

Journey through Theology

Authors(s):

Sayyid Ahmad Ali Khan [3]

Preparations For The Journey

The territory of Theology stretches before me. I am about to embark on a journey through this territory, riding the chariot of rationality. And you are here, at my invitation, to accompany me in this journey.

This particular journey will be brief, so as not to tire you out. Once you become seasoned travelers, then you can go on longer journeys.

We embark upon this journey of ours without any preconceptions, but with an open mind, with our intellect as our guide.

It is implicit in our choice of guide, that we consider our intellect capable of differentiating between two or more options, deciding which is the right one.

First Stage

We start our journey with a simple observation. We see the world around us and think the age-old question: How did this all come about? We search here and there for an answer. We come across not one but many answers. We give our intellect the choice of selecting the right one among them. In our explorations, we come across a book which presents a chain of reasoning, leading to an answer to our question.

The book says thus:

The thing or being by which another thing or being exists or on which the existence of another thing or

being depends is called a cause.

The thing or being which depends on or owes its existence to something else is called an effect or phenomenon.

The existence of an effect cannot depend on a non-being or nothing or nothingness. This implies that the chain of an effect and its cause should end in a self-existing cause, otherwise it would mean the existence of a being or a thing by a non-being, or naught; the absurdity of which is self-evident.

The basis of all scientific investigation is that there can be no effect without a cause. The word 'cause' is a term meaning a thing responsible for the existence of a being or another thing: and this is of two kinds, the structural and creative.

The structural causes are the parts and the components of the effect.

The creative or agential causes are the producing or originating factors, bringing the structure into existence but they are not the part of the structure.

The structural cause is sub-divided into two kinds, material and formal. The material cause is the thing out of which the structure is made. The formal cause is the shape or form by which the structure is what it is.

The creative cause means the factor which produces the parts and affects their arrangement. This cause consists of two kinds, genetic and objective, the former is called the first or active cause and the latter is called the ultimate or final cause (purpose or motive).

Everything or being of composite nature is an effect, i.e. its existence is not by itself, as it depends at least on its parts and its existence is caused by them. The parts of a being or beings cannot be non-beings. The question arises whether the parts exist by themselves or they are also composite, depending on their parts?

If they are also composed of parts then we have to trace back the process till we reach the final components which will lead to the conclusion that they are beings of non-composite nature existing by themselves on which the whole edifice of effects and their causes stands. But, no being of a dimensional nature presentable in terms of space and time, can be ever be of a non-composite nature as the simplest and the smallest being which occupies space is dimensional and geometrically divisible and depends on its parts.

Therefore, no dimensional being can be taken as a self-existing being and thus considered as the First or the Beginning in the chain of begins. We have either to accept that the chain is based on non-beings, which is absurd, or we are forced to step out of the realm of the material chain in the search of a non-composite, non-dimensional self-existing 'Being' and assert that the chain of cause and effects is based on this 'Being'.

This means that the whole dimensional realm presentable in the terms of space and time is an effect and the phenomenon of a Non-dimensional, Non-material Being. On this ground we have to leave the dimensional realm and proceed in search of the self-existing Being responsible for the phenomenon of the chain of cause and effect in the realm where the experimental logic and method has no approach to it at all.

Hence, the Self-Existing Being must be unlimited, not presentable in terms of space and time. It should be beyond all dimensional and undimensional limitations, and as such, it cannot be but One; because the idea of two self-existing beings implies limitations of both.

The conclusion is that the Self-Existing Being is One, the Real Unit, which is not divisible at all, in any sense of the term, and in any respect of form or any aspect imaginable. Therefore, it is the Real Unique, the like of it in any sense is not possible.

This Unique Unit by which the finite beings in part and as a whole are existing, is not absent from 'Itself'. Hence it is conscious of 'Itself.'

Our intellect follows the reasoning given in the book and finds no fault with it. We have the answer to our first question, and this answer also proves to be the vehicle to carry us through the rest of our journey.

We come to the conclusion that there does exist a timeless, all-powerful, all-pervading unit Entity, Who is the Creator of all, and Whom we call God or Allah.

Excursion 1

Once someone asked the wisest man of the times to guide him toward the Lord, saying that he had been confused by the words of the polemicists.

The wise man asked, "Have you ever traveled by ship?"

He answered, "Yes."

The wise man said, "Did it ever happen that the ship sprang a leak and there was nobody to save you from drowning in the tempestuous waves of the ocean?"

"Yes."

"At that dangerous moment and in that state of despair, did you have the feeling that an infinite and almighty power might save you from your terrible fate?"

"Yes, that's the way it was."

The wise man then said: "It is God Almighty Who is the source of reliance and toward Whom men look with hope when all doors are closed."

Excursion 2

A materialist of Egypt went to Mecca in order to engage in debate, and there he met the same wise man whom we came across in our previous excursion and whom we will meet again in our next one. (The name of this wise man, and the sources of these excursion materials will be revealed when we reach the fourth stage of the journey. Happy traveling.)

When the discussion began, the wise man said, "Do you accept that the earth has an above and a below?"

The Egyptian said, "Yes."

"So how do you know what is below the earth?"

The Egyptian: "I do not know, but I think there is nothing below the earth."

The wise man: "Imagining is a sign of impotence when confronted with what you cannot be certain of. Now tell me, have you ever been up in the skies?"

"No."

"How strange it is that you have not been to the West or to the East, that you have not descended below the earth or flown up to the heavens, or passed beyond them to know what lies there, but nonetheless you deny what exists there. Would any wise man deny the reality of what he is ignorant of? And you deny the existence of the Creator because you cannot see him with your eyes."

The Egyptian said, "No one talked to me before in this way."

The wise man said, "So, in fact, you have doubts concerning the existence of God; you think He may exist and He may not exist?"

"Perhaps so."

"O man, the hands of one who does not know are empty of all proof; the ignorant can never possess any kind of evidence. Be well aware that we never have any kind of doubt or hesitation concerning the existence of God. Do you not see the sun and the moon, the day and the night, regularly alternating and following a fixed course? If they have any power of their own, let them depart from their course and not return.

Why do they constantly return? If they are free in their alternation and rotation, why does the night not become day and the day not become night? I swear by God that they have no free choice in their motions; it is He Who causes these phenomena to follow a fixed course; it is He Who commands them; and to Him alone belongs all greatness and splendor."

The Egyptian said, “You speak truly.”

The wise man continued, “If you imagine that nature and time carry men forward, then why do they not carry them backwards? And if they carry them backwards, why do they not carry them forward? Know that the heavens and the earth are subject to His Will. Why do the heavens not collapse onto the earth? Why are the layers of the earth not overturned and why do they not mount up to the heavens? Why do those who live on the earth not adhere to each other?”

The Egyptian submitted to the truth, “God Who is the Lord and Master of the heavens and earth protects them from collapse and destruction.”

Excursion 3

A man named Mufaddal, who was the follower of the wise man, once asked him, “Master, some men imagine that the order and precision we see in the world are the work of nature.”

The wise man responded: “Ask them whether nature performs all its precisely calculated functions in accordance with knowledge, thought and power of its own. If they say that nature possesses knowledge and power, what is there to prevent them from affirming the eternal divine essence and confessing the existence of that supreme principle? If, on the other hand, they say that nature performs its tasks regularly and correctly without knowledge and will, then it follows that these wise functions and precise, well-calculated laws are the work of an all-knowing and wise creator. That which they call nature is, in fact, a law and a custom appointed by the hand of divine power to rule over creation.”

Second Stage

At this point in the journey, we come across two diverging paths.

One path assumes that Justice is not an attribute of God. God need not be just. This assumption simply leads to chaos, as it makes all life, including the present journey we are embarked on, totally meaningless. Our intellect (with its power to differentiate between right and wrong) decides that injustice is wrong. In other words, this assumption implies imperfection in God. Our intellect doesn't accept this.

The other path states that God is always just.

Our intellect accepts this later path, and guides us onward.

Third Stage

When the Justice of the Creator is taken as a fact, there are certain logical conclusions that directly follow:

1. . Creation cannot be purposeless.

2. . When creation has a purpose, the creatures should be properly guided to that purpose.

We find that we are already aware of one guide provided for this express purpose. It is our intellect, which has enabled us to come this far in our rational journey. It is our internal guide.

It is our very intellect which leads to the fact that it alone is not a sufficient guide. Intellects can be misguided. There exists the need for explicit external guidance. And God being Just, should send this guidance to us in a form that we can understand and follow.

The need for such guidance is continuous. It should be made available at all times.

Study of history shows that there were several persons in the past who stated that they had been sent by God to guide the populace. These guides, during their lifetime, would show the people the correct path. Some of them would leave scriptures behind them, so that the people can follow these scriptures after the guides are gone.

It is also required that the guides should be sent repeatedly, as After a guide had come and gone, sometimes people, for selfish reasons, manipulated the teachings and scriptures and changed them for their personal benefit. Due to this reason, it was necessary to send the guides repeatedly, renewing the scriptures and edicts, every few decades or centuries.

At this stage, we have the task of evaluating for truth, the statements of those persons in history, who had stated that they had come from God.

For any form of evaluation, we need standards. Our intellect once again comes to our aid and shows us some standards.

1. As these persons come from God, they should be free of wrong-doing. Any person observed to commit any wrong at any time of his life cannot be the rightful guide. For how can a person who errs himself, exhort another person not to err? Also, if a person is not free from wrong, then who can say what part of their teaching is right and what is wrong? On the other hand, they should be the leaders in all good human qualities and values.

2. They should not have been taught by anyone in the world. And yet they should be the most knowledgeable persons of their times. Their knowledge should be faultless. Else, the argument stated above, applies in this case too: If their knowledge is faulty, who can say which part of their commandments are true and which are wrong and misleading? That leaves the guidance without integrity, and therefore, useless. As the guides are being sent by God, their education and knowledge should come from the Creator and not from any of the creation, as only knowledge from the Creator can be faultless.

3. When required, they should be able to exhibit supernatural powers, as signs from God, of their truth.
4. Their principles and values should not change from one time to another, as such a change would imply imperfection at one stage or another.

There are other, subtler, indicators of the rightfulness of a God-sent guide, but the above criteria should suffice for us to evaluate the truthfulness of a person who states that he is guide sent by God.

Armed with the criteria, we sift through the sands of history. We come across some names of persons who were undoubtedly God-sent guides. Such persons are called Prophets or Messengers of God. Some of the names we come across, are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus (God's blessings upon them all).

We now find that some people stop at the name of Moses and do not venture forth. The rest of the people on the journey forge ahead and reach the name of Jesus. Some of them then stop at this name and refuse to search any further. However, seeing that none of them (i.e. Moses, Jesus, and any of the other revered persons) had stated that they are the last of the guides to be sent by God, some of us keep on searching and sifting and evaluating on our criteria, until we arrive at one name: Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him and His Progeny).

Let us look at Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with reference to the four above-stated criteria:

1. Infallibility: Even before the declaration of his Prophethood, Muhammad (PBUH) was being called "Sadiq" (the truthful one) and "Amin" (the reliable one), by the polytheists of Mecca. Even when all these polytheists became his enemies (after the declaration of his Prophethood), no history records that anyone among the polytheists could pinpoint any fault in Muhammad (PBUH).

2. Muhammad (PBUH), revealed a book, the Holy Qur'an. This book is one of the strongest signs of the truthfulness of Muhammad (PBUH). About this book, a present day scientist, Dr Maurice Bucaille of French Academy of Medicine, expressed his views thus:

"A totally objective example of it [the Holy Qur'an], in the light of modern knowledge, leads us to recognise the agreement between the two, as has already been noted on repeated occasions. It makes us deem it quite unthinkable for a man of Muhammad's time to have been the author of such statements, on account of the state of knowledge in his day. Such considerations are part of what gives the Qur'anic Revelation its unique place, and forces the impartial scientist to admit his inability to provide an explanation which calls solely upon materialistic reasoning."

He also states: "The slightest alteration to the text [of Qur'an] would have destroyed the remarkable coherence which is characteristic of them [Qur'anic Revelations]... The Qur'an is a preaching which was made known to man in the course of a Revelation which lasted roughly twenty years. It spanned two periods of equal length on either side of the Hegira."

(The above quotes are taken from Dr Bucaille's talk on "Qur'an and Modern Science", given at the Commonwealth Institute, London, on 14th June 1978.)

As is evident from the above sentiments of Dr Bucaille, just the Qur'an is ample proof of the second, third and fourth criteria for a true Prophet, as stated above.

We now see that Muhammad (PBUH), fulfilling all the criteria for a true guide from God, also stated that he was the last of the Messengers of God, and no more Prophets would be sent after him. The people who have reached this far in their search for Messengers of God, are called Muslims, and the path they follow is called Islam.

At this point we stop our search, and accept Islam as our way. We believe in the truthfulness of Muhammad (PBUH), and the Holy Qur'an.

Till now, we had been journeying solely with the help of our intellect. At the end of this stage, we now have two more vehicles to carry us through the rest of our journey. These vehicles are: The verses of Qur'an, and the authentic traditions of the Prophet (PBUH).

And the third stage of our journey comes to an end.

Excursion

A group of Christian scholars from Najran came to the Prophet and engaged him in a debate about the Christian belief versus the Islamic belief.

As the Christians believed that Christ was son of God in view of the fact that he was born without a father, the Holy Qur'an first refuted their reasoning with logic, saying:

Verily, similitude of Jesus with God is as the similitude of Adam; He created him out of dust then said He to him BE, and he became. (Ch.3, Verse 59)

When the Christian scholars refused to accept reason, God commanded the Prophet as follows:

And to him who disputes with you therein after the knowledge has come to you Say (O' Our Prophet Muhammad) (to them) "come, let us summon our sons, and (you summon) your sons, and (we summon) our women and (you) your women, and (we summon) ourselves and (you) yourselves and then let us invoke and lay the curse of God on the liars!"(3:61)

(This verse is also called the verse of "Mubahela").

The Prophet conveyed the command of God to the Christians. It was arranged that the next day would be decisive.

The next day, the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), as per God's commandment, took with him his grandsons

Hasan (AS),¹ Hussain (AS), his daughter Fatima (AS) and his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi-Talib (AS), and proceeded to face the Christians.

Abu Haris bin Alqama, one of the leaders of the Christian group, watched this procession of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) and said to his fellow Christians:

“I see such faces that if they pray to God to move the mountain, God would do so in answer to their prayers. Do not go against them or you will be destroyed.”

Then the Christian group accepted their defeat and agreed to give jizia (a kind of tax) to the Prophet (PBUH).

This incident is related in detail in several books of Islam including “Sahih Muslim”, “Madarij an-Nabuwwah”, etc.

Fourth Stage

As we discovered in the beginning of the third stage, there is a need for availability of continuous guidance, else people may change the teachings of their guide for their own selfish benefits.

But the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the last Messenger of God. This means that his message should be kept safe from manipulation, even after he has passed away. This is possible only if there remain in the world, till eternity, successors of Muhammad (PBUH), to whom would be entrusted the task of safeguarding the message. And reason dictates that these successors should also be free of wrong-doing, as had been the Prophet himself.

Did Muhammad (PBUH) then, in his lifetime, appoint any successor and guardian of his message after him?

At this point, two paths once again diverge.

The wayfarers of one path state that of course, the Prophet did appoint someone as his vicegerent, and it is unreasonable to suppose otherwise. Else, how could the Prophet (PBUH) be so irresponsible as to leave his religion without a guardian after him? The people who tread this path are called “Shia”.

The wayfarers of the other path are called “Sunni”. They say that the Prophet did not specifically appoint anyone as his vicegerent. However, our explorations indicate that this denial is simply erroneous and illogical, as is proved from the books of the very people who deny this fact.

Our explorations discover the following facts:

The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) stated that his successors will be twelve in number. This tradition is quoted from numerous sources in numerous important books of Ahl al-Sunna, including Bukhari, Muslim,

Masnad e–Ahmad Hanbal, Abu–Daoud, Tirmidhi, Tabarani, Masnad al–Hamidi, Mustadrak of Hakim, etc. Some writers have counted up to more than two hundred and seventy narratives of this tradition. This makes this tradition irrefutable.

Who, then, are these twelve successors of the holy Prophet?

Unquestionably, Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) is the first successor of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), as is clear from numerous clear traditions, chief among them being the following tradition of Ghadeer e–Khum:

Just a few months before his passing away, the Prophet performed the last Hajj of his life. On his call, thousands of Muslims from near and far joined him for the Hajj. After the Hajj, the Prophet and the Muslims left for Madina. They had not gone very far when, at God's command, the Prophet of Islam stopped them all at a place called Ghadir Khum. Here, he ordered a pedestal to be made of the palanquins from the camels. When this was ready, the Prophet climbed up the pedestal and delivered a sermon. Then he raised Ali ibn Abi Talib high up on his hands and said:

“Those of whom I am the master, so is this Ali their master.”

And then he raised his hands in supplication to God, and said:

“O Allah! Love him who love Ali and be the enemy of the enemy of Ali; help him who helps Ali, and forsake him who forsakes Ali”

And thus, in the presence of thousands of Muslims, the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor.

This tradition is quoted in countless authentic books of Ahl al–Sunna (the Sunnis), some of which are:

- Muslim: Sahih
- Ahmad Hanbal: Masnad
- Nisai: Kitab al–Khasais
- Hakim Nishapuri: Mustadrak
- Hakim Hakani: Shawahid al–Tanzil
- Syuti: Tafsir Durr al–Manthoor
- Raazi: Tafsir Kabir
- Muhammad Abduh: Tafsir al–Minar
- Ibn Asaker Shaafa'i: History of Damascus

- Ibn Talha Shaafa'i: Matalib al-Suool
- Ibn Sabagh Maliki: Fusool al-Muhimma
- Sulaiman Qandozi Hanafi: Yanabi' al-Muwadda
- Ibn Jurair Tabari: Kitab al-Wilaya
- Badruddin Hanafi: Umdat al-Qari fi Sharh al-Bukhari
- Abdulwahhab Bukhari: Tafsir al-Qur'an
- Hafiz Abu Na'eem: Nuzool al-Qur'an
- Humwaini: Faraid al-Simtain

This tradition has been narrated directly from the holy Prophet (PBUH) by at least one hundred and ten companions of the Messenger of God (PBUH). For more details, Allama Amini's book, Al-Ghadeer, may be referred.

The second and the third successors are Imam Hasan (AS) and Imam Hussain (AS), sons of Ali (AS) and Fatima (AS). This is clear from the many statements of the Last Messenger of God (PBUH), one of which is given below:

“Ali is my brother and my inheritor and successor and leader of all believers after me; then Hasan; then Hussain; then nine from the sons of Hussain: the Qur'an is with them and they are with the Qur'an, and will not part till they arrive at the pool (of Kauthar).” (Humwaini)

Concerning the nine successors being the descendants of Hussain, let me quote one more tradition (out of many): In the books of Syed Ali Hamdan, Shaafa'i, Akhtab Khwarizm, etc., it is reported from Salman (may God bless him), that he once saw the Prophet (PBUH) such that Hussain (AS) was sitting on his lap and the Prophet (PBUH) was kissing his eyes and lips saying, “You are sayyed* and son of sayyed. You are Imam and son of Imam. You are hujjat (proof of God) and son of hujjat and father of nine hujjats, the ninth of whom is Qa'im (AS).”

Did the Prophet ever indicate all his twelve successors by names?

Again, the answer is: yes.

A Jew whose name was Na'thal, asked the Prophet (PBUH) some question. During the questions, he asked about the successors of the Prophet (PBUH). The Prophet said: “After me, my successor is Ali ibn Abi Talib and after him my two sons Hasan and Hussain, and then there will be nine Imams from the progeny of Hussain.” Na'thal asked their names.

The Prophet (PBUH) replied: “When Hussain will leave the world, his son Ali will be his successor; when Ali will leave the world, his son Muhammad will be his successor; when Muhammad will leave the world, his son Ja'far will be his successor; when Ja'far will leave the world, his son Moosa will be his successor; when Moosa will leave the world, his son Ali will be his successor; when Ali will leave the world, his son Muhammad will be his successor; when Muhammad will leave the world, his son Ali will be his successor; when Ali will leave the world, his son Hasan will be his successor; when Hasan will leave the world, his son ... Al-Mahdi will be his successor. These are the twelve.” (Qandozi: Yanabi' al-Muwadda)

There should be no doubts now about the names of the twelve successors of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH).

The evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of the fact that the Prophet did appoint a successor before his passing away. In fact, the Prophet had announced the whole line of his successors, till eternity, without a gap in between. From the traditions above, it is quite clear that these successors are twelve in number; no more, no less. These successors are called “Imams”.

These twelve Imams are also referred to as “Ahl al-Bayt” (people of the house) of the Prophet (PBUH). Both the Shia and the Sunni scholars accept this fact. (For a review from the Sunni point of view, please see “Arjah al-Matalib” by Ubaidullah Amritsari).

In view of the last quoted tradition, and numerous such traditions, all Shia traditionists and scholars, and majority of Sunni traditionists and scholars accept the fact that the twelfth Imam is the son of Hasan al-Askari (AS). His name is the name of the Prophet (PBUH), his title is al-Mahdi and he has been born more than a thousand years ago, and is in existence, though hidden from us. He will remain in occultation till the time that God wills, and then, at God's command, he will show himself to the world and conquer it and fill it with justice. Near the end of this stage of our journey, we will come across a selected list of some Sunni references, which confirm the above mentioned facts.

However, some people have their doubts about the last successor. Let us try to clear these doubts.

From all authentic accounts, the twelfth Imam, whose name is the name of the Prophet, and whose title is “Al-Mahdi”, was born in 869 AD. Imam Hasan al-askari (AS) was martyred in 874 AD. This means that the twelfth Imam became the leader of his people at the age of five.

Some people raise an objection, asking: how is it possible for a boy of five to be the leader of his nation?

What is there so unbelievable in this? Doesn't Qur'an give us examples of persons who became leaders in a very young age? Let us look at some such examples:

1. Jesus became prophet and spoke to people when he was a baby in the cradle (Qur'an, Ch. 19, V.29-31).

2. About Yahya, the Holy Qur'an says:

“...And we gave him the appointment (of Prophethood) in his childhood.” (19:12).

3. The Prophet Solomon (Sulayman) was appointed by Allah the heir of his father David (Dawood), and became the king of his community while had not reached the age of puberty.

If Jesus, Yahya and Solomon can become leaders in their childhood, why not al-Mahdi?

The second doubt that some people raise, is about the longevity of the Imam.

Not being able to face the fact of the longevity of the Imam, some people believe that the twelfth successor of the Prophet is not in existence now, but will be born sometime in the future. This assumption has no roots in the traditions of the Prophet, as this would entail a break in the chain of successors.

Let us look at some of the evidence for the existence of the twelfth Imam, from Qur'an, and traditions of the Prophet (PBUH).

In Chapter 13, Verse 7, the Qur'an states:

“(O Muhammad!) You are but a warner, and for every community there exists a guide.”

Who is this guide today?

In Chapter 8, Verse 33, the Qur'an states:

“It is not for Allah to punish them while you are among them.”

Numerous Sunni scholars, including Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his “Musnad”, and Ibn Hajar in his book “Sawaiq-e Muharraqa”, quoted the following tradition of the Prophet in the course of the interpretation of the above verse:

The Messenger of Allah said: “The stars are amnesty for the inhabitants of the heavens, and if the stars go away, the inhabitants of the heavens will be destroyed. And my Ahlul Bayt are amnesty for the inhabitants of the earth, and if my Ahlul Bayt go away, the inhabitants of the earth will be destroyed.”

Ibn Hajar comments that: “Ahlul Bayt are amnesty for the inhabitants of the earth the same as the Messenger of Allah was amnesty for them.” He later writes thus: “... Allah created this world for the sake of the Prophet, and has made its existence conditional to the existence of his Ahlul Bayt for they have certain virtues in common with the Prophet, as Fakhr al-Razi mentioned, and because the Messenger of Allah said of their virtue that: 'O Allah! They are from me and I am from them”, since they are a part of him as their mother, Fatimah, was a part of him. Thus they are also amnesty for the earth.”

The above traditions clearly indicate that the existence of the successors of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) should be uninterrupted.

This means that the twelfth and last successor of the Prophet (PBUH) is already born and is living, though in occultation (hidden from our eyes).

Coming back to the question of longevity, is it such a surprising and novel thing?

No. Evidences abound in human history of long-lived people. (In getting this evidence, we take the help of "Shia Encyclopedia" on "Internet").

1. According to Qur'an (Ch.29, V. 14), Prophet Noah preached for 950 years. His age was then surely more than that.
2. It is accepted by all Muslims that Khidr (AS) is still alive. Qur'an mentions the story of his meeting with Moses (AS), and as such, Khidr is now more than 3000 years old. He is also hidden from the eyes of the people.
3. The Hanafi scholar, Sibti ibn al-Jawzi, in his book, "Tadhkirat al-Khawass al-Ummah" gives the names of 22 people believed by Muslims to have lived to various ages from 3,000 down to 300 years.
4. Even scientifically speaking, there are no objections whatsoever to the extended life span assertion. A group of scientists conducted a series of experiments at the Rockefeller Institute in New York in 1912 on certain parts of plants, animals and humans. These scientists included Dr Alex Carl, Dr Jack Lope, and Dr Warren Lewis and his wife, among others.

Among the experiments conducted was one that directly treated the nerves, muscles, heart, skin and kidneys of human beings. These organs were not connected to a human body. It was concluded by the scientists that these parts or organs can continue to live almost indefinitely as long as they are nourished properly, and as long as they are shielded from external negative interactions like microbes and other obstacles that might inhibit the growth of these organs.

Furthermore, the assertion was made that the cells would continue to grow normally under the above conditions, and that the growth is directly related to the nourishment provided. Again, aging had no effect on these organs, and they grew every year without any signs of deterioration. The scientists concluded that these organs will continue to grow as long as the patience of the scientists themselves is not exhausted, causing them to abandon the nourishment process.

Finally, as we have already accepted the might of God, is it then beyond His powers to keep a person alive as long as He wishes?

The doubters sometimes ask: "What is the significance of a leader who cannot be seen? How can you receive guidance from someone who is hidden from you?"

Let us respond to this question with another question: Is it necessary for one to be seen in order to be of significance, or to receive guidance from? Can you see Allah?

And Allah says that it He who guides people to the right path (Qur'an, Ch. 2, V. 142).

From some of the traditions quoted above, it is quite clear that the existence of the earth itself is dependent upon the presence of the Imam on earth. His being in occultation doesn't change this situation.

The world benefits from the Imam in occultation the same way as it does from the sun even if it is hidden behind clouds.

Now comes another point that needs clarification at this stage: Why occultation? Why is the last successor of the Prophet hidden from the eyes of the populace and when will he show himself?

There are many answers to these questions, and the simplest ones are as follows:

1. The occultation of the Imam is a test for the faith of his followers, the way the occultation of Moses for 40 days (refer to the Holy Qur'an, Chapter 7, Verse 142) was a test for his followers. (In this context, please note that a test from God is actually a test that proves the facts for ourselves as witness, otherwise God has the foreknowledge of everything).

2. The occultation of the Imam was to safeguard them from the evils of the oppressors of the world. Imam al-Mahdi (AS) will come as soon as people are ready for him. People throughout the history were never ready. They killed Prophets and Imams, one after the other. However, Allah continued to send prophets till He finally sent Muhammad (PBUH), who brought the last message at the time when the evolution of the mind of human being reached its maturity, and thus Allah provided them with the most complete and final religion.

After that there was no need to send a new message. Thus He sent protectors and guides (Imams) who preserved and explained the message to the people. But the oppressors among the people continued killing the Imams. The situation will continue till such time when people realize that they need a divinely appointed Imam who would rule over them. When this happens universally, and when people become frustrated and disappointed from all types of "isms", and raise their hands for help, then people would be ready for him.

Imam al-Mahdi (AS) will come when all types of ideologies are tested and they fail. At that time people will realise that they do not have any true solutions for their problems, and they will accept the solution of Imam al-Mahdi (AS).

As stated earlier, majority of Sunni scholars and traditionists, in view of numerous traditions of the Prophet, believe in al-Mahdi in exactly the same way as the Shias do. If we were to list all these traditionists, the list would be extremely long. We will just select five of them:

- Sulayman al-Qandozi al-Hanafi, in his book, "Yanabi' al-Mawaddah".

- Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Yusuf Ganji, al-Shaafa'i, in "Al-Byan fi Akhbar Sahib al-Zaman" and "Kifayah al-Talib".
- Shaikh Nooruddin Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Sabbagh al-Maliki, in "Al-Fusool al- Muhimmah".
- Ibn Arabi (Muhyudden) al-Hanbali, in his book "Al-Futoohat al-Makkiah".
- Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, in his book "Tadhkirat al-Khawas".

Sunnis have four schools of jurisprudence – Maliki, Hanafi, Shaafa'i, Hanbali – named after their four leaders, Malik, Abu Hanifa, Shaafa'i and Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Please note that all the four Sunni schools have been represented in the above citations. This indicates that the belief in al-Mahdi (AS) is universal among Muslims.

Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (cited above) writes about the twelfth Imam as follows:

"His (Imam al-Mahdi's) title is Abu Abdullah and Abul Qasim. He is the last successor of the Prophet (PBUH). He is the last Imam of the House (Ahlul-Bayt). He is the authoritative proof of God (al-Hujjah). He is the master of time (Sahib al-Zaman). He is the expected one (al-Muntadhar).

Excursion 1

Yunus bin Yaqub reports:

I was with Abu Abd Allah (Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, may God bless him, the sixth successor of the Prophet PBUH) when a Syrian came up to him. He said, "I am a scholar of theology, jurisprudence, and the laws of inheritance. I have come to dispute with your followers."

"Is your theology from the Apostle of God (PBUH), or from yourself? Abu Abd Allah (AS) asked.

"Partly from the Apostle of God (PBUH) and partly from myself," replied (the other man).

"Then are you a partner of the Apostle of God (PBUH)?" enquired Abu Abd Allah.

"No," he answered.

"Have you heard inspiration (direct) from God?"

"No," he replied.

"Is obedience to you required as is obedience to the Apostle of God (PBUH)?"

"No," was the answer.

Abu Abd Allah (AS) turned to me and said, "Yunus bin Yaqub, this man has contradicted himself before

he has begun (the real business) of discussing.” Then he said, “Yunus, if you were good at theology, you should speak to him.”

How sad it was, for I said to him, “My I lay down my life for you, I have heard you forbid (taking part in) theology and say: Woe to the theologians who say that this follows and that this does not follow; that this is entailed and that this is not entailed; that this we accept as rational and this we do not accept as rational.”

“I only said,” Abu Abd Allah (AS) remarked, “Woe to them, if they abandon what I say and adopt their own wishes.” Then he told me, “Go out to the door and look for any of the theologians you can see, and bring them in.”

I went out and found Humran bin A'een who was good at theology and Muhammad bin al-Nu'man al-Ahwal (also known as Momin Taaq), who was a theologian, and Hisham bin Salim and Qays bin al-Masir, both theologians. I brought them in to him. After he had settled us in the assembly – we were in the tent of Abu Abd Allah at the top of a mountain on the edge of the sanctuary (of Makkah) and that was (a few) days before the days of the pilgrimage – Abu Abd Allah (AS) put his head out of the tent. There appeared at that moment a camel dashing along. He cried out, “Hisham, by the Lord of the Ka'ba!”

We thought that it was Hisham, one of the sons of Aqil, who loved him greatly, but behold, it was Hisham bin al-Hakam who came. His face still showed only the first traces of beard. All of us there were older than him. Abu Abd Allah (AS) made room for him and said, “(Here is) one who helps us with his heart, his tongue and his hand.”

He told Humran, “Debate with the man” – meaning the Syrian. Humran debated with him and overcame him. Then (the Imam) said, “O my Taaq, debate with him,” so Muhammad bin al-Nu'man debated with him and overcame him. Next he said, “Hisham bin Salim, debate with him.” So they both argued together. Abu Abd Allah (AS) began to smile at their discussion as the Syrian sought to escape. He told the Syrian, “Debate with this lad,” – meaning Hisham bin al-Hakam.

“Yes,” replied the Syrian and said, “lad, ask me about the Imamate of this man” – meaning Abu Abd Allah (AS).

Hisham trembled with anger but then he said, “Fellow, does your Lord look after His creatures or do they look after themselves?”

“Indeed,” replied the Syrian, “my Lord looks after His creatures.”

“What does He do to look after their religion for them?”

“He gives them duties and provides them with proof (hujja) and evidence for the things which He has required of them. He removes any weaknesses they might have about that.”

“What is the evidence which He has established for them?” Hisham asked him.

“It is the Apostle of God (PBUH),” the Syrian answered.

“What after the Apostle of God?” enquired Hisham.

“The Book and the sunna.”

“Do the Book and the sunna benefit us today in our differences so that the differences are removed from us and we are able to agree?” asked Hisham.

“Yes,” replied the Syrian.

“Then do we differ from you,” retorted Hisham, “so that you have come to us from Syria to dispute with us? You claim that personal judgement is the method of religion while you acknowledge that personal judgement does not bring people who differ together in one doctrine.”

The Syrian was silent as if he was thinking. So Abu Abd Allah (AS) asked him, “Why aren't you debating?”

“If I say: We do not differ,” he answered, “I would be (merely) being obstinate. If I say: the Book and the sunna remove our differences, I would be wrong because the two bear (different) interpretations. However, I could use the same argument against him.”

“Ask him, then,” Abu Abd Allah (AS) told him. “You will find him competent.”

So the Syrian asked Hisham, “Who looks after His creatures, their Lord or themselves?”

“Indeed their Lord looks after them,” replied Hisham.

“Does He establish for them someone who will harmonise their doctrine, remove their differences and explain the true from the false to them?” demanded the Syrian.

“Yes,” replied Hisham.

“Who is that?” asked the Syrian.

“At the beginning of the shari'a (the religious doctrine), it was the Apostle of God but after the Prophet (PBUH), it was someone else.”

“Who is it other than the Prophet (PBUH), who takes his place in being His (i.e. God's) proof?” the Syrian asked.

“Now or before?” Hisham asked.

“At the present time,” answered the Syrian.

“This man who is sitting here,” said Hisham – meaning Abu Abd Allah. “He is the one to whom you traveled; he is the one who tells us about heaven and is the inheritor from father and grandfather.”

“How would I have knowledge of that?” asked the Syrian.

“Ask him about anything which occurs to you,” Hisham told him.

“You have stopped (any) excuse of mine but I do have a question,” the Syrian declared.

“I will dispense with your questioning,” Abu Abd Allah (AS) told him. “I will tell you about your travel and your journey. You left on such and such a day. Your road was such and such. You passed so and so and such and such (a man) passed you.”

Every time he told him anything about his affair, the Syrian would say, “True, by God.” Then the Syrian said to him, “At this moment I have submitted (aslamtu) to God.”

“Rather at this moment you have faith (amanta) in God,” said Abu Abd Allah (AS). Islam (submission to God) is before Eeman (faith in God). On the basis of the former they arrange inheritance and marriage; on the basis of faith men are rewarded.”

“True,” replied the Syrian, “at this moment I testify that there is no god but God, that Muhammad is the Apostle of God (PBUH), and that you are the (present) trustee (wasi of God) among the trustees (appointed by God).”

[Later, Imam commented on the individual styles of debate of each of his followers.]

To Hisham bin al-Hakam, he said, “Hisham, you are hardly likely to fall, for you tuck in your legs (like a bird); when you are about to fall, you fly. Therefore a person like you should debate with the people. Guard against slipping and intercession will be behind you.” (Al-Irshad by Sheikh Mufeed)

Excursion 2

Hisham bin Hakam was a close companion of the sixth and the seventh Imam and was noted for his scholarly debates and discourses.

Yunus bin Yaqub reports that one day, people were gathered around the sixth Imam, noted among them being Humran bin A'een, Momin Taaq (Muhammad bin Ali bin Nu'man), Hisham bin Salem, Hisham bin Hakam, etc.

Imam turned to Hisham bin Hakam and said, “What did you say to Amr bin Ubaid? What questions did you ask?”

Hisham said, "I feel embarrassed talking about that before you. I am tongue-tied."

"Why should you feel embarrassed when I, myself, am commanding you? Relate the incident."

Hisham began, "I had heard that Amr bin Ubaid discourses on scholarly problems in the mosque of Basra. It was Friday when I reached Basra and went to the mosque. I saw Amr bin Ubaid surrounded by a crowd. I made my way through the crowd, sat down near Amr and said, 'O man of knowledge and wisdom, I am a stranger here and have come from far. Will you permit me to ask you some questions?' 'Go ahead,' said Amr."

The discourse then went this way:

Hisham: Do you have eyes?

Amr: Young man! What kind of a question is that? Ask something proper.

Hisham: I will ask these kind of questions only.

Amr: Alright! Ask and I will answer, though your question is foolish.

Hisham: Do you have eyes?

Amr: Yes.

Hisham: Of what use are these?

Amr: They see colours and shapes.

Hisham: Have you nose?

Amr: Yes.

Hisham: What is it used for?

Amr: To smell.

Hisham: Have you mouth?

Amr: Yes.

Hisham: What do you use it for?

Amr: To taste food.

Hisham: Have you mind and intellect?

Amr: Yes.

Hisham: Of what use is it?

Amr: Everything that I sense through my organs (eyes, nose, mouth, etc.), I cognize with my mind and intellect.

Hisham: Don't your organs make you independent of your intellect?

Amr: No.

Hisham: Why, when all your organs are intact?

Amr: When the organs face a doubt, they refer to the intellect to remove the doubt and confirm the truth.

Hisham: This means that God has given us intellect to remove the doubts of our senses and to inform them of the truth.

Amr: Yes, of course.

Hisham: So we are dependent on the intellect in all circumstances.

Amr: Yes.

Hisham: God has not left our organs and senses without an Imam who can clarify their doubts, but the same God has left his creatures amidst their doubts and did not ordain any Imam for them who could remove their doubts and confirm the truth?

Amr remained silent for some time, then asked Hisham, "Where are you from?"

"I am from Kufa," said Hisham.

"Perhaps you are Hisham?"

Then he seated Hisham in his place and as long as Hisham remained there, he refused to answer the questions of all the people gathered around him. After sometime Hisham came away.

After Hisham had related this incident to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (AS), Imam smiled and said, "Who taught you this argument?"

"No one, O son of the Prophet!" said Hisham. "It just came to me impromptu."

Imam said, "By God! This argument is stated in the epistles of Abraham and Moses." (Rijal Kishi)

Excursion 3:

Remember the three excursions we took during the first stage of our journey? We now take this excursion to discover the identity of the wise man whom we met during those excursions. We discover that the referred wise man was Jafar al-Sadiq (702–765 AD), the sixth successor of the Muhammad (PBUH) and the sixth Imam of Shias. The events disclosed during those excursions are from the book “Bihar al-Anwar” by Majlisi, as quoted in the book “God and His Attributes” by Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari.

Fifth Stage

We retrace our steps to the second stage of our journey, the Justice of God. From this point, we go down to the final stage of our journey.

God is Just. The Justice of God is complete and faultless. This faultless Justice entails that our creation has a purpose (as stated earlier). Guides have been sent to show us the way of fulfilling our purpose, by recognizing the Creator and shaping our lives as per His commands.

The Justice of God also entails that all the creations would be judged one day, and judged in the fairest way, about how far a creation has fulfilled the purpose of his creation. The judgement would end in allotment of reward or punishment, based on the intents and deeds of the creatures.

Keeping the above in mind, let us now ponder over the chains of cause and effect.

No person is an island. The thoughts that I think, or the actions that I perform, do not come totally from within me, independent of all external influences. No! The external influences are there. My parents, my surroundings, my peers, the books I have read, each and everyone of these things – and more – have influenced the way I think and the way I act. These sources of influence have in turn been influenced by other factors. And so on... And when you take this chain in the other direction, my thoughts and actions have influenced, and will probably influence several other persons who have come in contact with me.

Where does all this lead?

It leads to the fact that even if a single act of mine is to be judged with complete accuracy, it has to be judged in the background of the ever-expanding and intricate network of causes and effects which reach in both temporal directions: past and future. A gathering of this network would eventually encompass the whole of humanity, from beginning to end. Unless this is done, the judgement passed on my actions would not be complete. And God's justice is complete.

And all this irrefutably indicates that there should exist a Judgement Day – a Judgement Day when the dead are raised and all of the God's creations are gathered together and every thread of the cause and effect network surrounding them is traced all along its length, and judgement is passed accordingly.

Numerous verses of Qur'an, and traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) speak about this Judgement Day.

Excursion:

The Justice of God, and the existence of the Judgement Day, entail the existence of free will among His creatures.

This is further confirmed by several Qur'anic verses, of which some are quoted below:

- ***Whoever does the smallest good deed shall experience the result of it, and whoever does the smallest evil deed shall experience the result of it. (99:7-8)***
- ***Certainly you are accountable for what you do. (16:93)***
- ***God will never change the destiny of a society until its people change that society. (13:11)***
- ***God never changes the state of a people until they themselves change their own situation. (8:53)***

Debriefing

We now come to the end of our rational journey through theology, which has taken us to five territories: Unity of God, Justice of God, Prophethood, Successorship (Imamate), and Judgement Day. I hope that this journey had proved to be interesting, thought-stimulating and intellectually satisfying.

As stated in the very beginning, this journey was designed to be short one. Now that you are a seasoned traveler, and would like to go exploring deeper into the territory of theology, I would like to recommend the following books as preliminary guides (all these books are available in English):

1. "Nahjul Balagha" (a compilation of the sermons of Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib AS).
2. "Fundamentals of Islam", by Haji Mirza Mehdi Pooya. (This is the book from which we derived our discussion on chain of cause and effect, in the first stage of our journey).
3. "God and His Attributes", by Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari.
4. "Some Discourses on Imam al-Mahdi" by Ayatullah Baqer al-Sadr.
5. "Then I Was Guided", by Dr Muhammad Tijani.
6. "The Voice of Human Justice", by George Jordac.

1. AS stands for Alaihis-Salam, meaning "May God bless him."

Topic Tags:

Theology [4]

Category:

Philosophy [5]

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