



**An Inquiry Concerning
Imam Al-Mahdi**

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INTRODUCTION

Not only is al-Mahdi (the Guided One) a materialization of an Islamic belief of a spiritual nature, but a model to a particular goal which humanity has been striving to achieve, as well as a form to a natural inspiration, through which people came to realize - in spite of their different faith and means of access to the unseen - that there is an appointed day on earth, when the Divine messages will be fulfilled in all their great significance and final aim, when the exhausting march which humanity took in the course of history will lead to stability and security, after a long struggle.

However, the awareness of this expected future is not limited to those who believe in the unseen from a religious angle, but it has extended to others and has even been reflected in those ideologies which strongly denied the existence of the unseen and any of its aspects, such as dialectical materialism, that interpreted history in terms of contradictions, but at last admitted the fact that there was an appointed time in which these contradictions would be resolved when peace and harmony would prevail on earth.

Thus we find that the psychological experience of this awareness, which humanity has undertaken in the course of time, is one of the widest and most commonly held among people.

So, if religion strengthens this awareness by reaffirming that at the end of matter, the earth will be filled with justice after having been filled with injustice and tyranny, it is in reality providing it with its objective value and turning it into a decisive belief in human destiny, which is not only a source of consolation but of generosity and strength.

A source of generosity, since belief in al-Mahdi is in reality belief in the protest against all forms of oppression and tyranny although they still prevail in the world.

It is also a source of strength and a refutation that cannot dwindle, since it is a ray of light that is continually struggling against despair within people and keeping the flame of hope ablaze within their hearts in spite of the gloomy conditions and the might of oppression under which they live, because the appointed day confirms the fact that justice can challenge a world filled with transgression and tyranny, that it can shake its foundations, and rebuild it anew; that oppression is only an unnatural condition, regardless of its power and extent in the different corners of the world. that it will eventually be defeated; that the ultimate defeat of oppression while on the summit of its glory, brings great hope before every persecuted individual and every oppressed nation, in tipping the balance and rebuilding the world.

If the idea of al-Mahdi is older and wider than Islam, the detailed outlines, which the latter has fixed for it, have proved more satisfactory to all those ambitions that have been seeking its realization since the dawn of history as well as a more generous gift and a stronger prediction for the feelings of those who have been persecuted and oppressed in the course of history. This is because Islam has turned the idea from the unseen into reality, and from an aspiration for a saviour the world would produce in the distant and unknown future into the conviction that he actually exists looking forward with other people to that day and the right circumstances that would make it possible for him to assume his great role.

Thus, al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) is no longer an idea waiting to be materialized nor a prophecy that needs to be substantiated, but a living reality and a particular person, living among us in flesh and blood, who is sharing our hopes, suffering, sorrows and joys, actually witnessing all the sufferings, sadness and transgression that exist on the surface of the earth, who is affected with all this from near or far, who is waiting for the appropriate moment when he can stretch his hands to every oppressed and needy person and eradicate the tyrants.

However, it has been decreed that this expected leader is not to reveal anything concerning his life or person to other people, although he is living amongst them, waiting for the appointed moment.

It is obvious that thinking in terms of these Islamic indications narrows the gap of the unseen between the oppressed people and the expected saviour and reduces the psychological distance between him and them, no matter how long the expectation may last.

So, when we are supposed, as far as we are concerned, to consider the idea of al-Mahdi as actually designating a particular living person who is observing events like we are, it is to inspire us with the fact that the idea of the unconditional protest against all sorts of transgression and tyranny, which al-Mahdi stands for, has already materialized in the expected dissident leader who will emerge, paying no homage to the transgressors, as it has been mentioned in the hadith (tradition), and that by believing in him we are in reality believing in this unyielding and living protest and participating in it.

Indeed lots of ahadith (traditions) are constantly urging those who believe in al-Mahdi to expect release from suffering and be prepared for his coming, which is a consolidation of that spiritual bond and emotional tie between them and the dissident leader and every value he stands for both of which could not have existed had he not actually materialized as a contemporary living person.

Thus we come to realize that this materialization has given a new impetus to the idea and made it a source of strength and generosity of a higher degree in terms of what any dissident

individual finds of comfort consolation and relief from the pains that he has to suffer under tyranny and deprivation, when he comes to feel that his Imam and leader shares them with him, since the latter is a contemporary person and not an idea to be realized in the future.

However, the above mentioned materialization has led many people, who found it hard to believe or assume, to take negative attitudes even regarding the idea of al-Mahdi.

Since they all wonder if the idea of al-Mahdi actually designates a living person who has coexisted with all these consecutive generations for more than ten centuries, who will continue to do so until the time comes for him to emerge on the surface, how can such a human being live all this long and yet be immune from the laws of nature which compel any person to pass by the phase of old age and decrepitude and from there to his death. Is not such a matter impossible from an existential point of view?

Also, why should Allah show all this desire for this particular person - for whom the laws of nature would be obstructed - and endeavours to prolong his life and preserve him for the appointed day. Has humanity become barren from yielding capable leaders? Why should not that day come when a leader will be born at its dawn and grow up like anyone else and gradually assume his role until the earth be filled with justice after having been filled with injustice and transgression?

They also wonder if al-Mahdi is the name of a particular person, who is the son of the eleventh Imam of the family of the Prophet (Ahlu'l-bayt - peace and blessing of Allah be upon them), born in the year 256 A.H. whose father died in the year 260 A.H. This means that he was very young when his father died, not exceeding the age of five, which is too early for him to have completed his religious and intellectual education at the hands of his father. Therefore how and by what means could he personally be prepared to assume that great role from religious, intellectual and scientific angles.

Moreover, if the leader is ready why should he wait all these hundreds of years? Is not what the world has witnessed of afflictions and social disasters enough to justify his appearance on its surface for the establishing of justice on earth?

They also wonder how can we believe in his existence even if we were to assume that this could be possible? Can anybody admit the validity of a hypothesis of this kind when it is not actually supported by any conclusive legal or scientific evidence? Should some narratives (ahadith) related to the Prophet (blessing and peace of Allah be upon him and his progeny), of which we doubt the authenticity be enough for us to approve such a hypothesis?

As far as the role that this individual is going to play on the appointed day is concerned they

wonder how a single person can assume this great decisive role in the world, while we know that however great an individual is, he cannot create history nor lead it into a new phase; whereas the seeds of any historical movement ripen under certain objective circumstances and their coming together. and the sublimity of the individual is the factor which selects him to shape these objective circumstances and provide the required solutions?

They also wonder how we can imagine what this individual would achieve of enormous change and decisive victory for justice and its message against the realities of injustice, oppression and tyranny in spite of what they have of power and influence and what they possess of means of destruction as well as what they have achieved of high standards in scientific, political, social and military capabilities.

Questions in this connection recur often in one form or another, however the true motives behind them are not only intellectual, since they have also a psychological source expressed in terms of the fear that dominates the world and the meagerness of all opportunity of change from the roots. Therefore, doubts deepen and questions increase, the more one becomes aware of the harsh reality that has prevailed in the world in the course of time. Thus failure, meagerness and the weakness that the human being is subject to lead him to feel under a psychological pressure whenever he attempts to imagine the tremendous change of the world which would relieve it of its contradictions and historical oppression and would provide it with a new structure based on justice and truth. This pressure makes the individual doubt the whole concept of change and leads him to refuse it for one reason or another.

As far as we are concerned, we are going to deal with all these questions in sequence answering each one briefly due to the limits provided by these pages.

HOW WAS THIS LONG LIFE GRANTED TO AL-MAHDI

In other words, is it possible for a man to live for many centuries, as is the case with the Expected Leader, for the change of the world, whose age must be actually one thousand one hundred and forty years, or fourteen times the average age of an ordinary person who would pass through the phases of life from childhood to old age normally.

The word possibility here has one of the three following meanings, namely. Practical possibility, scientific possibility and philosophical or logical possibility.

I mean by practical possibility that a task is feasible in a manner that enables me, you or a third person to perform it, such as taking a journey across the ocean, reaching the depth of the sea or going to the moon, all of which are practically possible since they have actually been performed by people in one way or another. By scientific possibility I mean that there are some tasks that neither I nor you nor a third person can practically perform with the means that are accessible to present civilization. However there is nothing in the alterable trends of science which can indicate a justification for the rejection of the possibility of these tasks and their occurrence conforming to certain special circumstances and means. For example, there is nothing in science that could deny the possibility of travelling to Venus, because all its existing trends indicate the possibility of such a task, although that is still not possible for me or you. Since the difference between going to the moon and travelling to Venus is only one of degree. The latter representing a stage of overcoming some relative difficulties stemming from the fact that the distance is longer. From this we deduce that it is scientifically possible to travel to Venus even if it is still not feasible from a practical angle. Contrary to that is the idea of travelling to the sun in distant space since it is scientifically impossible, meaning that science would never entertain the possibility of this task, for one cannot assume scientifically or empirically the possibility of inventing that preventive armour that could protect the body against the heat of the sun which is like an enormous kiln constantly burning with a degree impossible to imagine.

By logical or philosophical possibility I mean that there is nothing in the intellect, conforming to what it knows of previous laws - (preceding the experiment) - that could justify the rejection of a task nor decide that it could not occur. Say, for example, the grouping of three oranges into two equal parts, this is logically impossible, since the intellect knows - before carrying out such an experiment - that three is an odd number, thus it is impossible to divide it into two equal parts, first it would turn into an even number, which would be a contradiction, which is impossible in logic. But if a man were to be exposed to fire, or if he were to go to the sun without burning, that would not be impossible from a logical point of view, since there is no contradiction in the assumption that heat does not penetrate into a body of lower temperature from one of higher temperature.

That would only run contrary to the experiment which proved that heat actually penetrates into a body of lower temperature from one of higher temperature until both bodies get an equal temperature.

Therefore, we come to realize that logical possibility has a wider scope than scientific possibility and that the latter is wider than practical possibility. There is no doubt about the logical possibility of the prolongation of human life for some thousands of years, because that is not impossible from an abstract intellectual point of view, also there is no contradiction in an assumption of this sort, since life as it is understood does not fathom sudden death and no one can dispute this fact.

Also, there is no doubt or controversy that this prolonged life is not possible from the practical

aspect, as is the case in going down to the depths of the ocean or ascending to the moon. That is because science with what it owns of modern means and instruments, that were made available by concomitant human experiments, cannot prolong human life for hundreds of years, this is why we find that even those among people who are more eager about life and more able to utilize scientific possibilities can only live to the extent of what is usual.

As far as Scientific possibility is concerned, there is nothing in science, nowadays which could justify the denial of that fact from a theoretical point of view. This inquiry is in reality related to the nature of the physiological interpretation of the phenomenon of old -age and decrepitude among people. Does this phenomenon indicate a natural law that compels the tissues of the human body and its cells to harden gradually and become less efficient in the performance of their task once they have reached the summit of their growth, until they die at a particular moment, even if we were to isolate them from the influence of some external failure? Or is this hardening of the bodily tissues and cells and the lack of efficiency in the performance of their physiological tasks a result of their struggle against certain external factors, such as microbes or poison that penetrate the body from an excess in food or from the heavy work that the person might perform or any other factor. Now this is the question that science has to find an answer to, yet many answers present themselves on a scientific level in this respect.

If we are to consider the scientific point of view that tends to interpret old-age and the weakness that goes with it, as a result of reactions against some external factors, it means that it is theoretically possible, once we have isolated the tissues that compose the body from these influences, to prolong life to the extent of surpassing the phenomenon of old-age and even overcoming it.

On the other hand, if we consider the other point of view which sees old-age as a natural process with regards to the living tissues and cells, it will mean that they bear within themselves the seed of their own ultimate death, once the phase of old-age has been completed. I say: If we take this point of view into consideration it should not mean that there is no flexibility in this natural law, rather the assumption of its existence shows that it is in fact flexible, Since we find in our everyday life, in addition to what has been found by scientists through the experiments that they carry out in their laboratories, that old - age as a physiological phenomenon has no fixed time, since a man can be very old and yet possess tender limbs, with no trace of old- age appearing on him as has been mentioned by some doctors. Moreover some scientists take advantage of this flexibility and prolong the life of some animals by a hundred times their natural age, by creating certain circumstances and factors that delay the process. of old-age.

Thus it has been proved scientifically that this process can be postponed, by creating specific circumstances and factors, even if this experiment has not been carried out by science on a particular complicated creature such as the human being, owing to the difference in the difficulty

of carrying it out on the human being and other organisms.

This means that, from a theoretical point of view, science, with all its alterable orientations, has never had any objection to the prolongation of human life, whether old-age has been interpreted as the product of a struggle and close contact with some external influences, or as a result of a natural process of the cells and tissues that leads them towards their death. Thus we deduce that the prolongation of human life and its survival over many centuries is possible logically as well as scientifically but it is still impossible from a practical angle, and that nevertheless scientific progress has a long way to go before realizing this possibility.

In light of what has been discussed we shall deal with the age of al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) and what has been surrounding it of wonder and surprise.

Thus we notice that since the possibility of this prolonged life has been confirmed both logically and scientifically, science is in the process of gradually transforming the theoretical possibility into a practical one. There is no room left for wonder except the remoteness of the probability that al-Mahdi might have preceded science in this transformation, before that the latter could have, in its evolutionary course, reached the standard of actual capacity for such a transformation, which would make him equal to that person who had preceded science in discovering the cure for cancer.

The question now is - How could Islam which determined the age of the Expected Leader - have preceded science in the field of this transformation?

The answer is that this is not the only field in which Islam preceded science. Has the Islamic shari'ah (revealed law) as a whole not come before science and the evolution of human thought by many centuries? Did it not promulgate certain symbols that submitted plans to be put into practice, which man could achieve only after hundreds of years of his independent activity? Did it not formulate certain regulations perfect in wisdom, the secrets of which were realized by man only after a certain length of time? Did the Divine message not reveal mysteries about the universe, that could never have occurred to people's minds, which science came later to confirm and support?

So, if we are convinced by these facts why then should we regard as too much that the sender of this message - the Exalted - anticipates science in determining the age of al-Mahdi?

Here I mentioned only those aspects of precedence that we can notice in a direct manner, we can also include the aspects of precedence mentioned in the Divine message, for example, when it informs us about the night journey which the Prophet undertook from al-Haram Mosque to al-Aqsa Mosque. If we are to understand this journey within the frame of natural laws, we will find that it shows that these laws were utilized in a way that science could achieve only after hundreds of years.

Therefore, the same Divine knowledge which enabled the Messenger (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) to undertake this fast motion before science could achieve it, has also enabled his designated successors to have a prolonged life before science could realize such a project. Certainly, this prolonged age that Allah, the Exalted, has bestowed on the Expected Saviour may seem rather strange, if it is considered within the limits of the everyday in people's lives and what has been achieved by the experiments of scientists. But is the decisive and transformative role which has been prepared for this Saviour not strange within the limits of the ordinary in people's lives and what they have experienced of historical evolution? Has he not been entrusted with the task of changing the world and rebuilding its civilization on the basis of justice and truth? Why should we disapprove if the preparation of this great role is characterized by strange and unusual aspects, such as the prolongation of the Expected Leader's age? For this remoteness of those aspects and their unusual aspects, however great they are, cannot surpass the remoteness of the great role that has to be achieved on the appointed day? Therefore, if we approve the validity of that unique role from a historical angle in spite of the fact that there has never been in the history of humanity a role similar to it, why should not we also approve that prolonged age which is still unique in our ordinary life?

I wonder if it is a coincidence that only two individuals should carry out the task of emptying human civilization of its corrupt elements and rebuilding it, which means that they must have been of an excessive age many times superior to our ordinary lives. The first is Nuh (Noah) who had assumed his role in the humanity's past. The Qur'an mentioned that he had lived among his people for nine hundred and fifty years. His role was to reconstruct the world after the Great Flood.

The other one is al-Mahdi, who is to assume his role in the future, who has lived among his people until now for more than a thousand years. It has been ordained that he will reconstruct the world on the appointed day. Why then should we accept Noah, who must have reached a thousand years at least, and yet reject al-Mahdi?

THE MIRACLE AND THE LONG LIFE

Up to now we have seen that the prolongation of life is scientifically possible. But let us suppose that it is not, that the process of old-age and decrepitude is quite rigid, that it cannot either now or in the long run overcome nor alter its conditions or circumstances - what will this mean? It will mean that the prolongation of human life - as is the case of Noah, or al-Mahdi - runs contrary to the natural laws which science confirmed thanks to modern instruments of experimentation. Thus this

condition becomes a miracle that has hindered the applicability of a natural law under a certain circumstances, in order to preserve the life of a particular individual whose role is to cherish the Divine message.

Yet this is not the only miracle of its kind, nor is it remote from a Muslim's faith, which derives from the Qur'an and the sunnah. Moreover the process of old-age is no more rigid than is the process of the passage of heat from a body of higher temperature to another of lower temperature until both of them become equal. This had occurred in the case of Ibrahim (peace be upon him) when the only way to preserve his life was by hindering that process, when it was said to the fire in which he was thrown:

We said, "O fire be cool on Ibrahim and keep him safe." (Qur'an, 21:69)

So, he emerged from it safe and unharmed. There are also other cases where natural laws were hindered to protect some of the prophets or Proofs of Allah on earth. When the sea was split for Musa (Moses), when the Romans were misled in thinking they had caught 'Isa (Jesus) or when Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) left his house, while it was surrounded by the troops of Quraysh who were waiting for hours to attack him but Allah, the Exalted, hid him from their eyes while he was walking in their midst. All of these cases show a hindrance of the laws of nature to protect an individual, whom the Divine wisdom wished to preserve. Therefore, why not include here the process of old-age and decrepitude?

From this we can deduce a general notion, which is that whenever the preservation of the Prophet's life (the Proof of Allah on earth) depends on the hindrance of a natural law, and the prolongation of his life comes to be necessary for the performance of his task, Divine care then intervenes by delaying the process so that the task of that individual can be accomplished. On the other hand, once the Divine mission of that individual has been fulfilled he either dies naturally or as a martyr depending on what is determined by natural laws.

Thus we find ourselves confronted with the present question in connection with this general notion: How can the process be obstructed? How can the necessary correlation that exists between natural phenomena, be sundered? Does it not contradict science, which discovered the existence of that natural law or process and defined that necessary correlation on experimental and deductive bases?

The answer is that science has already solved the problem by giving up the idea of necessity as far as natural laws are concerned. To clarify this we can say that science discovers natural laws through systematic observations and experiments. For example, when the occurrence of a natural phenomenon is followed another one, we deduce from this a natural law which is: that whenever the first phenomenon comes into existence it is automatically followed by another phenomenon.

However, science does not propose a necessary correlation between the two phenomena stemming from their nature, since necessity is an invisible condition that experimentation and the instruments of scientific and inductive inquiry cannot demonstrate. Therefore, the logic of modern science emphasizes that natural law - as it is defined by science - does not indicate a necessary correlation, but an uninterrupted connection, between two phenomena. But when the miracle occurs and separates one from the other, it does not mean that their correlation was sundered.

The truth of the matter is that the miracle, in its religious sense, has become, in the light of modern scientific logic, more understandable than before, under the classical view of causal correlation. This old view assumed that every two phenomena, in which one is followed automatically by the other must have a necessary correlation, which means that it is impossible to separate one from the other. However, this correlation has been transformed thanks to modern scientific logic into a law of correlation or of consecutive succession between two phenomena without the hypothesis of invisible necessity.

Thereby the miracle becomes an exceptional condition with regard to this connective succession without running against a necessity or leading to an impossibility.

So, in the light of the logical foundation of induction we agree with the modern point of view which says that induction does not demonstrate the existence of a necessary correlation between two phenomena. We find that it shows that there is a common interpretation for the consecutive connection between the two. Since this common interpretation can be formed on the basis of the assumption of subjective necessity, it can also be formed on the assumption of a wisdom that made the Creator of the universe to continuously combine some particular phenomena with others. The same wisdom sometimes calls for exception; thus a miracle occurs.

WHY ALL THIS DESIRE TO PROLONG HIS

Now we should deal with the second question which is: Why should Allah, the Exalted, show all this desire for this person in particular? Why should the natural laws be hindered just to prolong his life? Why should the leadership of the appointed day not be left to a person born in the future, who will appear then and assume his expected role?

In other words:

What is the use of this long absence and what is the motive behind it? Indeed many people ask these questions, yet at the same time none of them is prepared to accept the Divine answer for them. However we believe that the twelve Imams form a unique group of individuals, none of whom could be substituted. But these people require a social interpretation of the situation, in the light of tangible realities, for the great operation of change and the understandable requirements for the appointed day. On these bases, we will temporarily disregard the characteristics that we believe should be fulfilled in the infallible Imams and ask the following questions:

As far as the expected operation of change, of the appointed day, is concerned and as far as it is understandable in the light of the norms and the experiences of life, can we consider the prolonged age of its preserved leader as one of the factors for its success? And of his ability to lead it in a better way?

We can give an affirmative answer to this question because of many reasons among which are the following:

First, that the great operation of change requires from its leader a unique psychological attitude, filled with a sense of success and a sense of the insignificance of the mighty existence which he has been prepared to struggle against and transform into a new civilized world.

Thus the more the leader's heart is filled with the triviality of the civilization he is fighting, and the clearer is his sense that it is no more than a speck of dust on the long path of human civilization, the more he is ready from a psychological angle, to oppose, resist and persevere in his efforts against it until victory is achieved.

It is clear, therefore, that the scope required from this psychological attitude ought to be proportionate to the size of change to be brought about and what needs to be rooted out of civilization and existence. So, whenever the opposition is to a mightier existence and a loftier and deeply rooted civilization, the greater is the thrust required from this psychological attitude.

Since the message of the appointed day is to change, in a comprehensive way, a world filled with injustice and tyranny, it is therefore natural that it is looking for an individual whose psychological attitude is superior to that whole world; a person whose age exceeds those who were born in that world and who were brought up in the shade of its civilization which he is to destroy and replace with one based on justice and truth.

For whoever is brought up in a deeply-rooted civilization, that dominates the world with its values and modes of thinking, would be overwhelmed by it, since he would have been born while it had been in existence, and opened his eyes just to see its different aspects, and would have been brought up under its power and influence.

Unlike that is a person who has deeply penetrated history, who has come to life long before that civilization which completes the cycle of the story of humanity before the appointed day saw the light. He sees it as little seeds, hardly visible, then gradually growing and taking roots within human societies, waiting for the right moment to blossom and appear. Then he witnesses it, as it starts to grow and advance, sometimes relapsing, sometimes meeting with success, then when it begins to prosper and become gigantic, gradually dominating the destinies of the world, such a man who has lived through all these stages with sagacity and caution, watching this giant - (against which he has to struggle) under that long historical perspective which he has lived in reality, and not just read about in books of history, such an individual would consider it as a definite destiny, unlike Jean Jacques Rousseau's consideration of the monarchy in France, when he was terrified at the mere imagining of France without a king, in spite of the fact that he was one of the heralds, both intellectually and philosophically, of the evolution of the political situation that existed in those times. That was because Rousseau lived in the shade and under the influence of the monarchy.

On the other hand this individual who has thoroughly penetrated history, would have the dignity and strength of history and a powerful sense that all that surrounds him of civilization and existence was born at a certain time in history, when the way was paved for its existence, that it would disappear to the extent that nothing of it would remain as when there was nothing of it before it came into existence in the distant or near past, that the historical life spans of any civilization, however long they may be, are only limited days in the long era of history.

Have you not read the chapter of the cave in the Qur'an (surah al-Kahf)? Have you not read of those youths who believed in their Lord, whom Allah increased in guidance, who opposed a ruling pagan existence that was ruthless and did not hesitate to suppress every single seed of at-tawhid (Unity of Allah), so that it might not rise above the level of idolatry. So these youths became depressed to the point of despair, once the windows of hope had been closed before their eyes; so they sought refuge in the cave, where they begged Allah for a solution to their problem after having exhausted all the possibilities. For they could not tolerate the fact that falsehood was ruling, transgressing and subjugating the truth and suppressing anyone whose heart showed an inclination towards the truth.

Do you know what Allah did to them?

He made them sleep for three hundred and nine years in that cave and caused them to rise up from their long sleep and sent them to the outside world, after that the existence which had bewildered them with its power and transgression had collapsed and became a chapter in history that could frighten no one nor activate anything. They were brought out so that they could see all this with their own eyes and learn that falsehood is insignificant.

Indeed if this clear vision had been true in the case of the people of the cave, with all that it bore of psychological loftiness and thrust out of that unique event which prolonged their age by three hundred years, then the same event could occur in the case of al- Mahdi, the Expected Leader, whose extended age would make him see the giant as a dwarf, the tall tree as a seed and the hurricane as a breeze.

Add to this that the experience that is granted by the concomitants of those consecutive civilizations and the direct confrontation with all their movements and changes, has a great influence on the intellectual preparation and the deepening of experience of the Expected Leader, since it puts him face to face with the many various practices of others, with all they contain of weakness and strength, and the different aspects of their errors and accuracy. And this enables him to classify the social symptoms with a complete awareness of their causes and their historical circumstances.

Moreover the preserved operation of change, which is the task of the Expected Leader, is founded on a particular message, namely the message of Islam. Therefore, it is natural that in this case, the required leadership should be more proximate with the original sources of Islam, that his personality be fully shaped in an independent way, free from the influence of that civilization which is subject to his struggle on the appointed day, unlike that individual who would have been born and brought up in its atmosphere, whose intellect and feelings would have blossomed within its frame. Quite often such a person cannot free himself from the effects and residues of that civilization, even if he were to lead a movement of change against it.

Thus, in order that the preserved leader be not influenced by the civilization he has been prepared to transform, it is necessary that his personality should be fully shaped during a previous stage of civilization, as near as possible to the universal spirit, and in terms of the principles of that civilized condition, which the appointed day is aiming at realizing under his leadership.

HOW WAS THE PREPARATION OF THE EXPECTED LEADER ACHIEVED

Now we have reached the third question which is: How could the preparation of the Expected Leader be achieved, while we know that he only remained five years with his father, al-Imam al-'Askari - which is a period of childhood not sufficient for the maturity of his personality.

Therefore, under what circumstances has this achievement taken place?

The answer is:

That al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) was appointed as a successor to his father, for the leadership of the Muslims, which means that he was an Imam in the fullest intellectual and spiritual sense of the word in a very early age of his noble life.

Moreover, the early Imamate (leadership) is a previous phenomenon in the case of his forefathers (peace be upon them all), for example, al-Imam Muhammad son of 'Ali al-Jawad (peace be upon him). We call it a phenomenon because it has given in the case of al-Mahdi's forefathers (peace be upon them), a perceptible and a practical meaning, which the Muslims have lived and been aware of, in all their experiences with the Imams, in one way or another. Therefore, we cannot claim the proof of a clearer and wider phenomenon than the experience of a whole community. So, we can clarify the issue in the following points:

1) The leadership of the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt (descendants of the Prophet) has never been one of the centres of influence and power that are transmitted through inheritance, from father to son, with the full support of the ruling regime, as was the case, in the leadership of Fatimid caliphs and the 'Abbasids; but it has always won the good will of its wider popular bases, on the grounds of their intellectual and spiritual conviction about the worth of the Imamate for the leadership of Islam.

2) These popular bases have existed since the dawn of Islam and became wider during the times of the two Imams, al-Baqir and as-Sadiq (peace be upon them). The school that these two Imams led within the boundaries of these bases formed a very wide trend that stretched all over the world of Islam, bringing together hundreds of jurists (fuqaha') theologians (mutakallimun) and commentators (mufasssirin) on the Qur'an and the learned in the different branches of Islamic and human sciences that were predominant in those times, to the extent that al-Hasan son of 'Ali al-Washsha said, "I went into al-Kufah Mosque and found nine hundred sheikhs all of them were saying, 'Ja'far son of Muhammad related to us . . .'"

3) This school and what it represented of popular bases from Islamic society, had certain conditions which it believed in and abode by, in the appointment of the Imam and his suitability for the role because it believed that an individual cannot be appointed as Imam unless he is the most learned among the agnostic of his time.

4) That both this school and its popular bases were ready to give sacrifices, for the sake of their belief in the Imamate, since the latter was considered, in the opinion of the concomitant leadership, as a hostile line, even from an intellectual point of view. This was the reason that led the authorities to carry out several campaigns of purging and torture to the extent that many people were either killed or were put into prisons, while hundreds of them died in the darkness of

the cells. This meant that those who believed in the Imamate were ready to pay a lot, and the only instigation they had was their nearness to Allah.

5) The Imams these bases yielded to were not isolated from them, only when the authorities prosecuted them or sent them into exile. This is what we come to know through the narrators who related to us the events of each one among the twelve Imams, and on the one hand from what has been copied from the letters that they sent to their contemporaries and the trips that they took, and on the other hand from representatives that they dispatched to the different corners of the Islamic world, as well as the frequent visits that the Shi' ahs used to pay to their Imams in the holy city of Medina, when they went to the sacred lands for the performance of the holy rites of hajj.

All of these factors show an uninterrupted interaction between the Imam and his popular bases, that stretched over the different parts of the world of Islam, with all their different classes including the learned as well as the others.

6) That the caliphate which was contemporary with the Imams (peace be upon them) used to consider their spiritual leadership as a great threat against its existence and its destiny. Because of that it deployed all of its efforts for the sake of disintegrating that leadership and bore a lot of negativism in that respect, sometimes appearing under the guise of cruelty and transgression when its security was at stake. The campaigns of persecution and victimization were a permanent event with respect to the Imam, in spite of what that left behind of sadness and disgust among the Muslims and their supporters from the different classes of society.

If we take these six points into consideration knowing that they are all historical facts, it leaves no room for doubt, and we come out with the following result: That the phenomenon of the early Imamate was a fact and not an illusion. Because the Imam who emerges while still young and declares openly that he is the spiritual and the intellectual leader of the Muslim community as a whole, and whom that wide trend pledges its loyalty, must surely be in possession of a remarkable, let alone a very wide knowledge and agnosis and a very wide horizon as well as a proficiency in jurisdiction, exegesis and the articles of faith, otherwise the popular bases would not be convinced of his spiritual leadership. We should also bear in mind the fact that the Imams took certain positions that made the interaction with their bases possible and threw different lights on their way of life and personality.

Do you think then that a young child who declares his Imamate (spiritual leadership) and hoists out of it a flag for Islam, with the full knowledge of the masses among his popular bases who believe in him and are prepared to sacrifice their lives and security without taking the trouble to discover his condition, or without being incited by the phenomenon of the early Imamate to inquire about the validity of the situation and the establishment of the worth of this young Imam?

Now supposing that people did not attempt to assess the situation , would it then be possible that after days, months or even years, the whole affair would go unnoticed without its truth coming to the surface, although there has been a natural and constant interaction between the young Imam and the rest of the people? Is it rational that the worth of a young child's way of thinking and knowledge would not be obvious after this long interaction?

Therefore, if we assume that the popular bases of the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt (descendants of the Prophet) were not able to discover the truth of the matter, why did the existing caliphate keep silent and did not attempt to find out, if it were for its benefit? Nothing could have been easier for the authorities then if the Imam had been a child, quite immature in his education and way of thinking, the normal case in all children.

No plan would have been more successful than to present this child to his supporters (the Shi'ah) and others and prove to them that he was not fit for the Imamate and the intellectual and spiritual leadership.

If it is indeed difficult to convince people of a man in his forties or fifties, already in possession of a great deal of education for the role of the Imamate, there can be no difficulty in convincing them of the incapacity of an ordinary child for the same role, in the sense that the Shi'ah know, regardless of his intelligence and awareness.

All this would have been possible and easier than the complicated means of suppression and recklessness which the authorities resorted to in these times.

The only explanation for the caliphate's hesitation in playing this card, is that it realized that the early Imamate was a real phenomenon and not an invented idea. The truth is that it had realized the fact after it had attempted to play that card but failed. History relates to us many of these attempts and their failure, while it does not mention at all the occurrence of a situation in which the phenomenon of early Imamate was put into question, where the Imam was confronted with difficulties or complications which surpassed his ability or shook people's trust in him.

This is what we mean when we said earlier that the early Imamate is a real phenomenon in the life of Ahlu'l-bayt (descendants of the Prophet), moreover this phenomenon has similar roots and situations in the Divine heritage that stretched over all the messages and the Divine leadership. It is enough to cite one example of an early leadership of Ahlu'l-bayt (peace be upon them) in the case of Yahya (peace be upon him) when Allah said: .

"O Yahya take the Book with strength,"

and We have given him wisdom when he was young. (Qur'an, 19:12)

Now that the early leadership has been proved as an existing and real phenomenon in Ahlu'l-bayt's life there is no more objection to the leadership of al- Imam al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) nor to his succession to his father while very young.

HOW CAN WE BELIEVE IN THE EXISTENCE OF AL-MAHDI?

Now we have reached the fourth question which is: Supposing that the hypothesis of the Expected Leader and all that it comprehends of prolonged life, early leadership and a silent absence, is possible, that would not be enough proof for his existence, thus, how can we indeed believe in the existence of al-Mahdi? Would some narratives related in books on the Great Messenger (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) be enough for perfect conviction in the existence of the Twelfth Imam, in spite of what this supposition bears of peculiarity and deviation from the norms? Or rather, how can we prove that al-Mahdi had a true historical existence and that he is not only an assumption, for which psychological circumstances have been combined to confirm his existence in many people's minds?

The answer is:

That the idea of al- Mahdi, as the Expected Leader, who will change the world for the best, has been already mentioned in several of the narratives (ahadith) related from the Great Messenger in general, and the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt in particular. Moreover, it has been reconfirmed, with a degree beyond doubt, in many texts. I could count up to four hundred narratives of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) which reached us through our brothers, the Sunnis, (e.g., the book al-Mahdi written by my uncle as-Sayyid Sadru'd-Din as-Sadr, may Allah bless his noble soul), as well as a great number of reports about al- Imam al- Mahdi through both the Shi'ites and the Sunnis - nearly more than six thousand narratives, (e.g., the book entitled Muntakhab al-athar fi al-Imam aththani 'ashar [Selection of traditions concerning the Twelfth Imam] by ash-Shaykh Lutfu'llah as-Safi), which is very high statistical number, not found in many of the self-evident Islamic issues.

As regards the materialization of this idea in the Twelfth Imam (peace be upon him) we do possess enough justifications to be convinced that he is the one They can be summed up into two groups of evidence - the first Islamic, and the other scientific. By the Islamic evidence we confirm the existence of the Expected Leader.

By the scientific evidence, we can prove that al-Mahdi is not just a myth or a supposition but a reality which has been confirmed by historical experience. The Islamic evidence appears in the hundreds of narratives related from Allah's Messenger (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) and the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt (peace be upon them), which prove that al-Mahdi will be appointed as Imam, that he is from the descendants of the Prophet and Fatimah and the ninth descendants from al-Husayn, that the caliphs (Prophet's successors) are twelve.

All of these narratives limited that universal idea by personifying it in al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam of Ahlu'l-bayt. Moreover they reached a great number and diffusion, although the Imams took a great precaution and care, fearing their exposure on a general level, in order to protect the righteous descendants against assassination or an unpredicted assault on his life.

However, the numerical abundance of these narratives is not the only reason for their validity, for in addition to this, there are certain virtues and coherences to be taken into account for proving their validity.

The Prophet's narratives (ahadith) about the fact that the Imams, caliphs, or amirs - depending on the style of the narrative in its different ways are twelve. Some writers counted up to more than two hundred and seventy narratives taken from the most well-known books of Sunni and Shi'ah traditions such as al-Bukhari, al-Muslim, at-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud and the collection of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the Rectification of the Judge on the Two Sahihis (al-Hakim, Mustadrak 'ala s-sahihayn).

We should bear in mind here that al-Bukhari who had compiled these narratives, was a contemporary to both al-Imam al-Hadi and al-Imam al-'Askari which means quite a lot, since it proves that the narratives were recorded from the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) before that the realization of their contents and the idea of the Twelfth Imam had materialized.

This means, therefore, that there is no room left for doubt, that the recording of the narratives was not influenced by the fact of the Twelfth Imam, or that it might have been a reflection of it, because the false narratives (ahadith) that are related from the Prophet (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny) are either a reflection or a justification for a fact occurring later in time. Now, they did not precede in their appearance and recording in the books, that fact which they came to reflect, therefore, as long as we possess the material evidence, which is that the mentioned narrative had already preceded the historical sequence of the twelve Imams, and that it had been recorded in the books of ahadith (books of traditions) before that the event took place, we can be sure that this narrative is not a reflection of an event but an expression to a truth from Allah, uttered by the one who did not speak out of fancy (the Holy Prophet) when he said: "Surely the caliphs after me are twelve".

So, the event of the twelve Imams was fulfilled, starting with al-Imam 'Ali and ending in al-Mahdi, this way being the only rational interpretation to that noble narrative of the Prophet.

As far as the scientific evidence is concerned, it is formed out an experience, lived by a community of people, lasting nearly seventy years, which we call the period of the minor occultation (ghaybah as-sughra) To elucidate this point, we will pave the way by giving a brief description

This minor occultation marks the first phase in the Imamate of the Expected Leader (peace be upon him) From the time that had been predestined, from the time he assumed the role, he remained hidden from the outside world, distant from all the events that were taking place although being at the same time proximate to them in his mind and heart

We should bear in mind that had this occultation occurred suddenly, the result would have been a great shock among the popular masses, who believed in the Imamate since they were used to contacting their Imam in every period, to consulting him for solutions to their various problems. Thus, had he suddenly vanished, his supporters would have felt cut off from spiritual and intellectual leadership Such an event would have created an enormous gap which would have thoroughly shaken the whole structure and undermined its unity. Therefore, it proved necessary that the way should be paved to this occultation, so that these bases might get used to it and gradually adapt themselves to the new situation

So the plan was this minor occultation, during which al- Imam al-Mahdi vanished from the universal scene, while keeping in touch with his popular bases and supporters through his delegates or representatives and the most reliable among his companions, who acted as a link between the Imam and those who believed in his line.

The position of representative of the Imam was held in those times, by four personalities, whom the popular bases agreed as to their fear of Allah, piety and integrity. They were:

- 1) 'Uthman ibn Sa'id al-'Amri;
- 2) Muhammad ibn 'Uthman ibn Sa'id al-'Amri;
- 3) Abu'l-Qasim al-Husayn ibn Ruh; and
- 4) Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad as-Samuri.

These four individuals assumed the role of representative of the Imam (al-Mahdi) according to the above classification. So whenever one of them died, the other succeeded him, after being designated by al- Imam al-Mahdi (peace be upon him).

The representative of the Imam used to get in touch with the Shi'ahs and submit their questions and problems to the Imam and return to them with his answers. Sometimes orally and very often in

a written form. So these masses who lacked the vision of their Imam, found some comfort and consolation in these indirect communications.

Moreover they could notice that the signatures and the letters were all written in the same way, during the time of the four representatives that lasted nearly seventy years. The last representative, as-Samuri, declared that the period of the minor occultation, which was characterized by the designated delegates, was over; that the period of the major occultation, in which there would be no designated individuals to mediate between the Imam and the Shi'ites, had begun. This transition meant that the minor occultation had already accomplished its mission and achieved its goal, since it immunized the Shi'ites against the great shock and the feeling of the profound gap caused by the Imam's occultation.

In that way, it enabled them to adapt themselves to the situation and gradually prepared them to accept the idea of general representation on behalf of the Imam. By this token the latter changed from a representation by a designated individual to a more general line manifested in the just mujtahid (a legalist who arrives at an independent judgement), who has a keen insight into the religious and worldly issues of the Muslims, in view of the transition from the minor to the major occultation.

Now you can have an idea about the situation, in the light of what has been discussed up to now, so you can clearly realize that al-Mahdi is a reality that a community of people has lived and which has been expressed for seventy years, by the representatives and the mediators of the Imam, whom no one could suspect of cheating nor of playing on words.

For can you imagine - by your Lord - that a lie could survive for nearly seventy years, which four individuals would successively assume and agree upon and continue to interact with others on its basis as if it were a reality that they lived; that nothing would escape their control, which would cause a doubt in people's minds; that there would be no particular relation between the four through which they could gain the trust of everyone and their belief in the truth of the matter, which they pretend to live and feel?

An old proverb said, "The rope of lies is short". Also logic in life confirms the fact that it is impossible that a lie could survive in this way and for all time through these relations and still win everyone's confidence.

Thus, the phenomenon of the minor occultation can be considered as a scientific experiment which has confirmed the factual objectivity of the Imam's existence, his birth, life and occultation, on account of which he has been hidden from the world and has not revealed himself to anyone ever since.

WHY HAS THE LEADER NOT APPEARED YET?

Why has the leader not appeared during all this long period? If he were really prepared to assume his social work? What prevented him from emerging during the period of the minor occultation or after, instead of extending it into a greater one, when the conditions for any social and transformative work were much simpler and easier and when the leader's relation with the people, owing to the minor occultation organizations, could have made it possible for him to organize the ranks and start the work with strength. Also the authorities that existed then did not have that tremendous level of strength and power which humanity has achieved thanks to its technical and scientific evolution?

The answer is:

That the success of any operation of social change is bound by certain conditions and objective circumstances without which it cannot achieve its aims.

However all the operations of social change that are sent to earth from heaven are marked by the fact that the contents of their message are not bound by any objective circumstance. Since the message on which the whole operation depends is of the Lord's making and is not created by these objective circumstances, but rather relies on them on its executive side as well as for its timing, heaven waited five centuries of ignorance (al-jahiliyyah) before sending its last message into the hands the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny), since the connection that should exist between the objective circumstances and the execution required its postponement although the world had been waiting for it for a long time Among the objective circumstances that have an effect on the executive part in the operation of change, are those that create the right climate and the general atmosphere for the intended change, while others form some details required by the movement of change in its elaboration.

For example, in the case of the operation of change led by Lenin in Russia, this operation was connected to an important factor manifested in the first world war and the decline of the Tsar, which played a major part in creating the appropriate climate for the operation of change. It was also linked to partial and limited factors such Lenin's health, during his trip and when he entered Russia and led the revolution For had he met with an incident while on his way, he would have been delayed and the revolution would have lost its ability for that swift move.

However, the unchangeable custom of Allah in every Divine operation of change proceeded, in its executive side, in accordance with the objective circumstances that created the appropriate climate and the general atmosphere for its success.

Hence Islam came only after a great gap and long period which lasted for centuries after the messengers.

Although Allah, the Exalted, could have overcome all the obstacles and difficulties that were on the way of the Divine message and created the appropriate climate by way of miracles, He preferred not to use such a style, since the tests, trials and the afflictions that make the human being perfect required that this Divine task be natural and objective.

However, this did not prevent Allah, the Exalted, from interfering from time to time with some details that did not shape the appropriate climate but which were sometimes needed for the movement within such a climate, such as the support that Allah, the Exalted, bestows on his saints during some of their difficult moments, so as to protect the message. So suddenly Numrud's fire becomes cool and a peace for Ibrahim. When the traitor's hand which was bearing the sword to strike the Prophet's hand was suddenly paralysed and lost its ability to strike, also when suddenly the storm swept away the unbelievers and the polytheists' camps, when they were encircling Medina, on the Day of the Ditch (yawmu'l-Khandaq), thus terrorizing them. However, all of these events did not go beyond certain details and the provision of assistance during some decisive moments after the appropriate atmosphere had been already formed for the operation of change in a natural way and in accordance with the objective circumstances.

In this light we can examine al-Mahdi's position to find that the operation of change, for which he had been prepared, is linked, on the executive side, as is the case with any other operation of social change to certain objective circumstances that participate in securing the convenient climate under which it will occur.

We must bear in mind that al-Mahdi has not been prepared for a limited social task nor for an operation of change limited to a particular part of the world or another. Since the message which Allah decreed for him has been a comprehensive change of the whole world and the leadership of humanity away from the darkness of transgression to the light of justice. However, it is not enough for this great operation that its message and its leader be made available, for otherwise its conditions would have been fulfilled in the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) Rather, an operation of such a scale requires a world-wide climate and a universal atmosphere which will fulfil the required objective circumstances for its realization.

From a human perspective we should consider the feeling that the man of civilization experiences of exhaustion as an essential factor for the creation of that appropriate ~ climate, which paves the way for the acceptance of the new message of justice. This feeling is established and implanted through the various experiments of civilization, out of which man comes overloaded with negativism regarding what has been built, and realizes his need for help, thereupon turning with his natural disposition to the unseen or the unknown.

From a material angle, it is possible that modern conditions of life are better equipped to realize the aims of the message world- wide than the conditions that existed in the previous periods - such as the period of the minor occultation - owing to what has been achieved in terms of shorter distances and a greater ease of interaction between the different nations of the world, as well as the availability of instruments and means that a central organization needs in order to carry out its programme for the awareness of the different nations of the world and their education on the bases of the new message.

Yet what I hinted at here, which is a fact, is the growth of military strength and equipment that faces the leader of the appointed day whenever his appearance is delayed But to what avail can the growth of the material aspect be, when they already exists a psychological defeat for it from within and the spiritual collapse of that man who possesses all these equipment and power?

Indeed many were the occasions, in history, when the gigantic structure of a whole civilization collapsed only with the smallest conquering gesture. That was because it has been already falling apart and loosing confidence in its existence and trust in its reality.

CAN AN INDIVIDUAL ASSUME THIS ROLE?

Now we have reached another question in this series which is: Can an individual, however great he may be, achieve this great role?

Is not such an individual only that one who is selected by circumstances and faced with the realization of their movement?

The idea here, is related to a particular view of history which interprets the latter on the basis that man is only a secondary factor in it, while the objective strength that surrounds him is the essentials. In this sense the individual can only be, in the best of situations, the intelligent expression to that essential factor

However, we had already made it clear, in other chapters of our printed books, that history is made up of two poles: The first one being man and the second the material strength that surrounds him. Thus, while this material strength, the circumstances of production and nature affect man, the latter also exerts an influence upon them Moreover, there is no evidence for the assumption that the movement starts from material conditions and ends up with man, except when there is an

evidence for the contrary, since both factors interact in time Therefore, within this framework, an individual can be more than a parrot in the historical trend, especially when we take into account his relation with heaven, since the latter intervenes, then, as a guiding power to this historical trend That has been the case in the history of all the prophets, especially the last one since by virtue of the relation of his message with heaven, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his progeny), assumed by himself the reins of the historical movement and started a civilized expansion which the objective circumstances that existed around him, could not bring about in any case, as we have already mentioned in the introduction of al-Fatawa al-wadihah.

Therefore, what had been achieved at the hands of the Great Messenger could occur also at the hands of the Expected Leader from among his progeny whom he announced and whose role he hinted at.

HOW WILL THE CHANGE ON THE APPOINTED DAY OCCUR?

Now we have reached the last question, which is about the manner through which we can form an image about what will be accomplished at the hands of this individual in terms of a decisive victory for justice and an end to the existence of transgression that he is faced with?

The limited answer for this question is related to the knowledge of the time and the phase in which al- Mahdi (peace be upon him) is supposed to emerge to the world, as well as the possible assumption regarding what peculiarities and close relations, might characterize that phase so as to be able to draw, in that light, the shape that the operation of change would take and the path that it would follow.

But as long as we do not know anything concerning that phase, its environment nor its circumstances, we cannot scientifically predict what would take place on the appointed day, although we can imagine or give certain assumptions in this respect, which are founded on theoretical bases and not on realistic grounds.

There is one basic assumption which we can adopt in the light of the previous narratives we mentioned earlier, as well as in the light of the great operations of change in the course of history, namely the appearance of al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) after a great gap which will result in a shocking decadence and a crisis in civilization. This gap will give the opportunity for the message to expand and the decadence of civilization will prepare the psychological atmosphere for its acceptance.

However, this decadence in civilization is not a mere incident that will occur suddenly in the history of human civilization, but a natural result of a contradiction in a history that is cut off from Allah the Exalted, that cannot reach a decisive solution of the end of its course, so that its fire will burn leaving nothing in its path and the light will then appear to establish Divine justice on earth.

THE GOOD NEWS

There is no doubt that the Holy Qur'an is the book of Allah, and that all the Muslims of the world accept and obey its teachings and instructions.

When one opens this Book (Qur'an) and casts a glance at its verses, one will come to what seems to be a clear vista of the extraordinary, sensational and exciting future and end of the universe.

The Holy Qur'an says that the ultimate mission of the Holy Prophet of Islam is to make this holy religion prevail over all other religions of the world; and one day this holy aspiration will finally be fulfilled, as the Holy Qur'an says:

He it is who has sent His messenger (Muhammad) with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, however much the idolaters may be averse. (9;33)

The divine book of the last Messenger of Allah gives the glad tidings that rule over the earth shall finally belong to the righteous and virtuous servants of Allah:

The earth is Allah's. He gives it for an inheritance to who He will.

And lo! the sequel is for those who keep their duty (unto Him). (7:128)

The earth, which will be full of corruption, destruction and ignorance like a lifeless body, will be revived with the glowing light of justice, as referred to in the Holy Qur'an.

We also read in the Holy Qur'an:

Allah has promised such of you as believe and do good works that He will surely make them succeed (the present rulers) in the earth even

as he caused those who were before them to succeed (others) and that He will surely establish for them religion which he has approved for them, and will give them in exchange safety after their fear. They serve Me. They ascribe no thing as partner unto Me. (24:55)

The Almighty Allah also says:

Fain would they put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will perfect His light however much the disbelievers are averse. (61-8)

These are some short examples of the divine glad tidings mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. By studying these matters and tens of other similar matters, it shall be perceived that the Islamic message will reach its complete fulfilment when these holy aspirations and desires have taken place. All fabricated and superstitious objectives will disappear and then only Islam, the unique and true religion, will be the faith of the people in the east and west of the world. Injustice, oppression and inequality shall vanish and instead justice and equality which is the law of the creation of the world will be established everywhere. The sovereignty of the divine caliphs (khulafa') will be established in all the corners of the world. The light of the guidance of Allah will shine and the earth belong to the virtuous ones.

Yes, the Holy Qur'an gives the good news that a day will come when all Muslims of the world shall wait enthusiastically for such a time.

Next to the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Honourable Imams are the most important and worthiest treasure of Islamic learning. For every Muslim, it is obligatory and essential to follow and obey the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Holy Imams since obeying their commands is particularly and clearly mentioned in the Book of Allah.

In the sea of jewels of Islamic traditions, glad tidings on the Government of Justice can be seen. Moreover, special mention has been made regarding the "Divine Revolution" and the divine leader who will fulfil this holy aspiration. The Holy Prophet of Islam said:

"Even when the entire duration of the world's existence has already been exhausted, and one solitary day is left to embrace the eve of Doomsday, Allah will expand that day and make it swell to such a length of time as to accommodate the ultimate reign of a person out of my holy progeny who will be called by my name and my agnomen ('Abu 'I-Qasim). He will then make the earth abound with peace and justice as it will have been fraught with injustice and tyranny before him."

The context of this precious tradition reveals a definite good news more than anything else. and informs the people of the Government of Justice, Achievement and Divine Promises as mentioned

in most of the Shi'ite and Sunnite sources. In another tradition, the Holy Prophet told Amir al-mu'minin 'Ali (a.s.), saying:

"There will be twelve Guides (aimmah) after me, the first of whom is you, O' 'Ali, and the last one will be the , Support , (al-Qa'm), who with Almighty Allah's grace, will gain victory over the whole of the east and west of the world."

The Purified Imams reminded people in several traditions of the significance of the Divine Promise and Government of the Twelfth Imam, and told them that waiting for the Great Saviour is the most valuable deed, and that his followers and devotees are the best and the beloved people.

It will suffice here to quote, as an example, a few of these traditions:

1) When Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (a.s.) held the seat of the caliphate, he fought the hypocritical Mu'awiyah, who, with the assistance of his cunning minister, gradually deceived the companions of Imam Hasan (a.s.), who thus deserted and left the Imam alone. Hence, he was compelled to make a peace treaty with Mu'awiyah in which he (Mu'awiyah) was obliged to comply with some duties and to refrain from appointing a successor and fighting. On some occasions, the Imam took the opportunity to point out to the people Mu'awiyah's errors and unjust acts. Meanwhile, some of ignorant people started criticizing the Imam as to why he had accepted the peace treaty Imam Hasan (a.s.) clarified for the people the meaning of the Imam and the leader, and the necessity of obeying every command of the Imam without asking why and wherefore. Then he explained to them about the Government of the Twelfth Imam, saying:

"Don't you know that every one of us (Imams) has the responsibility of taking allegiance from the oppressors of his time, except the 'Support' (al- Qa'im) behind whom the Spirit of Allah (Jesus) will pray, and Almighty Allah will keep secret his birth from some people and will conceal his person from their sights. When he appears he will not be responsible for taking allegiance from anyone. He is the ninth descendant of my brother Husayn, the son of the captive princess. Almighty Allah will prolong his age during his occultation, and by His Perfect Power, he will appear as a young man of less than forty years so that all people will know that Allah truly has power over all things."

2. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) in reply to a question from one of his followers about his successors, said:

"The Imam succeeding me is my son Musa, and the Awaited Imam is Muhammad ibn Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Musa."

The same Imam is quoted as having said repeatedly that:

"Every group of people is waiting for a government, and we are waiting for our Government to be established at the End of Time."

3) The Seventh Holy Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) in a reply to one of his companions who asked him whether he was "al- Qa'im bi 'l-Haqq" (he who is supported by the Truth), said:

"I am al-Qa'im bi'l-Haqq, but that 'al-Qa'im' who will remove Allah's enemies from the earth and will fill it with justice and equity is my fifth descendant. Since he will fear for his own life, he will be in occultation for a long time during which a group of people will apostate, but there will also be a group who will be firm in their belief."

He added:

"Blessed are our followers (the Shi'ites) who, during the time of the occultation (ghaybah) of the Imam of the Age, identify themselves with our Authority (wilayah) and keep away from our enemies. They belong to us and we belong to them. They have accepted our leadership and we are pleased with their adherence Therefore, blessed are they. I swear to Allah that they will be with us in our rank in Paradise."

4) Finally, the Eleventh Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) said:

"I see that after me differences will appear among you concerning the Imam after me. Whoever accepts the Imams after the Prophet of Allah but denies my son is like a person who accepts all the prophets but denies the prophethood of Muhammad (s.a.w.), the Prophet of Allah. And whoever denies (Muhammad) the Prophet of Allah is like one who has denied all the prophets of Allah, for to obey the last of us is like obeying the first and to deny the last of us is like denying the first But beware I . Verily, for my son there will be an occultation during which all people will fall into doubt except those whom Allah protects."

The available traditions from the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams are so many in number as to make us well-informed on this important principle of faith. One can say that the most important, and the highest recorded number, of traditions is on the subject of Imamology (Imamate) in the Shi'ite books of traditions.

The subject of the leadership of the Twelfth Imam, his Government, and other related matters, comes next to the subject of the successorship of Imam Ali, Amir al-mu'minin (a.s) There are hundreds of these traditions recorded both in the Shi'ite and Sunnite books. A large number of religious scholars from all Islamic sects have independently compiled books on this 'The years of Imams', Islamic leadership passed one after another along with tyranny of the rulers contemporary with them, till the leadership of Imam Hasan al-Askari (a.s.) came.

This Holy Imam lived in a difficult circumstances, appearing less frequently in the public gatherings. His beloved son who is the last Divine Proof, was hidden from ,the sight of strangers till the year 260 A. H., when the rays of his being set while the eyes of all people were fixed at the door of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.).

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THE GOOD NEWS

There is no doubt that the Holy Qur'an is the book of Allah, and that all the Muslims of the world accept and obey its teachings and instructions.

When one opens this Book (Qur'an) and casts a glance at its verses, one will come to what seems to be a clear vista of the extraordinary, sensational and exciting future and end of the universe.

The Holy Qur'an says that the ultimate mission of the Holy Prophet of Islam is to make this holy religion prevail over all other religions of the world; and one day this holy aspiration will finally be fulfilled, as the Holy Qur'an says:

He it is who has sent His messenger (Muhammad) with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, however much the idolaters may be averse. (9;33)

The divine book of the last Messenger of Allah gives the glad tidings that rule over the earth shall finally belong to the righteous and virtuous servants of Allah:

The earth is Allah's. He gives it for an inheritance to who He will.

And lo I the sequel is for those who keep their duty (unto Him). (7:128)

The earth, which will be full of corruption, destruction and ignorance like a lifeless body, will be revived with the glowing light of justice, as referred to in the Holy Qur'an.

We also read in the Holy Qur'an:

Allah has promised such of you as believe and do good works that He will surely make them succeed (the present rulers) in the earth even as he caused those who were before them to succeed (others) and that He will surely establish for them religion which he has approved for them, and will give them in exchange safety after their fear. They serve Me. They ascribe no thing as partner unto Me. (24:55)

The Almighty Allah also says:

Fain would they put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will perfect His light however much the disbelievers are averse. (61-8)

These are some short examples of the divine glad tidings mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. By studying these matters and tens of other similar matters, it shall be perceived that the Islamic message will reach its complete fulfilment when these holy aspirations and desires have taken place. All fabricated and superstitious objectives will disappear and then only Islam, the unique and true religion, will be the faith of the people in the east and west of the world. Injustice, oppression and inequality shall vanish and instead justice and equality which is the law of the creation of the world will be established everywhere. The sovereignty of the divine caliphs (khulafa') will be established in all the corners of the world. The light of the guidance of Allah will shine and the earth belong to the virtuous ones.

Yes, the Holy Qur'an gives the good news that a day will come when all Muslims of the world shall wait enthusiastically for such a time.

Next to the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Honourable Imams are the most important and worthiest treasure of Islamic learning. For every Muslim, it is obligatory and essential to follow and obey the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Holy Imams since obeying their commands is particularly and clearly mentioned in the Book of Allah.

In the sea of jewels of Islamic traditions, glad tidings on the Government of Justice can be seen. Moreover, special mention has been made regarding the "Divine Revolution" and the divine leader who will fulfil this holy aspiration. The Holy Prophet of Islam said:

"Even when the entire duration of the world's existence has already been exhausted, and one solitary day is left to embrace the eve of Doomsday, Allah will expand that day and make it swell to such a length of time as to accommodate the ultimate reign of a person out of my holy progeny

who will be called by my name and my agnomen ('Abu 'I-Qasim). He will then make the earth abound with peace and justice as it will have been fraught with injustice and tyranny before him."

The context of this precious tradition reveals a definite good news more than anything else. and informs the people of the Government of Justice, Achievement and Divine Promises as mentioned in most of the Shi'ite and Sunnite sources. In another tradition, the Holy Prophet told Amir al-mu'minin 'Ali (a.s.), saying:

"There will be twelve Guides (aimmah) after me, the first of whom is you, O' 'Ali, and the last one will be the , Support , (al-Qa'm), who with Almighty Allah's grace, will gain victory over the whole of the east and west of the world."

The Purified Imams reminded people in several traditions of the significance of the Divine Promise and Government of the Twelfth Imam, and told them that waiting for the Great Saviour is the most valuable deed, and that his followers and devotees are the best and the beloved people.

It will suffice here to quote, as an example, a few of these traditions:

1) When Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (a.s.) held the seat of the caliphate, he fought the hypocritical Mu'awiyah, who, with the assistance of his cunning minister, gradually deceived the companions of Imam Hasan (a.s.), who thus deserted and left the Imam alone. Hence, he was compelled to make a peace treaty with Mu'awiyah in which he (Mu'awiyah) was obliged to comply with some duties and to refrain from appointing a successor and fighting. On some occasions, the Imam took the opportunity to point out to the people Mu'awiyah's errors and unjust acts. Meanwhile, some of ignorant people started criticizing the Imam as to why he had accepted the peace treaty Imam Hasan (a.s.) clarified for the people the meaning of the Imam and the leader, and the necessity of obeying every command of the Imam without asking why and wherefore. Then he explained to them about the Government of the Twelfth Imam, saying:

"Don't you know that every one of us (Imams) has the responsibility of taking allegiance from the oppressors of his time, except the 'Support' (al- Qa'im) behind whom the Spirit of Allah (Jesus) will pray, and Almighty Allah will keep secret his birth from some people and will conceal his person from their sights. When he appears he will not be responsible for taking allegiance from anyone. He is the ninth descendant of my brother Husayn, the son of the captive princess. Almighty Allah will prolong his age during his occultation, and by His Perfect Power, he will appear as a young man of less than forty years so that all people will know that Allah truly has power over all things."

2. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) in reply to a question from one of his followers about his successors, said:

"The Imam succeeding me is my son Musa, and the Awaited Imam is Muhammad ibn Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Musa."

The same Imam is quoted as having said repeatedly that:

"Every group of people is waiting for a government, and we are waiting for our Government to be established at the End of Time."

3) The Seventh Holy Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (a.s.) in a reply to one of his companions who asked him whether he was "al- Qa'im bi 'l-Haqq" (he who is supported by the Truth), said:

"I am al-Qa'im bi'l-Haqq, but that 'al-Qa'im' who will remove Allah's enemies from the earth and will fill it with justice and equity is my fifth descendant. Since he will fear for his own life, he will be in occultation for a long time during which a group of people will apostate, but there will also be a group who will be firm in their belief."

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THE BIRTH

At dawn, on the 15th Sha'ban 255 A.H., the rays of the illuminating world shone with a powerful shaft of light into a human form which became the source of existence for the universe.

Yes, finally the Divine Promise was fulfilled and Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) was born in spite of the efforts of those who denied him. It is one of history's miracles that the Umayyids 'Abbasides and other opponents of this Holy Imam attempted to extinguish this divine light but met with complete failure. The cruel and tyrannical caliphs of the Bani 'Abbas had heard that the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'ites would establish a just Government and would rule over the east and west of the world, and would destroy the foundations of injustice Therefore, to counter this event, they tortured and shed the blood of the Shi'ites as much as they could.

The conditions of the martyred Shi'ites can be referred in the books on this subject. In the year 235 A. H., Mutawakkil, the 'Abbasid caliph, ordered the Tenth Imam Muhammad al-Hadi (a.s.) and his family to be shifted from Medina to samarra', his seat of government, so that he could keep a close watch on the Imam of the Shi'ites. Similarly, Mu'tamid, the 'Abbasid caliph, the Pharaoh of the time, was afraid of the son of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.).

He formed a group of detectives and midwives who had the mission of frequently searching

through the houses of the 'Alawiyyin, and especially the house of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.), so that if a newly-born child were found, he could be killed immediately.

The search to find and kill Imam al- Mahdi (a.s.) was intensified when Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) left this world for the eternal one. This is because everyone knew that on that day the command of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was to be entrusted to the Twelfth Imam, and the universe would come under his authority. Shaykh Saduq, the eminent scholar of the Shi'ite world, writes in Kamalu 'd-din: "When the holy body of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) was buried and the people went away, the caliph and his comrades started their efforts to search for his growing son and inspected the houses carefully." Shaykh Mufid, a distinguished Shi'ite scholar, also wrote in Irshad: "When Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) passed away, the caliph of that time, pursued his son because the Shi'ite Imamiyyah's belief was famous and was spread about that the Shi'ites were awaiting His Eminence." Mu'tadid one of the tyrant 'Abbasid caliphs who ruled from 279 to 289 A H., decided all at once to destroy the entire family of al, Askari when he heard that more than twenty years had passed since the birth of the son of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s) and that he was still living in spite of the attempts of the preceding caliph to kill him. One of Mu'tadid's officers said: "Mu'tadid has ordered me and two other persons, each of us to mount a horse and to proceed to Samarra' in full speed without even stopping for prayer.

He gave us the address of (Imam) al- Askari and instructed us to enter his house without his permission and to bring him the head of whoever we find there." As a matter of fact, they were unaware that the same power which had protected the Imam from the former caliphs would give him protection from his evil, because: Allah disdains (nothing) save that He shall perfect His light, however much the disbelievers are averse. (Qur'an, 9:32) Indeed what an immature thought and foolish act it was! If the Divine Will bears on some matter, can a person revolt against it and combat it? Is it possible that definite Divine Promises may not be compiled with? Or is it possible that the reins of oppressive imposters who fight against the Divine decree will not cut? Is it not more amazing that Peerless, Almighty Allah has shown His power many times before, so that after that all men should know that if He wishes to give His chosen servant government and sovereignty and to destroy in fidelity and irreligiousness through him, then there is no one who can disrupt His rule? Fortunately , this sensational story is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an.

Pharaoh, the great emperor of Egypt, who had great power and pride, claimed the divinity for himself. He determined to kill all the youths and boy children of Bani Isra'il as a result of what he had heard about a son being born who would destroy his empire and divinity. He shed the blood of innocents, and banished many persons to unknown regions; but see how Almighty Allah restored His Prophet and how the Divine Will worked to protect the life of Musa (Moses - a.s.) and destroy Pharaoh: And We revealed to the mother of Musa, saying, "Give him suck; and if you fear for him,

launch him on the river. and fear not, nor grieve; for We will return him to you and make him one of the Messengers." And took him up Pharaoh's people, that he might be to them an enemy and a (cause of their) grief (for) verily Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts were sinners. . . So We did restore him to his mother that her age might be refreshed and that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is (always) true, but most of them know not.

(28:7- 13) Yes, Allah will protect His Proof (Hujjah) and will fulfil His promises and glad tidings because His decision is based on its execution, although most people do not know it. Would Allah wish to save the life of Prophet Musa (a.s.), who was only a messenger to a certain nation and tribe, and yield the Imam of the Age (Imam-e Zaman) into the hands of Mu'tamid and Mu'tadid?

Would Allah protect the life of Musa (a.s.) while he was in the middle of the roaring waves of a river, and give no security to the Imam of the Age who was in the house of his father, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.)?

Would the Sustaining Allah of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham - a.s.) (Whose story is mentioned in the Qur'an) protect Ibrahim (a.s.) in the middle of the flaming fire, but allow the Last Pearl of the Prophet's progeny to be a victim of the lust and anger of the 'Abbasid caliphs? Really, how do false thinkers and feebleminded people At dawn, on the middle day of Sha'ban in the year 255 A.H., Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) beheld the heavenly, shining face of his son who was to fulfil all Divine promises and glad tidings. Not more than three days had passed after his birth when the Eleventh Imam took the holy child to his companions and told them: "After me this will be your master of authority and my successor, and he is the Support, (al-Qa'im) for whose appearance all people will wait; when the earth is full of injustice and tyranny, he will fill it with peace and justice." At the time of his son's birth, the Eleventh Imam told some of his companions: "Oppressors were plotting to kill me so that my son would not be born, but now see how great is the power of the All-powerful."

Imam Hasan al- Askari (a.s.) , ordered ten thousand pounds (10,000 lbs.) of bread and meat to be distributed among the Banu Hashim to mark the happy and auspicious birthday. 'Uthman ibn Sa'id was charged with this important work which he undertook in the best way. From the very beginning; Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) hide his son from strangers. Read carefully these words of Shaykh Mufid, part of which was quoted above. "Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) prepared a true Government for his fruitful son.

He kept secret the birth of his son and other related matters, because His Eminence was living in a difficult time when the caliphs were intensively searching for his son and were keeping a close eye on the affairs of Imam al-'Askari. This is because the Shi'ite Imamiyyah belief about the Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) had become so current that they were waiting for His Eminence. Hence, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) did not show his son, and, therefore, the enemies could not recognize Imam al-

Mahdi (a.s.) after the demise of His Eminence (father)." Although the affairs of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) were unknown to his enemies and opponents, the sincere Shi'ites gathered the news of this important event. Some of them were informed by Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) through a letter.

One of the sincere Shi'ites, Ahmad ibn Is'haq, received a letter from the Imam written in his own handwriting, saying: "A son is born to me. Therefore, keep secret the news of it from people and inform only his near relatives and particular friends." Some of the Shi'ites used to pay private visits to Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) who would take them into the presence of the Twelfth Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) who would guide them. Abu 'Umari and Ahwazi reported: "Abu Muhammad (Imam Hasan al-'Askari -a.s.) showed me his son (the Twelfth Imam) and told me, 'This is your Master (sahib).

" Some other Shi'ites used to visit Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) in a group, and if the Imam trusted in them that they would faithfully keep their visit secret, he would show them his beloved son. Mu'awiyah ibn Hakim, Muhammad ibn Ayyub and Muhammad ibn 'Uthman 'Umari have narrated that: "We were forty persons who gathered at the house of Imam Hasan, then His Eminence showed us his son and said to us, 'This is your Imam and my successor. You should obey him after me and should not oppose him lest you perish.

" Anyhow, from the time of the birth of the Twelfth "moon" till his Imamate, the Shi'ites used to go to the Eleventh Imam and congratulate him. Hasan ibn Hasan al-'Alawi said: "I went to see Imam Hasan (al-'Askari) in Samarra' and congratulated him on the birth of his son." And 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas al-'Alawi also said: "I visited Imam al-'Askari (a.s.) in Samarra' and congratulate him on the birth of his son." Yes, in this manner was the Imam of the Age (Imam-e Zaman) born and kept hidden from the reach of strangers. On some occasions only were virtuous Shi'ites allowed to see him, until the year 260 A H., when the Eleventh Imam expired, and by Divine decree the office of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was vested in the Master of the Authority (Sahibu 'lAmr).

THE MINOR OCCULTATION

When Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) died, the office of Divine Leadership (Imamate) was transferred to the Last Luminous Pearl of the Household of the Holy Prophet, Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) Although His Eminence did not appear amongst the people, some persons in whom he had trust and confidence were allowed to visit him and present him the problems and questions of the Shi'ites And they communicated to the people the guidance and commands of the Divine Luminous Light.

From the point of view faith, confidence and virtue, these were distinguished persons among the

Muslims who were mediators between the Imam and the people And in due time they conveyed the guidance of His Eminence to the people.

By studying the degree of the character and perception of the belief and piety of these individuals, not only does the greatness of their personalities become clear to us, but we become more familiar with the Imam of the Age, because, among the sayings of these distinguished, trustworthy and reliable companions of the Holy Imams, one finds the signs of the greatness of His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi - a.s.).

Among the companions of Imam-e Zaman, four became his most famous and confidential deputies who acted as mediators between the Imam and the people, and they are known as the Nawwab al-arb'a ah (the four deputies).

In order to know more about the dignity and greatness of their positions, we give below a brief description of each one of them:

1) 'Uthman ibn Sa'id 'Umari: This honourable figure was not only a deputy (na'ib) of Imam-e Zaman but he was also a representative (wakil) of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) and Imam 'Ali an-Naqi (a.s.) He settled and organized many affairs of the Shi'ites The Tenth Imam (al-Hadi -a.s) said to his followers regarding him.

"This Abu 'Umari is a reliable and trustworthy person. Whatever he says to you he says so on my behalf, and whatever he does he does on my behalf."

This representation continued till 254 A H when Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) died. Then, the Eleventh Imam is reported to have praised the character of Abu 'Umari as having his high esteem in his address to his Shi'ites, saying:

"This Abu 'Umari is a reliable and trustworthy person. He had the confidence of the preceding Imam, and has also my confidence in my lifetime and after my death. Whatever he says to you he says so on my behalf, and whatever he does he does on my behalf."

Likewise, with this certificate of admiration, he became the deputy (Na'ibu 'l-Imam) of the Twelfth Imam after the demise of Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a s).

On the death of Abu 'Umari, the Lord of the Age (Sahibu 'z-Zaman) himself sent condolences to his son, Muhammad ibn 'Uthman saying:

"Verily, we belong to Allah and verily to Him shall we return We submit to His command and are pleased with His decree. Your father has lived in good fortune and has died with dignity. May

Allah's mercy be upon him, he has joined his friends and masters. He was always endeavouring to search for whatever would bring him near to Allah and His friends. May Allah make strengthen his countenance."

2) Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman: This man was the second special deputy of Imam-e Zaman He was also a deputy of the Eleventh Imam, about whom the latter said:

"The greatness of his dignity and the exaltation of his status among the Shi'ites is so famous that there is no need to explain or dispute it."

Regarding him and his father, 'Uthman ibn Sa'id, Imam Hasan al-'Askari (a.s.) said to one of his companions:

"Umar and his son are both trustworthy Whatever they do they do on my behalf, and whatever they say to you, they say so on my behalf Therefore, listen to their words and obey them, because both of them are reliable and trustworthy to us."

And Imam-e Zaman himself said about him:

"He is my confident, and his letter is of the same status as mine."

3) Abu 'l-Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh Nawbakhti: Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman, the third deputy of Imam-e Zaman, said about him:

This Husayn ibn Ruh ibn Abu Bahr Nawbakhti is my successor. He is a reliable and trust worthy envoy and deputy between you and the Sahibu 'l-Amr (the Master of the Authority). Therefore, in your affairs and important tasks refer to him and trust him. I was given this task; and I have announced it."

Shaykh Tusi (may Allah's mercy be upon him) said about him:

"Abu 'l-Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh was regarded by his friends and opponents as the most learned man among the people."

The integrity of Husayn ibn Ruh's deputyship was acknowledged by his opponents too. Shalmaghani, who was one of the pseudo-claimants to the deputyship, had to confess his falsity when Imam-e Zaman ordered Husayn ibn Ruh to expose him. He (Shalmaghani) said:

"It is not right between me and Allah to say anything in the affair of Husayn ibn Ruh other than the truth. Although his crime towards me is a big one, yet this man was appointed by Imam-e Zaman

for the task. The Shi'ites should not turn away from him."

4) Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad Simmari: This honourable figure was the last special deputy (Na'ibu 'l-khass) of the Holy Imam-e Zaman. His death, coincided with the 15th of Sha'ban 329 A.H. Husayn ibn Ruh introduced him as the deputy of the Imam. The last letter of Imam-e Zaman (the Lord of the Age) to the four special deputies was addressed to this honourable man. In this order the Imam announced the death of 'Ali ibn Muhammad and the end of the deputation:

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful You are going to die in six days, may Allah grant patience to your brothers in faith on your departure So, be prepared, but appoint no one in your place, because from the day of your death the period of my major occultation (ghaybatu 'l-kubra) will begin. Henceforth-, no one will see me, unless and until Allah makes me appear My reappearance will take place after a very long time when people will have grown tired of waiting and those who are weak in their faith will say:

'What! Is he still alive?' When men will become cruel and inconsiderate, and the world will be full of injustice and violence. Very soon some men will claim to have seen me. Beware! Anyone who makes such a claim before the coming out of Sufyani and the sound from heaven announcing my reappearance, is a liar and an imposter. There is no might nor strength except in Allah, the Magnificent."

As can be seen from this, it is the last order, in which the door of special deputation is closed by the death of Ali ibn Muhammad; hence, anyone who claims to be a mediator, or claims that the Imam can be seen, is a liar. In the period of the major occultation no - one has made the claim that he has been in the presence of the Holy Imam-e Zaman.

The people would not accept the deputation of the four special deputies unless they had been shown the miracles of the Sahibu 'l-Amr to verify their truthfulness and accuracy, although they acknowledged them as reliable and trustworthy and had not the smallest doubt in their piety, faith and knowledge.

The special deputies presented to Imam-e Zaman the problems and questions of the Shi'ite scholars, and he answered the ones that were necessary in letter form and delivered them through the same deputies.

In these letters, the most important and difficult problems on different subjects of Shi'ite beliefs were cleared up.

One of these problems was a question as to what would be the responsibility of the Shi'ites who would be faced with new events during the period of occultation, and what should they do to face

them?

In the letter issued by Imam-e Zaman to the celebrated and distinguished Shi'ite Is'haq ibn Ya'qub he recounted duties, methods and guidance for the Shi'ites in the period of occultation. This direction was carried out for many centuries, and it is one of the proofs of the comprehensiveness and eternity of Islamic rule.

In one of the letters to Imam-e Zaman which he sent through the second special deputy of the Imam, Is'haq ibn Ya'qub asked him some different questions, among which was a question which is the subject of our discussion. The Imam said that in those affairs one must refer to those who really understand their (Imams') sayings and have truly related them:

"But as for the problems which will occur in the future, you should refer to the narrators of our traditions for their verdicts as they are my proofs to you, and I am Allah's Proof (Hujjatu 'llah) to them."

Other letters of His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)) were issued during the minor occultation (ghaybatu 's-sughra), each one of them solved difficulties and gave instruction in the boundless sea of wisdom. All these letters were conveyed through the Holy Imam's special deputy to the desirous seekers.

Yes, the four deputies, who were at the highest level of faith and confidence for many years, were the blessed mediators between the Imam and the people till in the year 329 A. H., when this deputation was closed, and on the basis of the Divine Will the major occultation of Imam-e Zaman commenced. This was the very occultation which was prophesied a long time previously by the Holy Prophet and the Shi'ites Imams; and Muslims keep patient in this period of test, till by the order of Almighty Allah, the Awaited Imam will appear and the Divine Aim will reach its fulfilment.

THE MAJOR OCCULTATION

After the year 329 A. H., when the major occultation commenced the special deputation of Imam-e Zaman terminated. If anybody claims during the major occultation to be a mediator and a deputy, then, according to the declaration of Imam-e Zaman himself, that claimer is a liar.

In the Holy Imams' traditions, the purpose of the Imam's going into occultation is compared to the sun being behind the clouds yet being a source of vitality and life for living creatures. Likewise, while the Imam is behind the curtain of occultation, he is still a source of the existence and

remaining of the world.

During the major occultation, many people have had meetings with His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi - a.s.), and have managed to meet him, but none of them have claimed to be able to see him or to represent him, because only the four special deputies (Nawwab al-khass) of the Imam had the honour of meeting with His Eminence whenever they wished.

Some of the names of these fortunate persons who have had the honour of meeting the Imam are mentioned in the authentic books. Among these personalities are - 'Allamah Hilli -- a famous scholar and a rhetorician of the Islamic world; Muqaddas Ardibili - the most pious person and most knowledgeable jurist of his time; Sayyid ibn Tawus - a pious and a virtuous narrator, Sayyid Bahru 'l-'Ulum - a distinguished scholar. and other great and notable figures in Islam.

Yes, they saw the "sun" (Imam) with their own eyes, and their hearts were filled with the faith of Imamu 'l-'Asr (the Imam of the Period), and with sympathetic explanations they informed others about their meeting with His Eminence.

As an example, we can examine part of the will of Sayyid ibn Tawus which he wrote to his son in the year 650 A.H In his own words he explained to his son, implying the truth of the matter without claiming to have perceived him:

"O' my son! If success in discovering the truth and mysteries has been granted to you, then I will inform you regarding Imam al- Mahdi (a.s.) in such a way that you will never have any doubt, and you will not need intellectual proofs and recorded traditions; because His Eminence is certainly alive and exists, and as long as Merciful Allah does not allow him to plan events, he is excused from revealing and declaring his workings. And this matter is not exclusively to him, but was usual among many prophets and their successors. Then you must know with confidence and consider it as your faith and creed. And know that the insight of your father into His Eminence is brighter than his knowledge of the world."

The honour of seeing Imam-e Zaman was not exclusive to some special Shi'ite scholars only, but many devout and illiterate people have also had this honour. We are completely amazed when we see people who at one time used to commit sinful and indecent acts, but who after their repentance, and after having their hearts filled with love for Imam-e Zaman, also had an opportunity to meet him, and among them were also our Sunni brothers.

One of the Sunni brothers was Hasan 'Iraqi who lived a life of immorality when he was young. One day, he suddenly awoke from the slumber of heedlessness and asked himself, "Was I created to commit these evil deeds?" Then he left the immoral place he was in and went directly to the mosque. By chance, a preacher there was speaking about Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.). 'Iraqi's fully

disturbed soul turned into a heart flaming with enthusiastic love of the Imam Henceforth, he invoked Allah after every prayer to give him the opportunity to see the Living Imam (Baqiyatu 'Ilah) Finally, his prayers were answered and for seven days and nights he learned the path of salvation in His Eminence's presence.

Thereafter, this man became known as one of the great scholars of Islam 'Abdu '-Wahhab Sha'rani, one of the great Sunni scholars, and the original relater of this anecdote, used to call him by the title, "My great master Shaykh 'Iraqi."

During the major occultation, letters were issued by His Eminence to individuals and great scholars of Islam. In those letters new difficult problems were solved, and necessary guidance was given. Among these letters there was one issued in the year 410 A.H. praising a distinguished scholar of Islam, Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Nu'man, alias Shaykh Mufid.

Shaykh Mufid has enjoyed a special rank for his knowledge and devoutness, and that letter was an acknowledgement of his efforts and worthy services. Even after the passing of many centuries, people still admire him with honour and respect.

The importance of this letter indicates the awareness of the Imam of the mistakes and immoral actions of some of the Shi'ites, and at the same time it gives hope in the purpose of his existence.

"We are well informed of all your affairs and none of them is hidden from us. We are aware of the problems which have occupied you from the time when you found pleasure and kept committing indecent deeds which your predecessors had avoided.

We are aware from that time when your predecessors broke the covenant made with them, as if they knew not about it. We will not neglect or forget you lest calamity and troubles fall on you, and enemies have the opportunity to overpower you. Therefore, remember Allah and fear Him."

The valuable writings of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) during the major occultation are the most important guidance for his Shi'ites (followers). These writings can be referred to in the authentic Shi'ite books.

However, we are now passing through a very sensitive period in the major occultation.

In Islamic traditions, when the subject of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam is discussed, reference is made to the complex nature of this Divine test. In this Divine test, the sincere and faithful Shi'ites are distinguished from others "and becomes as pure as a pure gold."

In Islamic traditions, a comparison is drawn between the sincere faith of the Shi'ites and the faith of a few followers of the Prophet Nuh (Noah (a.s.)), who remained faithful despite their very difficult

test, and who, by boarding the ark with Prophet Nuh (a.s.), were saved from the Deluge.

Therefore, blessed are those who have passed this Divine test; we hope to be among their rank.

THE SHI'ITES DURING THE IMAM'S OCCULTATION

So now, what is a duty of a Shi'ite? What responsibilities does he have?

Truly, are we reckoned among the real followers of His Eminence (Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)?)

If we study the lives of the devout Shi'ites (followers) of the Holy Imams before the Twelfth Imam, and consider their sacrifices without the slightest hesitation, we shall at once awake from our neglectful slumber and realize our weakness and guilt.

Were not Salman al-Farisi, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, 'Ammar ibn Yasir and Malik al-Ashtar the followers of the contemporary Imam 'Ali, Amir al-mu'minin (a.s.), and are we too the followers of the Imam of our Age?

Was not Maytham at-Tammar, who did not cease to praise 'Ali, the Lord of the faithful, a follower of His Eminence 'Ali, and are we too, who are passing with the Imam of our Age through a strange period, the followers of His Eminence?

Were not the martyrs of Karbala', who with love strived in the way of defending the Imam of their time, Husayn (a.s.), and were martyred, the followers of His Eminence, and are we too, who refuse to give our wealth, lives and other means in the way of the Imam of our time, His Eminence's followers?

Is a person like Hisham ibn Hakam, who in his extraordinary and valuable debates crushed and defamed the opponents of the Divine Leadership (Imamate) in such a way that he was called the "assistant of the Imam" by Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.), a Shi'ite? And are we too, who are sluggish in fulfilling our foremost duty to recognize the Imam of our time, Shi'ites?

From what we read of the glad tidings in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Prophet and the infallible Imams, the Imam of the Age (Imam-e Zaman) has special responsibilities which other Imams did not have. Imam-e Zaman will establish a Universal Government. He will fill the earth with righteousness and justice. He will exploit the earth's treasures and natural resources. He will

improve and develop the land, and in this way people's awareness and understanding will improve.

Therefore, do not the followers of His Eminence have a very particular duty? Should not the Shi'ites endeavour to obtain the competence and merit of being His Eminence's special companions when he reappears by Divine Command?

Therefore, let us see what our duties are and how we should observe them. Undoubtedly, our first duty is to become acquainted with him.

Recognizing Imam-e Zaman is so important and essential that in the Holy Prophet's traditions we read:

"He who dies without recognizing the Imam of his age is like one who had died during the jahiliyyah (the pagan era before the advent of Islam)."

To die during the jahiliyyah means a death devoid of Islam and faith. And it is obvious that one who dies without recognizing the Imam of his age is counted in the group of the faithless.

In another tradition, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) is quoted as having said on the same subject : "One who dies without having (accepted) the Imam, it is as if he died in the jahiliyyah, and people are not exempted from recognizing their Imam."

Therefore, we must endeavour to recognize His Eminence (Imam-e Zaman) for the sake of Islam and our faith, and so that we may be reckoned among those who have gained salvation and among the faithful.

Another duty of the Shi'ites during the major occultation, which the Holy Imam have alluded to, is the question of being ready for the Saviour Hence, the first step for salvation is to recognize the Imam of the age; and the second step is to be prepared for the establishment of just Government by His Eminence.

One who is waiting (muntazir) and preparing himself for the appearance of the Imam must have the characters and merits of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.), and should sacrifice his life and wealth in his way. For this reason, Imam as- Sadiq (a.s.) said:

"One who waits for our commands is like a person who sacrifices his own blood in the way of Allah."

Yes, he who is really ready for the Imamu 'I-'Asr (the Imam of the Period) becomes like a martyr in the way of Allah.

In another tradition, the same Imam told some of his followers about the person who is really waiting for the Imam-e Zaman, saying: "One who dies while expecting the Government of al-Qa'im is like one who is in the presence of al-Qa'im (Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.)."

After a pause he added:

"But he is like one who has been struck with a sword while accompanying him."

Then he insisted further by adding:

"Nay, by Allah! He is like one who has been martyred in the presence of the Messenger of Allah."

Are we reckoned among those who are expecting His Eminence? Are we at least waiting for the Divine Promise of the Authority of Allah (Waliyyu 'llah) in the same manner as we wait for the return of our loved ones from a journey?

In another tradition, Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) narrated the virtues of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.) saying:

"If one takes pleasure in being among the companions of al-Qa'im, then he must wait for him and must act with good behaviour and modestly. If he dies before the appearance of al-Qa'im, then he will be rewarded like one who has followed him. Then act diligently, and await, that this effort and awaiting will give you delight, O' you who have found salvation."

So, one who is awaiting and has not ceased from good and worthy deeds should earnestly endeavour to be in an excellent and worthy position in such a way that Allah may shower His blessings on him.

So, we should pray to Allah that He may include us among those who are waiting for the Imam of the age, and that our acts and conduct may also symbolize the truth of our claim. Firstly, we should acquaint ourselves with His Eminence, the Imam, and then we should guide others, his opponents and enemies. We should gain the virtues of the companions of Imam al-Mahdi (a.s.), and should always be in the expectation of his appearance Henceforth, we will be able to sacrifice our worthless souls and thus to make them worthy.

Shi'ites must have a devout link with His Eminence during the occultation.<br

Their hearts and souls should be filled with love and affection for him.

Their thoughts should be devoted to his service and their desire should be to meet him.

Their prayers should be to ask for the blessing of Allah to be showered on His Eminence, and their

supplication should be for salvation.

Their existence should be one welded and fused unit, and their life should blaze with love for him .