[WHAT IS THE ISLAMIC VIEW ON THE MESSIAH AND THE ANTICIPATION THE MAHDI NEAR THE END OF TIME?](https://fountainmagazine.com/2006/issue-55-july-september-2006/what-is-the-islamic-view-on-the-messiah-and-the-anticipation-the-mahdi-near-the-end-of-time)

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Messiah is a name or attribute of Jesus, peace be upon him. Messiah means “blessed” in Hebrew, thus this name might have been used for him in admiration for his merits and virtues. It is reported that he was given this name for several reasons: he was protected from all kinds of sins; his touch healed illnesses by God’s permission; he frequently traveled and made his message heard every where. Mahdi literally means one who has embraced the faith and has thus been led to the “straight path.” Mahdi also refers to the savior, who will come at a time when tyranny and injustice dominate all around the world; he will re-establish justice, make Islam dominant, and he will be a descendent of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt), peace and blessings be upon him.

Awaiting a savior at times when basic credo of belief is ignored, abandoning religious duties has become common, and proper conduct as enjoined by faith has been forgotten in the world, dates back very early in history. Jews, Christians, even many people before them all spent a lifetime with expectations of a savior, especially when they had to face injustice and suffer. Throughout the ages of prophetic mission that was represented by a chain of messengers, it was always a Prophet or a Messiah for whom the people waited. After the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, people no longer await a messenger; rather they are expecting a reviver or a savior, a guide or a mahdi from the lineage of the Prophet. This mahdi has been called Mahdi al-Rasul, due to the perception that the Mahdi will be sent like a messenger by God and that there are signs of his superiority over the Fuqaha al-Arbaa (four great jurists of Islam: Imam Azam, Imam Malik, Imam Safii, and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal), saints of all ranks, and even the Qutb al-Irshad.1

**ISLAM AND ANTICIPATION OF THE MAHDI**

In religions like Judaism and Christianity people have always awaited a Messiah or a Mahdi, who will save the believers from sufferings and teach the faith to others. Such anticipation consolidated the believers’ spiritual power and stimulated the believers’ determination for revival. It can even be argued that the popularity of prophets like Moses and Jesus were, to a certain extent, a consequence of this kind of anticipation. People who gathered around each of them said, “He is the powerful will and determination that the previous messengers gave glad tidings of!” According to the New Testament (Matthew 3:11) the Prophet John (the Baptist), said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but he that comes after me is mightier than I; he is one whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Although he was also a prophet, when he listened to Jesus, the most glowing youth of Nazareth, who was also his cousin, he saw his enthusiasm and influence upon people, and he said, “This is the Messiah we have been awaiting!” John’s glad tidings gave rise to further enthusiasm and expectations in the community, and his testimony for Jesus quickened the process of the apostles’ faith in him, reinforcing their belief.

The Children of Israel have always anticipated a Messiah. When they noticed certain features of the savior described in their holy book, their anticipation became a fire burning inside, urging them toward further research. Nevertheless, during the translations of the scriptures, or as they were handed from generation to generation, some kind of a mist covered this very important issue, making it impossible to see what was behind. Lost in this overwhelming mist, the Children of Israel became lost in their viewpoint and got mired down in denial, although the savior for whom they had been waiting was standing in front of them. They denied the Messiah who embraced everyone with forgiveness and compassion, saying, “You are not him (the Messiah).”

After Jesus another savior was awaited. The coming of the Pride of Humanity, the Prophet Muhammad, was anticipated; all his attributes had been very well defined and sought after. The glad tidings of this were announced by Jesus and the messengers who came before him. Bahira, the Christian monk, expressed this longing for the coming savior when he told the following to the Messenger, who was partaking in a trade caravan to Damascus: “You will be the Last Prophet. I hope that I can live until the day when you will declare your mission, and that I will be able to serve you by carrying your shoes.” Zayd (Umar’s uncle and the father of Said ibn Zayd, a Companion who was among the ten people who were promised Paradise) voiced the same anticipation when he said on his deathbed, “I know a religion will come very soon, its shade is above your heads. But I don’t know if I can survive until that day.” However, there were also many others who failed to see the pit in front of them, denying him, saying, “You are not him.” There were others who did not accept his message either because it was against their interests or because he was not of their lineage. But the glad tidings, known for so many years, that a savior would come caused the first Companions to embrace Islam and the Helpers of Medina to pledge their commitment to the Messenger of God at Aqaba. Anticipation of a Messiah had a great influence in the formation of the bond between the Prophet and his Companions, despite so many provocations and attempts to discourage the followers by the polytheists. The believers stood firm at the reverse in the Battle of Uhud and at the Battle of the Trench. In addition to the Prophet’s personality, appearance, message, persuasion, confidence, devotion, loyalty, and intellect, we cannot deny the role this anticipation played in the spreading of his message.

**THE ORIGINS OF THE ANTICIPATION FOR THE MAHDI-MESSIAH IN RELIGION**

There are almost a hundred Traditions of the Prophet which point to the return of the Messiah at the end of time and how this return will take place. At least forty of these Traditions are authenticated (sahih) according to the criteria determined in hadith studies; they are considered to be reliable by experts. Another twenty of this hundred are listed as being hasan, i.e., although not as certain as the authentic Traditions, their chain of transmission is considered to be dependable. Twenty to thirty other Traditions have a weaker reliability for their authenticity. To cite an example, it is reported in Bukhari, Tirmidhi, and Musnad that the Messenger of God said, “By God in Whose Hand of Power my soul is, the descent of Jesus, son of Mary, who was a just sovereign, among you, is soon.” In another hadith, reported in Muslim and Abu Dawud, the Prophet said, “When Jesus, son of Mary, descends the ruler of the Muslims will ask him, ‘Come and lead the prayer for us.’ Jesus will say, “No, you are rulers to each other; this is a blessing of God to the Muslim community.”

There is no verse in the Qur’an that has an overt reference to this issue. However, some prominent scholars, like Kashmiri of India, who compiled Traditions related with this issue, selects four verses that are considered to indicate the descent of the Messiah toward the end of time.

He shall speak to the people in the cradle and in manhood. And he shall be of the righteous. (Al Imran 3:46)

And there is none of the People of the Book but will believe in him before his death. (Nisa 4:159)

And peace on me on the day I was born, and on the day I die, and on the day I will be raised to life. (Maryam 19:33)

And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment). (Zukhruf 43:61)

We can also give two examples from the Traditions about the Mahdi: “The Mahdi is from us, Ahl al-Bayt. God will give him victory in one night. The Mahdi is from the children of Fatima” (Ibn Maja, Fitan, 34; Darimi, Mahdi, 1). “Even if there will be one day left for the end of this world, God will send a person from Ahl Al-Bayt to fulfill justice in a world of tyranny” (Ahmad ibn Hanbal II, 117-118).

As a work of His Mercy, God Almighty, at various times of disunity, has sent a restorer, a reviver, a respected vicegerent, a saint, a perfect teacher, or other mahdi-like blessed people to us. Such people have eliminated disunity, restoring and protecting the faith. Bediuzzaman gives Mahdi al-Abbasi as an example in the political arena, Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Shayk Naqshbandi, aqtab al-arbaa (four great saints: Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Ahmad Badawi, Ahmad Rufai, Ibrahim Desuki), and twelve imams in the spiritual arena, saying, “As this is the way of God, He will definitely send a radiant person from Ahl al-Bayt, who will be the greatest jurist, the greatest reviver, sovereign, mahdi, teacher, and the greatest saint against a grievous mischief toward the end of time.” Bediuzzaman also answers questions about the weakness of the reliability of Mahdi-related Traditions: “Is there anything that cannot be criticized in some way or another? Some scholars report with indignity that even Ibn Jawzi, a great scholar of hadith, listed some authentic Traditions as fabricated (maudu’ ahadith). Every weak or fabricated hadith does not necessarily mean that it conveys a wrong message. A weak hadith means that its chain of transmission does not certify its authenticity; but its message might be the truth.”

**THE RETURN OF JESUS**

Some Islamic scholars consider the descent of Jesus as a person would be contrary to the divine wisdom of God Almighty. They rather think that it will take place as a descent of a “collective spiritual personality.” Some other scholars have interpreted Qur’anic verses and Traditions in a different way. Bediuzzaman, on the other hand, while not discarding the possibility of Jesus’ descent as a person, stresses the spiritual personality more, and interprets this descent as the conformity of the Christian world to Islam. He also argues that the descent of Jesus as a person might not be a distant possibility: “The Glorious Sovereign, Who sends angels from heavens to the Earth at all times, Who sometimes transforms them into human form as did Gabriel into Dihya (a Companion of the Prophet), Who make the spiritual beings from the realm of spirits come to this world in the form of a man, or late saints in an imaginary body, would certainly dress Jesus in a human form who is alive and resides in the worldly sky, even if he had gone to the farthest end of the afterlife and was really dead, and would send him for such a substantial result.” Bediuzzaman never went further into these details which exist in certain reports.

**CLAIMING TO BE THE MAHDI IS DEVIATION**

The Mahdi-Messiah issue is an issue that has not only long been abused, but also one that has been exploited by unbelievers who try to slander sincere believers. Some of those who make such claims are pushed to the fore by certain powers and they are used against Muslims.

I believe the descent of Messiah as a spiritual personality is not too distant a future. It may indeed take place that this spirit, or meaning, may descend, and nobody should oppose this possibility. The coming of the Messiah as a spiritual personality simply means that a spirit of compassion or a phenomenon of mercy will come to the foreground, a breeze of clemency will waft over humanity, and human beings will compromise and agree with each other. The signs of such a phenomenon are already present: Muslims are sometimes invited to churches to read the Qur’an, it is now an accepted fact that Prophet Muhammad is a Messenger of God, and that the Qur’an is a divine revelation. Some people as well may come to declare themselves as “Muslim-Christians.” It does not seem improper to me to regard these as an introduction to the spirit of Messiahhood.

**ABUSING THE EXPECTATION OF THE MAHDI AND THE MESSIAH**

Many individuals throughout Islamic history can be listed to have attained a rank near to that of the Mahdi. To cite an example, Mahdi of the Abbasids, may God’s mercy be upon him, can be considered as a mahdi in a sense if we take into account his significant reforms, the straight path he was following, his respect for his predecessors, his reverence for the Companions, as well as his moderate and upright ideas about religious issues. Among the Umayyads, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was a mahdi in this sense. It is also possible to refer to some prominent figures from Abu Hanifa to Imam Rabbani, Faruq al-Sarhandi, and from him to Imam Ghazzali and Mawlana Halid Baghdadi; for they are considered to have had the characteristics of the Mahdi. Such people served Islam sincerely, without making false claims or pursuing personal interests, and they never claimed to be the Mahdi. The people who noticed their virtues gathered around them, forming a circle of benevolence. However, there have always been some opportunists, who desired to exploit such considerations.

Even while the Messenger of God was still among us, many liars like Musaylima, Tulayha, Aswad al-Ansi, and Sajah claimed to be prophets. In addition, in every epoch some have asserted to be “the person who will come at the end of time.” Similar to the people mentioned above and to the eight Dajjals who uttered that “I, too, am a prophet” soon after the death of the Messenger of God, there have been some people with sick souls in every era who state “I am the Messiah” and go even further to produce the evil claim that the Messenger of God was sent to the Arabs, while they have been sent for the world community. Moreover, it is reported in the Traditions concerning the Mahdi that the Prophet said “Someone from my family will appear and his name will be similar to my own”; that is, it has been indicated that the Mahdi’s name will be similar to the names of the Prophet, for example, Muhammad or Ahmad; a number of people have changed their names to fit in with this fact.

According to what was reported by Shatibi for instance, Abu Mansur, the ruler of the sect called Mansuriya, honored himself with the name “Kisf,” which literally means “piece,” claiming to be the Messiah and that the Holy verse Were they to see a piece of the sky falling (on them), they would (only) say: “Clouds gathered in heaps!” is referring to himself (Tur, 52:44). Indicating this passage and claiming that he was the Kisf he soon gathered supporters around him, as if he had indeed descended from Heaven. Ignoring the actual meaning of the verse, and only taking into account the action of descending from the sky, he argued to be the Kisf mentioned in this verse thinking of himself as a stone that had descended upon humanity. Similarly to what Shatibi reported, Ubaydullah of the Rafizis, who thought of himself as the Mahdi, had two councilors, Nasrullah and Fath. Nasrullah in Arabic means the “help of God,” while Fath means “victory.” As if to justify his status, this so-called Mahdi assured them with the argument that “You are the ones the chapter Nasr in the book of God refers to; as the verse surely addresses us, the promise that Islam will be embraced by people in crowds will come true via our own efforts”:

When comes the Help of God, and Victory, and you see the People enter God’s Religion in crowds, celebrate the Praises of your Lord, and pray for His Forgiveness: For He is All-Forgiving.” (Nasr 110:1-3)

These two examples, reported by a man of significance like Shatibi, are sufficient in terms of providing evidence for how names and attributes can be abused, how they are used in the service of disorder, and how they cause bloodshed in a particular geographical area.

The issue of awaiting a savior and the abuse of this expectation has not remained restricted only to religious life. Some people, for instance, awaited a savior in economical terms while others did so in a social context. Those who awaited a savior for economy focused their attention upon Karl Marx during a chaotic time of Europe which was mired in blood by the uprising of workers. Such people have highly regarded his works Das Kapital and The Communist Manifesto which he wrote with Engels, and thus regarding him as the savior of humanity, and in particular, the working-class (the proletariat). Dr. Ikbal stated the following words about Marx in Payam Mashrik (News from the East): "a prophet without a holy book (!), who is voicing the people"s viewpoint"; he further depicts Marx as an ignorant, impolite, and impious character who is after various kinds of expectations; and this Marx was indeed greeted by some as the Messiah. Likewise, from Lenin to Trotsky, many others have been applauded as saviors. At times in the Islamic world, too, some have been viewed as saviors in nearly every country: from Egypt to Sudan and from Syria to Somalia. Some have even gone to such an extreme in apostasy, ignorance, heedlessness and unbelief that they even said, "Muhammad was the Prophet of the Arabs, or Medina; yet, this one is ours." Several mahdis emerged among the followers of the Rafizi thought throughout history. Similar to the argument that the person who founded the Muwahhideen State was the Mahdi, many political groups that emerged during the times of the Umayyads and Abbasids were convinced that their leaders were Mahdis. The first sovereign of the Shiite (Ismaili) Fatimid State, which was established in North Africa and exercised power over Egypt later on, was believed to be the Mahdi by those who founded and sustained this state. Placing a child on the throne, they would gather around this pseudo-savior whom they considered to be the grandson of the Prophet, thus abusing the Mahdi-Messiah issue. Furthermore, the Fatimids declared independence causing further disorder as well as segregation in the Muslim community during a phase in which the Muslims suffered at the hands of both the Crusaders and the Mongols. As for recent history, it is as if the Mahdi-Messiah issue has provided a playground in which disorder can frolic. It has been abused to a great extent by a number of people, from the Mahdi of Somali to the great Mahdi in Sudan; the latter was killed and cremated by the English and his ashes were then scattered on the Nile&#8212;Dr. Ikbal wrote a great deal about this matter. There is also Bahaullah, who was applauded as the Promised Messiah, and Gulam Ahmad, who was engaged in Hindu yoga and meditation, having a tendency toward revealing the power of the soul and seeing hallucinations when he felt dizzy, due to his asceticism. This last person called himself respectively a mujaddid (reviver of religion), the Promised Mahdi, the Expected Imam, and finally the Promised Messiah. Later came Elijah Muhammad, who declared himself to be a prophet. A particular case in point is the Shiite"s attempt to keep the idea of the Mahdi on their agenda by announcing that "One of the Twelve Imams has been hidden somewhere while still alive, so as to be able to appear at a later date." It is very ironic that they expect the savior who kept cover from the evil of the Abbasids will suddenly make his appearance as if from a neverland, during the time of the Dajjal (Anti-Christ), which is a much greater evil than was present under the rule of the Abbasids. This expectation should be investigated in terms of the essentials of faith as well. The expectation of a perfect Heracles has always been an everlasting characteristic of the oppressed and victimized nations. Many lazy, passive, and weak souls, who have completely sealed themselves to abolishing false beliefs through their own efforts, are busy awaiting such a Heracles who is to descend from the sky. As a matter of fact, there exists such a reality and there is a tendency to await a Mahdi in Sunni thought as well; however, the Mahdi, as understood by the Ahl al-Sunna, has not been attributed supernatural features at all. On the contrary, he is believed to be a ruler who will lead the society to Islam, and a man of science, heart, and spirit

**IT IS NECESSARY TO WATCH OUT FOR ABUSES**

Having been subject to abuses throughout the history, the belief in the Messiah and Mahdi might still be open to exploitation, while liars who claim to be prophets as well as imitators of the Mahdi and so-called shaykhs may well spring up. If a person can claim to be the Messiah, as Gulam Ahmad did, it is, then, necessary to study and analyze the issue in terms of the essentials of faith. What does he mean by such a claim? If he is trying to say that the Messiah has entered into him, as have some people attributed divinity to Jesus, and that he regards himself in this way, this is unbelief according to Muslim faith; the word "deviation" is too mild a term for such a situation. Yes, such a claim is blatant unbelief. By this utterance and claim such a person may mean to say that he is on a spiritual journey in the orbit of Jesus the Messiah, and that those who observe him are able, in some way, to see a (kind of) Messiahhood through him, due to the level he has attained. If this is what is meant, it is a paradox, as a person who has actually reached that level would never make such a claim. In addition, claiming to be a person of such a spiritual rank is the height of vanity. Abd al-Qadr al-Jilani may have really been a Mahdi, though he had never claimed such a thing. Likewise, Muhammad Bahauddin Naqshbandi might also have been a genuine Mahdi; yet, he had never associated himself with that rank. Though he equally deserves to be addressed as Mahdi in this sense, Imam Rabbani did not even consider himself to merit the quality of being human. To speak more frankly, those who belong to the horizon mentioned above are surely the ones who avoid claims and quests for high spiritual rank and status. Perfect analysis is required for such claims: Is it a wrong association arising from sharing the same level of spirituality?2 Is it an error which stems from an overestimation by society? Is it the voicing of the confusion of that same society? Or is it rather that this person truly thinks that he is a chosen one? If they really believe so and claim to be the Mahdi, then this is an obvious sign of vanity, deviation, and a groundless claim that should be refuted. If, in the same way, they argue that they are the Messiah, then this is nothing less than the worst kind of unbelief. Nobody can claim "I am the Messiah," as Jesus the Messiah came, and took his leave of us, going as prophet. This being the case, anyone who claims to be the Messiah is without a doubt performing an action that is as grave as claiming to be a prophet, that is, they are blaspheming. If a person born of certain parents claims to be the Messiah, it means that they have been reincarnated as well, an idea that finds no place in Islamic belief, where such a claim is regarded as a deviation, or even unbelief. From this perspective, one would never attempt such an argument if following the way of Ahl al-Sunna and walking in the light of the Prophet. As I have mentioned earlier, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi put forth the idea that "If there is a need for Islam, the manifest religion, to express itself in various places in the world again, the Messiah will come back right away, even from the remotest corner of the other world." However, in order to shed light upon his general outlook, he interpreted the descent of Jesus as a spiritual personality. He further stated that the Messiah would be represented by a group or a section of the society. Yet, in this context, giving a particular name, or perceiving the personality of Jesus epitomized in another person, or declaring that a specific person is the Messiah, be he the great Conqueror Mehmed II, or Imam Rabbani, are all in essence unbelief. It is an evil claim that genuine believers are afraid to utter; rather they are on constant alert to avoid it. Some nave people might easily call those whom they overestimate as "the Mahdi." As we have tried to emphasize, however, even if the Messiah were to come and descend in person, he would not do so as a prophet. The fact that he will obey the current guide of Muslims in addition to the fact that the Messenger of God, Muhammad, was the last prophet, both indicate that he will neither descend as a prophet nor will his spirit pass into another. If he were to appear as spiritual personality, neither those involved in this spiritual personality nor the leading figure would never come up with such a claim. Similarly, the person in question, or rather the spiritual personality, who bears the attributes of the Mahdi, would not claim to be the Mahdi nor would they ever make such an assertion. Thus, even if they do not believe themselves to be the Messiah, if a person remains silent against the overestimation of others regarding him who proclaim him the Messiah or the Mahdi, this means that he is keeping silent against deviation or unbelief, depending on the gravity of the claim. Accordingly, such a person would deserve more to be called "a mute devil," based on the statements of God"s Messenger. Indeed, if one is addressed as "the Messiah" but, on the other hand, remains silent purposefully, not attempting to warn others against making this deviation, then such a person is no less than a mute devil. If the person in question wanders around claiming that "I am the Mahdi," they indeed float on misery, and have gravely deviated from the path. It is out of the question that a Muslim would approve of any such claims. This issue, which was destined to be abused throughout time, has unfortunately become a tool exploited by the enemies of the religion, used to defame sincere believers. Moreover, some other people are backed by certain powers to emerge with such claims to use against Muslims. Such cases may well come to the fore in the near or distant future, just as they did in the distant and recent past. Some deviated people, as well as those who do not believe at all, might well take advantage of the expectation of the Mahdi-Messiah and exploit the meaning of such a title on behalf of their plots. This will be done in the name of deceiving Muslims through the exploitation of Islamic concepts and by condemning sincere Muslims to annihilation. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that care and caution be adopted against such plots and against the exploitation of such concepts.

NOTES

1. Qutb al-Irshad (Master of Teachers): It is a title given to very exceptional saints, and according to Imam Rabbani"s definition they appear only many centuries after a previous one. Their teaching of faith has a worldwide influence.
2. Here we can give the example Khidr, who is a beloved servant of God and an important figure in Sufism. He holds a high spiritual rank and those who reach this rank through spiritual journeying are sometimes confused with the Khidr himself.