ibn Muljam. His son Hasan, who followed him in his position, did not succeed in bringing order and finally abdicated the caliphate to the Umayyads.

Hasan and Husayn, the two grandsons of the Prophet, remained in their homes while the government passed into the hands of others. The Prophet's family and its supporters were living a miserable life as the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids squandered the Muslim treasury. These events led to an increase in the number of those who supported the family and raised their opposition to the corrupt rulers throughout in the empire. However, the rulers, instead of redressing the wrongs committed against the innocent populace, increased the intensity of their atrocities by killing or exiling them. In short, after the Prophet's death his *Ahlul Bayt* and their supporters suffered oppression. Fatima was denied her right to inherit from the Prophet. 'Ali's right to the caliphate was denied until later. Hasan was poisoned. Husayn b. 'Ali, his family and companions, were killed at Karbala and the survivors of the tragedy were taken prisoner. Muslim b. 'Aqil and Hani b. 'Urwa were killed mercilessly after being granted amnesty. Abu Dharr Ghiffari

was deported to Rabdha. Hujr b. 'Adi, 'Amr b. Humq, Maytham Tammar, Sa'id b. Jubayr, Kumayl b. Ziyad, and hundreds of other supporters of the Prophet's family were executed. Under orders received from Yazid, the Umayyad, Madina was sacked and hundreds of its residents killed. There are numerous such accounts filling the pages of history. Under these oppressive conditions the lives of the supporters of the *Ahlul Bayt* had become well nigh impossible and they began to look for deliverance. From time to time an 'Alid would take up arms to fight against the oppressors; yet the insurrection would finally be curbed by government forces who would also kill him. These unfavorable circumstances became the major cause for the minority supporters of the *Ahlul Bayt* to despair and look for any ray of hope for deliverance. Evidently, these conditions prepared them thoroughly to accept the belief in the divinely ordained savior, in Mahdiism.

It was at this time that the newly converted and opportunist Jews took advantage of the situation to spread their belief in the divinely ordained messiah. The Shi'is, having been deeply disappointed and having suffered great loss of life and tyranny under the ruling powers, found the belief to be extremely comforting and accepted it wholeheartedly. Nonetheless, they modified it, saying: "This universal deliverer would definitely be from among the wronged ahl al-bayt." Gradually, they embellished it and added to its detail until the idea reached its present complexity¹.

Does it Really Need Explication?

Mr. Hoshyar: The suffering and persecution of the Prophet's family, the *Ahlul Bayt* and their supporters, as detailed by the book you read, is quite true. However, this detailed analysis of the events that led to such a belief among the Shi'is would have been necessary only if we did not possess knowledge about the origin of the idea in Islam. If you recall, we demonstrated that the Prophet himself spread this belief among Muslims and gave them the information regarding the future restorer. To support this we cited numerous traditions, and not only from the Shi'i sources; we also quoted several traditions from the Sunni collections, the *Sihah*. After having provided all the necessary evidence I do not believe there is any need for further documentation.

In the earlier part of your exposition you mentioned the prevalence of such a belief among the Jews. This is also true. But your citation of the view that this belief was spread by Jews like 'Abd Allah b. Saba among Muslims is simply untrue. As stated earlier, no less a person than the Prophet himself was the publicizer of the information about this future restorer of Islam. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Muslims who were formerly Jews affirmed this belief.

The Legend of 'Abd Allah b. Saba

Let me also point out that the existence of a Jew by the name of 'Abd Allah b. Saba is not a proven fact of history. Some scholars believe that the legend was fabricated by those who were hostile to the Shi'is. Moreover, even if it is hypothetically acknowledged that he did exist, attribution of the aforementioned

beliefs to him is without evidence or proof. No reasonable person can regard it credible that a newly converted Jew would possess such extraordinary political cunning as to publicly speak about the emergence of the savior of Islam among the *Ahlul Bayt* in the otherwise oppressive conditions which existed under the Umayyads.

Moreover, it is improbable that such a person would undertake to organize an insurrection in secret and call people to pay allegiance to an individual among the Prophet's family to overthrow the caliph, and replace him with the divinely guided Imam, without government officials knowing about it. According to those who hold such an opinion, it would seem that a Jewish convert to Islam could undertake to destroy the Muslim religion without any Muslim raising a finger against him! Such an opinion can exist only in the realm of fantasy!²

The Messianic Leader, Mahdi in Other Religions

Engineer Madani: Is belief in the promised Mahdi confined to the followers of Islam, or does it exist in other religions too?

Mr. Hoshyar: In fact, this belief is not limited to the Muslims alone. In almost all religions and heavenly creeds one can find a similar belief in the future savior. The followers of these religions believe that there will come a time when the world will become corrupt and engulfed in a crisis. Evil and injustice will become the rule of the day. Disbelief will cover the entire world.

At that time, the universal savior of the world will appear. With remarkable divine help he will restore the purity of faith and defeat materialism with the help of divine worship. Not only are the tidings to be found in revealed books like the Zand and Pazand, and Jamaspname of the Zoroastrians, the Torah and other Biblical books of the Jews, and the Gospel of the Christians, such information can also be seen, more or less, among the Brahmins and the Buddhists.

The followers of all religions and traditions maintain such a belief and are awaiting the appearance of such a commanding figure under the divine protection. Each tradition recognizes this figure with a different name and specific title. The Zoroastrians call him Saoshyant (meaning the 'savior of the world'); the Jews know him as the messiah, whereas the Christians regard him as the Savior Messiah. However, each group believes that this divinely ordained savior will be among them.

The Zoroastrians believe he is Persian and among the followers of Zoroaster. The Jews maintain that he will be among the Children of Israel, and the follower of Moses. The Christians think he will be one among them. Muslims believe that he will be among the Hashimites and among the direct descendants of the Prophet. In Islam he has been fully introduced, whereas in other religions this is not so.

It is remarkable that all the characteristics and signs mentioned for this universal savior in other religions are applicable to the promised Mahdi, the son of Imam Hasan 'Askari. It is possible to regard him as Iranian in race because among his ancestors is the mother of the fourth Imam Zayn al-'Abidin who, as the daughter of Yazdgard, the Sassanian king, was a Persian princess. He can also be considered

among the Children of Israel, since both the Hashimites and the Israelites are among the descendants of Abraham. The Hashimites are the descendants of Isma'il (Ishmael) and the Israelites are the descendants of Ishaq (Isaac). Hence, the Hashimites and the Israelites are one family. He is also connected to Christians because, according to some traditions, the mother of the present Imam was a Byzantine princess by the name of Narjis (Nargis), who is part of the miraculous story reported in some sources.

It is not appropriate to confine the deliverer of the world, the Mahdi, to one particular nation. He will actually come to fight against all discriminatory claims of racial, creedal and national distinction. Consequently, he should be regarded as the Mahdi of the whole of humanity. He is the savior and deliverer of the people who worship God. His victory is the victory of all the prophets and all the righteous ones on earth. He will be restoring the religion of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and all of the heavenly revelations, namely, Islam; he will revive the pure religion of Moses and Jesus which had foretold the prophethood of Muhammad.

Let us be clear that we have no intention of proving the existence of the promised Mahdi by referring to the ancient books, nor are we in need of doing so. Our intention is to demonstrate that the belief in the appearance of the unique savior of the world is a common religious belief, stemming from divine revelation, of which all prophets gave glad tidings. All nations are awaiting his emergence, but they have made errors in identifying him.

The Qur'an and Mahdiism

Dr. Fahimi: If the tradition of the Mahdi was authentic, then there would have been some mention of it in the Qur'an. On the contrary, even the word mahdi does not appear in that heavenly book!

Mr. Hoshyar: First, it is not necessary that each and every true subject should be mentioned in all its specific details in the Qur'an. In fact, there are so many particular details that are true and authentic and yet have not been mentioned in the heavenly book. Second, there are a number of verses in that holy book which, however brief, give tidings about the day when the devout worshippers of God and those who support the true religion and those who are worthy of that blessing will rule the earth in its entirety; and the religion of God, Islam, will become the dominant faith over all other religions. Thus, for instance, in the Sura Anbiya' God says:

***For We have written in the Psalms, after the Remembrance, 'The earth shall be the inheritance of My righteous servants.'* (21: 105)**

In the Sura Nur God promises:

God has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will surely make you successors in the land, even as He made those who were before them successors, and that He

will surely establish their religion for them that He has approved for them, and will give them in exchange, after their fear, security: 'They shall serve Me, not associating with Me anything.'
(24:55)

In the Sura Qasas God says:

Yet We desired to be gracious to those that were abased in the land, and to make them leaders, and to make them the inheritors. (28:4)

In the Sura Saff God says:

It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may uplift it above every religion, though the unbelievers be averse. (61:9)

From all these verses it can be briefly surmised that the world can look forward to the day when its power and administration will be given into the hands of the believers and those worthy of the divine trust to become leaders and lead humanity and its civilization to its perfection. At that time, Islam will become the dominant religion, and monotheism will replace polytheism. That brilliant period will be marked by the revolution of the divinely designated reformer and savior of humanity, the promised Mahdi. More importantly, that universal revolution will be launched by the deserving Muslims.

The General Prophethood and the Imamate

Dr. Fahimi: I don't know why you Shi'a insist that you should prove the existence of the Imam. You are so unrelenting in your belief that if the Imam does not exist physically, you say he is in concealment. Since the Prophets have already delivered the injunctions from God, why would there be a need for the existence of an Imam?

Mr. Hoshyar: All those proofs that are advanced to prove the necessity of the general prophethood and require God to communicate His injunctions to humankind, also necessitate that an Imam should exist as a proof for the existence of those injunctions and their protection. In order to elaborate on what we have said, it is necessary, however briefly, to present first the proofs that require the existence of the general prophethood and then proceed to prove the existence of the Imam.

If you keep in mind the preliminaries that have been already established and which we will briefly touch upon here, the matter concerning the necessity of the general prophethood will become clear to you.

(1) A human being has been created in such a way that he cannot run his affairs on his own. He needs the assistance and cooperation of others. In other words, he is created civil and social by nature. Hence, he must act within a society. It is obvious that self-interest and survival are the cause of conflict in a social life. Each person in the society is engaged in exerting all his endeavor to benefit from limited material resources. In reaching this goal he has to overcome numerous obstacles and compete with

other individuals who are equally engaged in attaining the same goal.

Under those circumstances individuals become obstacles to each other's goals and, hence, end up stepping upon each other's rights. It is at this point that law is needed to regulate social relations so that people's rights should be protected from being infringed upon, and conflicts should be resolved without creating chaos and lawlessness. It is possible to surmise that laws are a precious treasure that have been discovered by human beings. Furthermore, it is probable that from the early days of organizing their society human beings have had access to laws and have always respected them for their own good.

(2) A human being has been innately endowed with the capacity to perfect himself and attain prosperity. In his ongoing struggle, a human being has no other purpose than to become truly perfect. All his endeavors are geared towards attaining that lofty goal of perfection.

(3) Since a human being is on his way to perfection, attention to the true meaning of perfection has been made part of his natural disposition. Hence, it should be possible for him to attain it, because God does not create anything in futility.

(4) The point that a human being is made of body and spirit is well established. He is material through his body; whereas his spirit, although intimately connected with his body is regarded as belonging to the world of incorporeal beings.

(5) Since human being is made of two elements, namely, body and spirit, he is bound to have two kinds of life: this worldly life, related to his body; and the spiritual and contemplative life, related to his soul. Consequently, in relation to each one of them he will have a life of prosperity and damnation.

(6) Just as between body and spirit there is connection and relationship, with ensuing unity, so is there a perfect connection and relationship between the material and spiritual life. In other words, the quality of life in this world has a direct impact upon the spiritual life. Likewise, the psychic conditions and other spiritual characteristics have an impact upon the way human acts surface.

(7) A human being is on the way to perfection and is attentive to the requirements of innate and natural perfection. Moreover, God has not created life without a purpose. It is incumbent upon God to provide the means to attain the goal and to acquire the perfection intended for humanity so that it is able to distinguish and pursue the path that leads to the attainment of prosperity and avoid that which leads to sinful deviation.

(8) By nature a human being is self-centered and pursues his own interests. He is not interested in any other thing than serving his own good and interests. In fact, he endeavors to exploit fellow human beings and take advantage of their endeavors to serve his ends.

(9) Although a human being is engrossed in pursuing his own real perfection and is engaged in an intense search of that truth which he believes would lead him to its acquisition, more than often he fails

to reach that goal. The reason is that his own egocentric desires and internal emotions overcome his ability to distinguish the straight path. These traits actually obscure the ability of practical reason to lead humans to that desired perfection, and instead mislead one toward the path of damnation and self-destruction.

What System Can Make Human Beings Prosperous?

Since human beings must live in a society, and since obstacles to preserving one's interest and the exploitation of fellow humans are a necessary part of social life, there is a need for law to control such self-serving interest that could lead to chaos among the people. Such a law can create order in the society only when the following conditions are fulfilled:

(1) Such law has to be comprehensive and effective to cover and administer all spheres of individual as well as collective human activity. It should provide for all the human exigencies without neglecting any aspect of social life. Such a legal system should promulgate laws that would be in conformity with the natural and actual needs of individuals, reflecting both the internal reality as well as external conditions of human beings.

(2) Such law should lead to the real prosperity of human beings and not merely their imaginary and speculative perfection.

(3) Such law should be attentive to the well being of the entirety of humanity, not just a particular group of people or specific individual.

(4) Such law should lay the foundation of a society based on human virtues and the perfection of humanity. It should lead it to the attainment of that lofty goal by putting a high value on earthly life as a means of procuring those virtues and that human perfection, and not as independent of it.

(5) Such law should possess the efficiency to protect the people from manipulation and chaos, and guarantee the rights of all individuals without discrimination.

(6) In its promulgation, this law should be alert to the spiritual needs of the people in such a way that none of its laws should be a cause of harm to the meaningful existence of the people. Nor should it lead to the deviation from the path of perfection.

(7) Such law should protect the society from turning away from the right path of humanitarian existence and from choosing the path of destruction.

(8) The lawgiver of such a system should be well informed about all the crooked and scrupulous aspects of human encounters and should be knowledgeable about all the judgements given at different times and places.

Undoubtedly, a human being is in need of this kind of law and it is regarded as the necessity of his life. Without such a system in place human life will be in danger. In light of this indispensable need, it is relevant to raise the question of whether human-made law is capable of administering human society justly.

We believe that human-legislated law, influenced by short-sighted human intelligence, is imperfect and does not possess the ability to administer human society with justice. Some examples would clarify this statement:

(1) Human knowledge and information is both limited and deficient. The average human being is unaware of all human needs and the laws of nature. He also does not possess sufficient knowledge about good and evil and all aspects of competing interests among various laws and their impact upon the formulation of final judgements in different places and times.

(2) If it is hypothetically admitted that it is possible for human legislators to promulgate such laws, it is undoubtedly impossible to concede that these legislators are aware of the ways in which the worldly and the spiritual life interact with each other to produce actions that suggest their deep roots in human nature. And, even if they are in possession of such an awareness, it is very negligible. Evidently, taking care of that spiritual life is beyond their legislative program. Hence, human prosperity is viewed only from a material perspective. On the contrary, these two aspects of human existence are intimately related, and their division is inconceivable.

(3) Since human beings are self-centered, manipulation and exploitation of a fellow human is part of his nature. Every person gives preference to his own interests above the good of others. Hence, conflict resolution and the prevention of exploitation are beyond his competence. The reason is that the self-serving goals of the human legislators will never allow them to disregard their own and their supporters' interests and work towards the common good of humanity.

(4) Human legislators always promulgate laws shortsightedly. Moreover, they are influenced by their prejudices, habits and defective thought. Consequently, the laws are enacted to protect the interests of the few, without due attention to the benefit and harm that could accrue to others. In these laws the general welfare of humanity has not been the source of legislation.

Indeed, it is only the divinely ordained legal system that is in conformity with the laws of nature and has been promulgated with the purpose of advancing human prosperity in this and the next world. Hence, it is free from every selfish human motive. It is, certainly, enacted to further universal human prosperity. Thus, it is clear that humanity needs the divinely ordained law and God's benevolence makes it necessary that He provide a complete and perfect system through His messengers.

The Other-worldly Prosperity

Even as a human being is constantly occupied with the mundane aspects of life, there is some mysterious life rooted in the depth of his own self to which he hardly pays attention, and he appears to have almost forgotten about it. He is bound to reap prosperity or adversity in relation to this neglected self too. In other words, good thoughts and true beliefs, virtuous conduct and praiseworthy actions that stem from the prosperous self would lead to spiritual perfection and ascendancy as well as to success and excellence, just as erroneous beliefs, immoral behavior and blameworthy conduct, which stem from the perverted self, lead to the impairment, destitution and deviation of the self.

Hence, if a person places himself on the path of perfection, he will permit his essential and real self to be nurtured and refined so as to ascend and revert to its original abode, which is all light and bliss. On the contrary, if he sacrifices all the means to attain the perfection of the self by surrendering to the animal appetites, then he will transform himself into a violent, lustful animal, having completely deviated from the straight path.

Consequently, a human being is in need of a carefully structured program for the progression of his inner self without which he cannot expect to travel this hazardous and highly intricate path. By allowing his animal appetites to overcome spiritual and moral perfection, he actually surrenders the ability of his intuitive reasoning to reach sound judgements.

As a result he falls into the darkness of misguidance, destroying his power to carry out the requirements of a virtuous life, judging good to be evil and evil to be good. Indeed, it is only God, the Creator of human beings, who knows the source of human prosperity, the good and the evil, who can provide the right guidance and complete program to attain true perfection and happiness, and to avoid those things that cause destitution and adversity. In sum, a human being needs the Lord Creator also in attaining his prosperity in the Hereafter.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the Wise God has not exposed humankind, which is potentially capable of realizing prosperity as well as disaster only to the deviating powers of the self. Nor has He abandoned humankind to the forces of ignorance and confusion. Rather, He has endowed humanity with abounding benevolence and kindness by guiding it through the prophets who are selected from among humans. These prophets have been sent with ordinances and laws to direct the lives of the people toward this and other-worldly prosperity and to warn against the tribulations caused by ignoring this guidance. By doing so God has removed all the possible excuses human beings could make for having failed to reach the appointed goal of prosperity.

The Path of Perfection

The path of human perfection leading it to God is embedded in sound belief, righteous action and virtuous conduct. The information about this path was revealed to the Prophets so that they could

undertake to call people towards it. It is important to emphasize that this path is not merely a formal path that has no connection in form or essence to the divine goals. Quite to the contrary, it is the path that is real and true, which has its source in the divine lordship. Any one situated in its course can ascend to the highest levels of the limitless universe and paradisaical heavens by going through the inner perfection of the self.

In other words, true religion is such a straight path that whoever situates himself in its course, perfects his/her essential self and his humanity through the straight, benevolent path and returns to the prosperous abode and the source of all perfection. And anyone who deviates from this straight path has to go through the inhuman path of demonic existence, without any virtues and good conduct to support themselves. Such individuals actually become incapable of treading the precise path of benevolent existence. Indeed, such an individual cannot expect anything better than being damned to perdition and hell fire.

The Infallibility of the Prophets

The Divine Benevolence makes it necessary that the prophets be sent as the guides to teach the people religious ordinances and laws so as to lead them to their prosperity in this and the next world. This goal can be accomplished only if the prophets are protected from committing any errors in delivering the divine message to humanity. Otherwise, human beings could make an excuse for not having received authentic directives from God. In other words, a prophet should be immune from any kind of error and forgetfulness in conveying the divine revelation to the people. This is known as *'isma* ('protection' or 'immunity' = 'infallibility'). Moreover, a prophet himself should be an exemplary person, having followed all the divine injunctions in his personal life. It is only then that he can call upon people to follow the divine guidance, demonstrating its validity through his own character and conduct. In this way the people can follow him confidently toward their own true perfection. In addition, it is a rationally derived proposition that no person can expect others to carry out moral and religious directives when he himself does not follow the same. A call to the divine path must be exemplified by the prophet.

It is obvious that our own knowledge and perceptions are not free of error, because they are conditioned by the way our sensory perceptions receive them. No one can deny the numerous times when our senses have made errors in perception. However, when that knowledge and those ordinances come in the form of divine guidance from God, delivered through the revelation to the prophets, these are immune from such dangers. In fact, revelation is not the kind of knowledge that is derived from sensory perceptions. Otherwise, it too would have been prone to same dangers as human perceptions are, depriving people of the confidence that is necessary in religious ordinances. Religious truth and knowledge about hidden matters is given to the prophets through revelation which descends upon their heart and their inner self. This very truth is experienced by these prophets in their earthly existence, which they convey to the people in accord with their capacity to understand and to follow it. Hence, the religious truth given to the prophets and delivered to the people by them remains immune from any

falsehood or error.

It is for this reason that the prophets are protected from disobedience and error of judgement, and are empowered to act upon their knowledge. How can it be otherwise? A person who has attained that level of truth through experience and direct observation cannot be expected to act contrary to that truth.

Moreover, after attaining such a level of perfection he cannot be expected to forfeit that blessing by falling into sinful deviation.

Rational Proof in Support of the Imamate

After having demonstrated the necessity for general prophethood to guide humanity to its this- and next-worldly goals, it is accurate to hold that the same proof can be utilized to establish the fact that, whenever the prophet dies, there must exist in his place someone who can lead the community to those ends. This person should be someone who can continue the work of the prophet in providing the divine ordinances and reach out to the people in their search for the religious and spiritual path. God's purposes cannot be fulfilled without such a person existing among the people to promulgate those laws without errors of omission or commission. Thus, in the absence of the prophet, God's benevolence makes it necessary that there should be someone among the people to make sure that divine revelation is protected from human interference and interpolations, and that divine laws are made accessible to the people at all times.

This outstanding person must also, like the prophet, be immune and protected from committing any error and mistakes in receiving, recording and delivering the divine ordinances to establish the proof that God's guidance for the people is intact. Moreover, he should be fully knowledgeable about the truth of the religious ordinances and should himself act upon those ordinances so that others can bring their own acts and opinions into conformity with his and follow his example in their search for truth, without falling into doubt and confusion and without resorting to excuses for not having found the proof of religious truth. Since the Imam must also be protected from committing any error in carrying out this great responsibility, it must be pointed out that the Imam's knowledge is other than that acquired through sense perception. Hence, his knowledge is different from the knowledge of an ordinary person. Through the Prophet's own guidance the Imam possesses clear insights into religious knowledge. Moreover, he is endowed with direct experience of the truth through his inner eyes. It is because of this that he is protected from any error or forgetfulness, and so acts in accord with this experience and direct observation of religious truth. More importantly, it is this attribute that qualifies him to assume the Imamate of the Muslim community.

In other words, there must exist among the people a perfect individual, one possessing absolute faith in God's revelation and exemplifying the best character and personal qualities in order to lead people in the minutest details of God's ordinances. At all these levels he must be protected from error, forgetfulness, and acts of disobedience. He must be *ma'sūm*. It is the coming together of faith and action, knowledge

and practice, that makes him the personification of all the possible human potentials of perfection. The realization of these potentials indisputably appoints him the leader of humanity. If humanity, at any point, is deprived of this leadership, the situation could lead to the disappearance of the divine ordinances which were proclaimed for the betterment of humankind. Moreover, it could lead to the discontinuation of divine help and could sever the connection between the divine and human realms.

In other words, there should always be a person among the people who is endowed with special guidance from God and is protected through God's benevolence in order for him to provide the necessary guidance and lead the people to their perfection in accord with their divinely endowed potentials. Moreover, through his knowledge and in any way possible, he should aid them in their journey towards their Creator. It is the existence of the sacred presence of the Imam as the Proof of God and as a perfect example of religious life that can make the divine presence known and divine worship possible in a society. Without the Imam's existence God cannot be known or worshipped perfectly. The inner self of the Imam is the receptacle for God's knowledge and divine secrets. It is like a mirror that reflects the realities of the material world, and people derive benefit from these reflections.

Dr. Jalali: Surely, the protection of religious ordinances and laws is not confined to one person who should know it and practice it all. Rather, if all religious ordinances and laws are distributed among the people and if each group learns and puts into practice part of these ordinances, all of them can be protected both from the perspectives of knowledge about and practice of them.

Mr. Hoshyar: Your hypothesis is refutable from two angles:

First, in our previous discussion we have pointed out that there should always be one outstanding person among the people who should be an embodiment of all the possible benevolent qualities and a personification of the religious existence in all its meanings. Moreover, he should be free from any need of acquiring the necessary sciences and education from any other being than God. If such a person is absent among the people, then humanity will be deprived of God's proof and knowledge about God's purposes. To be sure, when any species is left without a purpose its destruction is certain. According to your hypothesis, such a perfect person does not exist because each one of these persons, even when he knows and acts upon a number of those ordinances, is not on that straight path of religion and actually has deviated from it. The reason is that religious ordinances are inevitably too interrelated and profoundly interconnected as a whole for them to be taken in part.

Second, as pointed out earlier, since God's ordinances and laws are sent for the guidance of humanity, they should remain not only constant but should also be safeguarded. All ways to their change, distortion or destruction should remain firmly closed, and they should remain safe from all dangers. This goal can be fulfilled only when the person in charge of it is protected from error and immune from forgetfulness and disobedience. There is nothing in your hypothesis that guarantees this because the problem of error of judgement and forgetfulness is a possibility for each one of the people. Consequently, the divine ordinances and laws are not immune from any change or alteration and neither so the proof of God's

immutable guidance nor the elimination of people's excuse is procurable.

Textual Proof for the Necessity of the Imamate

Mr. Hoshyar: All that we have said is further attested in the traditions reported on the authority of the ahl al-bayt. If you are interested in an investigation of them you might refer to the books on hadith. Here we will cite some of these for your benefit:

One of the companions of Imam Sadiq by the name of Abu Hamza says: I asked the Imam, "Can the earth survive without the presence of the Imam?" He said, "If the earth is devoid of the Imam it will be destroyed³."

Al-Washsha¹, a close associate of Imam Rida says: I asked the Imam, "Can the earth be without an Imam?" He said, "No." I told him that it has been related to us that the earth cannot be without an Imam, except when God is angry with the people. On that he said, "Nevertheless, the earth cannot be void of the Imam, otherwise it will be destroyed⁴."

Ibn al-Tayyar reports that he heard from Imam Sadiq that if there remained two persons on earth one of them would be the Proof of God. In another tradition Imam Baqir is reported to have declared: "By God, from the time God caused Adam to die until this day, God has not left this earth without an Imam through whom His guidance becomes available to the people. It is this Imam who is the Proof of God for the people. As long as there is a need for God's proof the earth will not be without an Imam⁵."

In another tradition Imam Sadiq is reported to have said: "God has created us in the best form and has appointed us as the caretaker of all the divine knowledge. The tree spoke to us, and through our worship God is being worshipped." The Imam also said: "The vicegerents [of the Prophet] are the gates of divine knowledge. Hence, one should enter religion through them. Without them God cannot be known. It is through the existence of these vicegerents that God will present His argument against His servants⁶."

Abu Khalid, a close associate of Imam Baqir asked the interpretation of the verse that says: "Believe in God, His messenger, and the light which We have revealed." The Imam said:

O Abu Khalid, by 'the light' is meant the Imams. O Abu Khalid, the light of the Imam in the heart of the believer is more brilliant than the sunlight. They are the ones who enlighten the hearts of the believers. God denies and conceals this light from whomever He wishes, as a result of which the heart of that person turns dark and becomes veiled⁷.

According to another tradition, Imam Rida said:

When God wills to appoint someone to look after the affairs of humanity, He expands his chest and makes his heart the source of realities and wisdom. He continuously endows him with His knowledge so that after receiving it he would not be incapable of answering any question. Moreover, in explaining the

realities and providing the right guidance he would not fall into any error or falsehood.

He is free from any corruption and error, he is ma'süm. He remains all the time the recipient of God's support and assistance, and is protected from sinful deviation. God appoints him to this prominent position so that he becomes the Proof of God's existence on earth. This is God's special favor, which He gives to whomever He pleases. Indeed, God's bounty is extensive⁸.

In yet another tradition the Prophet declared: "Stars are the security for the dwellers of the heavens. If they get destroyed so will the dwellers of the heavens. My family members are the security for the dwellers of the earth. Hence, if they do not exist, the dwellers of the earth will also be destroyed⁹."

In one of his orations Imam 'Ali said:

The earth will not be void of the Qa'im who will stand by the command of God and will provide the proof of God's existence for humanity. Sometimes that proof is manifest and well attested, and at other times it is in fear and hidden. This is to ensure that God's proofs are not terminated. These proofs are few and their whereabouts is not known. I solemnly declare that although they are few their status is extremely elevated. Through them God protects His proof and evidence until that time when they can implant those proofs in those who are like them and cultivate them in their hearts.

The knowledge [given by God] has led them to the true insight and they have attained the spirit of certainty through it. That which baffles the lovers of wealth and makes it inconceivable for them appears easy and readily accessible to these proofs of God. That which frightens the ignorant, the proofs of God are intimate with it. Their connection to this material world is because of their physical body whose spirits are connected with the highly exalted places. They are God's caliphs and His callers to faith on earth¹⁰.

In another sermon Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib has described the excellences of the ahl al-bayt, saying:

The elegances of the Qur'an are about them and they are the treasures of God. When they speak they speak the truth, but when they keep quiet no one can speak unless they speak.

They are the pillars of Islam and the sanctuary of [its] protection. With them truth has returned to its proper position and falsehood has retreated and its tongue is severed from its root. They have understood the religion attentively and carefully, not by mere heresy or from narrators, because narrators of knowledge are many but those who understand it are few¹¹.

In short, on the basis of rational and textual evidence one can surmise that as long as human beings live on the earth, there must exist a perfect and divinely protected person among them who could personify all the perfect qualities that the human being can possibly attain. Moreover, such an individual must be responsible, both theoretically and practically, to guide humanity. This person is the Imam, the leader of humankind. Having himself ascended on this sacred path of human perfection he takes it upon himself to call others onto those stages and stations. Hence, he becomes the mediator between the hidden world of the spirit and the human world.

The bounties of the hidden world descend upon him first, and through him reach other human beings. It is obvious that the non-existence of such a person among people would inevitably lead to the absence of any goal for humankind. Such an absence would necessarily lead to the perdition of human society. In the final analysis, regardless of any other proof, this rational and textual evidence confirms that there is no period in history, including our own age, without an Imam. Since there is no manifest Imam at this time, we can say that the Imam is in occultation and lives a concealed life.

It was quite late in the night. Everyone was tired and it was decided that the discussion would continue at some other time in the near future.

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1. See the thesis presented in the book *al-Mahdiyya fi al-islam*, pp. 48–68
 2. For further details on the conditions that existed under these caliphal authorities, see: 'Ali al-Wardi, *Naqsh-i vu'aaz dar islam*, which is the translation of the work from Arabic by Khaliliyan, pp. 111–137. The legend about 'Abd Allah b. Saba has been critically analyzed by Sayyid Murtada 'Askari in his monumental study entitled 'Abd Allah b. Saba; and by Taha Husayn, 'Ali va farzandanash, which is the translation of his book in Arabic by Khalili, pp. 139–143
 3. Kulayni, *Usul al-kafi*, Vol. 1/334
 4. Ibid
 5. Ibid., p. 333, 335
 6. Ibid., p. 368–69
 7. Ibid., p. 372
 8. Ibid., 1/390
 9. Suyuti, *Tadhkirat al-khawass*, p. 182
 10. *Nahj al-balagha*, Sermon No. 147, Vol. 3
 11. Ibid., Sermon No. 235

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