

Question And Answer *Imam Mahdi**

Introduction

U sul al-Kafi written by Muhammad b. Yaqub Kulaini (death 328 a.h.), is one of the most authentic books in the Shia doctrine. It is translated to English by ayatollah Muhammad Reza Jafari Najafi, and is published by World Organization for Islamic Services (WOFIS) In 1998. This translation is fairly accurate and the translator has added explanatory remarks to some parts of the book. The following questions and answers are based on his remarks about Imam Mahdi (p.b.u.h.).

Question 1: What was al-Kulaini's purpose in narrating the traditions about Imam Mahdi?

Answer: The objective of al-Kulaini was to show that the eleventh Imam did have a son; that several people saw him; that he went into occultation; both the minor and the major occultations, and that there was a warrant for his

* Adopted and prepared in question and answer from al-Kafi by Hamid Shahedi

Imamate. It should be remembered that, for this purpose, he chose those traditions (ahadith) of which he himself was a narrator in the chain of transmitters, and from this aspect there is a difference between al-Kafi and such encyclopedic works as al-Majlisi's *Bihar al-Anwar* which do not restrict themselves in this way. With regard to his purpose, therefore, he makes no reference to the subject of the special historical position of the Mahdi, or to the traditions which narrate from the Prophet his prediction of a figure who will arise at the end of time.

Question 2: How does the Sunni scholar, Ibn Khaldun, report the overall belief of the Islamic world about Imam Mahdi?

Answer: The best formulation of the belief of all Muslims about the Mahdi has been given by a person who did not himself believe in his coming and who denied the validity of traditions concerning this matter. This was the famous historiographer 'Abdu 'r-Rahman ibn Muhammad, Ibn Khaldun (B.732/1332 – D.808/1406). In his well-known “Introduction” to his great historical work writes: “It has been (accepted) by all Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time, a man from the family (of the Prophet) will, without fail, make his Appearance. One who will strengthen Islam and make justice victorious. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realms. He will be called Mahdi.” (Ibn Khaldun, “An Introduction to History”, (The Muqaddimah), transl.

F. Rosenthal, ed. and abridged N.]. Dawood, London, 1967, pp. 257 - 258. See also Arabic text: Ibn Khaldun, at-Tarikh, Bulaq ed., vol. 1, p. 260). It can be understood from this extract that Ibn Khaldun was of the opinion, that belief in the Mahdi was not a peculiarity of a one sect in Islam, but was common to all Muslims. Secondly, the hadith literature was not sufficiently reliable as a basis for this belief. Here we shall try to show: 1) it was not only Ibn Khaldun's opinion that all Muslims held a belief in the Mahdi, but also many other Islamic scholars, held that belief in the Mahdi was a necessary belief for a Muslim to hold; and 2) there are ahadith (Plural of Hadith, narrations) on the subject of the Mahdi which are reliable (sahih) according to any traditional basis for evaluating the ahadith.

Question 3: How do Islamic scholars view Ibn Khaldun's report on Imam Mahdi?

Answer: Some 'ulama'(religious scholars) have taken the first opinion that Ibn Khaldun holds, i.e. belief in the Mahdi is common to all Muslims, and have used this as a basis for criticizing the second opinions, i.e. that this belief is unwarranted because the hadith literature is unreliable, on the grounds that what is commonly held by the Muslims must be a correct belief! (For examples, see al-Azimabadi, "awnu 'l-ma'bud, a commentary on the Sunan of Abu Dawud", vol. n, pp. 361362; al-Mubirakfuri, "Tuhfatu 'l-ahwadhi, a commentary on the Sahih of at- Tirmidhi", vol. 6, p.484; al-Shaykh Mansur Ali Nasif, at-Taju 'l-jami lil-usul,vol.5,p.341.)

Al-Sahykh Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (1309/1892 -

1377/1958), one of greatest recent Egyptian scholars of ahadith and tafsir, whose major work was his commentary on the Musnad of Ahmad Hanbal (for his biography see al-A'lam, vol. 1, p. 253; Mu 'jamu 'l-mu 'allifin, vol. 13, p. 368), says in this commentary: "Belief in the Mahdi is not peculiar to the Shi'a school, because it is something which is proved by reliable reports of the sunnah (traditions and practice of the holy Prophet (p.b.u.h.))through many channels from the narration of many of the companions of the Prophet, in such a way, that no one can doubt the truth of [this belief]." Then he proceeds to a strong refutation of Ibn Khaldun's second assertion. (Ahmad Hanbal, al-Musnad, Dar al-Ma'arif, Egypt, vol. 5, pp.196 -198. and vol.14, p.288.)

An even more recent opinion published on this approach to the subject was the fatwa given by the General Secretariat of the Rabitatu 'l- 'alami 'l-Islami (Muslim World League) in Mecca (23 Shawwal 1396/11 Oct. 1976), which states that more than twenty companions of the Prophet narrated traditions concerning the Mahdi, and gives a list of those scholars of Hadith, who have transmitted these traditions, and of those who have written books on the Mahdi. It also mentions those who have certified these ahadith as "reliable" on various grounds; So, after refuting the opinion of Ibn Khaldun, the fatwa says: "The memorizers and scholars of hadith have confirmed that there are reliable (sahih) and acceptable (Hasan) reports among the ahadith on the Mahdi; the majority of them are related by numerous authorities (undeniable mutawatir), and therefore providing exact knowledge). There is no doubt about their status as

undeniable mutawatir and sahih reports. [They have also verified] that belief in the Appearance of the Mahdi is obligatory, and that it is one of beliefs of the people of the sunnah and jama 'ah; only those ignorant of the sunnah [of the Prophet] and disbelievers in doctrine deny it." (For a transcription and reproduction of this fatwa, see, among others, the Introduction to al-Ganji, al-Shafe'i, al-Bayan, Beirut 1399/1979, pp.76 -79, and appendix.)

Al-Hafiz Abu 'l-Hasan, Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Sojistani al-Aburi al-Shafi'i said: "Ahadith were related by numerous authorities, and were spread far and wide by many narrators, from al-Mustafa, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his descendants, concerning the Mahdi, who is from the Household [of the Prophet] ... and who will fill the world with justice ..." This statement was accepted by many subsequent 'ulama' (see Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Tahdhibu 't-tahdhib, vol. 9, p. 144; Fathu 'l-bari vol. 7, p. 305; al-Qurtubi, at-Tadhkirah, p. 617; as-Suyuti, al-Hawi, vol. 2, pp.165 -166; al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, al-Burhan fi 'alamat Mahdi akhiri 'z-zaman, pp.175 -176; Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, al-Sawa'iq al-muhriqah, p.167; al-Zurqani, Sharhu 'l-mawahib al-ladunniyyah, vol. 5, p. 348; as-Sakhawi, Fat'hu al-mughith, vol. 3, P: 41. etc.)

Abu 'l-'Abbas Taqiyyu 'd-Din, Ibn Taymiyyah (661/1263 - 728/1328) said, in Minhaju 's-sunnah (vol. 4, pp. 211- 212), that the ahadith concerning the Mahdi were certainly reliable, and his student, adh-Dhahabi, concurred with him in his summary of his teacher's book (Mukhtasar Minhaj al-sunnah, pp.533 – 534).

al-Hafiz Muhammad ibn Ali ash-Shawqani (1173/1760 -

1250/1834) wrote a book called *at-Tawdih fi tawatur ma ja'a fi 'l-muntasar wa 'd-dajjal wa 'l-masih* (The Explanation concerning the fact that [the reports which] have been related concerning the Awaited One, the Dajjal and the Messiah are reliable because of the great number of their reporters), in which he said, concerning the Mahdi: “There are fifty hadith concerning the Mahdi which I have been able to find, and in them is what is reliable (Sahih) and acceptable (Hasan), and what is *da'if munjabar* (weak, but related to a Sahih tradition). They have been related by numerous authorities, and are, therefore, reliable beyond doubt or confusion. Because in jurisprudence (Usulu 'l- fiqh) the qualification of “*tawatur*” is valid even for [traditions] with less than this number of narrations. There are also many sayings of the companions [of the Prophet] which explicitly mention the Mahdi; these have the status of narrations from the Prophet, since there is no question of establishing such sayings through research (*ijtihad*).” (See *Mawsu'atn al-Imam al-Mahdi*, vol. 1, pp. 391392,413 - 414, 434.) He gives the same opinion in his other book, *al-Fat'h al-rabbani* (see *Tuhfat al-Ahwadhi*, vol. 6, p.485).

Many other Sunni 'ulama' have also attested the *tawatur* status of many ahadith concerning the Mahdi. The interested reader can refer to, e.g., Muhammad ibn Ja'far al-Kattani al-Fasi, *Nazm al-motanathir fi 'l-hadithi 'l-mutawatir*, Fas 1328, pp. 144 - 146.

As far as we have checked, at least 46 books by 35 non-Shi'a authors have been written specifically on the subject of the Mahdi. As far as Shi'a authors are concerned, there are a

great number of such books. In al-Dhari'ah (vol. 16, pp. 74 - 84) only 44 books with the title al-Ghaybah¹ are-listed, not to mention those in their titles “al-Ghaybah” is included, or those about the “Ghaybah” which do not include the word in their titles. The most well-known of all these books are: “Ghaybah” by Shaykh Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al- Katib an-No'mani, Ibn Abi Zaynab (d.c 360/971), Kamal al-Din wa tamam al-ni'mah in two volumes by Shaykh Saduq, Abu Ja'far, Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi; and “Ghaybah” by Shaykh Ta'ifah, Abu Ja'far al-Tusi, of all works on the Mahdi and his occultation, the most comprehensive is the al-Bihar (vols. 51- 53) by Allama Majlesi, which contains about 1,200 pages dealing specifically with this topic.

Question 4: What are the minor and major Occultations?

Answer: The Imam al-Mahdi's occultation is divided into two periods: the Minor occultation (al-ghaybat al-Soghra), and the Major occultation (al-ghaybat al-kobra). During the minor occultation there were authorized agents (nawwab) who acted as intermediaries between the holy Imam and the Shia community. The Agents were designated by their names. They were (nawwab khass), agents specified by their names. The specified agents, were four in number, and succeeded one another. The “four agents” (al-nuwwab al-arba'ah) were: 1) Abu 'Amr 'Uthman ibn Saeid al- 'Amri al-Asadi (d. 280/893); 2) his son, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Uthman al-'Amri (d. 305/917); 3) Abu al-Qasim al-Husayn ibn Ruh al-Nawbakhti (d. 326/938); 4) Abdu 'l-Husayn, Ali ibn

¹ Occultation

Muhammad al-Samuri (d. 329/941), whose death marks the inauguration of the Major occultation.

During the time of Major Occultation, any Muslim Shia scholar, possessing some specific attributes, could be a generally appointed representative of Imam Mahdi.

Question 5: Where does Imam Mahdi live? Is it true that he lives in a well in a cellar in Samarra¹?

Answer: The belief of the Shi'a concerning the residence of the Imam, in his life, is that it is unknown. Of course, during the minor occultation, the four designated agents, who were in connection with him, could know his address. It may also be the case that the holy Imam decides to communicate with someone during the major occultation, and therefore, comes into contact with him. But this is never a regular occurrence. Even if the Imam were to appear to such a person, Shi'a doctrine quite clearly states that he would not give him any instructions, although he may impart knowledge. In fact, any claim about an instruction from the twelfth Imam is considered as a false claim. Thus, his residence remains unknown during this latter period. There is no mention of any specific place where the Imam is at any time. He has been seen, by different persons throughout his life at many different places.

The belief attributed to the Shi'a, that there is a specific place where the Imam is “hidden”, is without foundation in

¹ A town in Iraq, where the holy shrines of the tenth and eleventh Imams are located.

their teachings. For example, many non-Shi'a writers claim that it is common among the Shi'a to refer to the "Imam zaman" as Sahib al-sardab (the Dweller in the cellar), and they have mentioned four places in which they suppose the Shi'a believe him to be hidden. The first is Samarra':

"The Imamiyyah claim that he went into the cellar of his father's house in Surra man ra'a [the old name of Samarra']; and his mother saw him. He has never left that cellar. It was in the year 265 A.H. [878 - 879], and he has remained hidden there up to now! They – the Shia people- are awaiting his Reappearance from the cellar in Samarra at the end of time!"(Ibn Khallikan, vol.4, p.176; al-Wafi bi' l-wafayat, vol. 2, p. 336; Ibnu 'l-Athir, vol. 7, p. 274; Abu 'l-Fida', vol. 2, p. 45; Mir'atu 'inan, vol. 2, pp. 107,172; Ibn Kathir, at-Tafsir, vol. 3, p. 61; Tuhfatu 'l-ahwadhi, 101.6, p.374; Awnu 'l-ma'bud, vol.11, p.367; al-Ibar, vol. 2, p.31; etc.) ibn Khallikan and as-Safadi wrote: "Also it is said that: the Mahdi went into the cellar in, 275 [888-889]" (Wafayatu 'l-a'y'an, volA, p. 176; al-Wafi, vol. 2, 1P.336-337).

The second place is al-Hillah, a town to the south of Baghdad, which was founded in 495/1101 (Mu'jamu 'l-buldan, vol.2, p.294; Le Strange, the Lands of the Eastern Caliphate, p. 71), some 235 years after the beginning of the occultation. Ibn Battutah (703/1304 - 779/1377), the famous traveler, says in his "Book of Travels" (Rihlah) that there was a mosque in al-Hillah called the Mosque of the Sahib al-zaman. The Shi'a were awaiting his Reappearance from this place! (vol. 1, p. 208, and vol. 2, p. 745). That mosque was described by Ibn Khaldun as: "The Ithna 'Ashari ... claim that their twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al- 'Askari,

whom they call the Mahdi, entered a cellar in [the family's] house in al-Hillah, and disappeared there ... and will Reappear from there at the end of time.” (al-Muqaddimah, vol. 1 [of his History], p. 166) al-'Isami, Samtu 'n-nujumi 'l-'awali, vol. 4, p.143; al-Tantawi, al-Jawahir, vol. 9, pp. 180 – 181; and many others have narrated this opinion from Ibn Khaldan. However, in the text of his “History”, Ibn Khaldan also wrote: “The Imamiyyah claim that the Imam after Ali al-Hadi was al-Hasan, who was called al-'Askari, for he was born in Surra man ra'a, which was then known as al-'Askar [i.e. the Army Camp]. He was imprisoned there after the death of his father up to his own death in 260 [874]. He left an unborn son called Muhammad, who, it is claimed, entered a cellar with his mother and disappeared! The Shi'a claim that he was the Imam after his father, and he is called the Mahdi and the Proof (al-Hujjah) ... They await his Reappearance from that cellar.” (at- Tarikh, vol. 4, pp. 29 -30).

The third place is Baghdad. Zakariyya ibn Muhammad al-Ansari al-Qazwini ash-Shafi'i (605/1208 - 686/1283), who visited Baghdad, included in his information about that town: “In the central mosque in Baghdad is the famous cellar from which the Shi'a claim their Mahdi will reappear, for they claim that Muhammad ibn al-Hasan went into it.” (A.tharu 'I-bi.ad wa akhbaru 'l- 'ibad, p. 386; see also al-Qaramani, Akhbaru 'd-duwal, Baghdad ed. 1282/1865, pp. 117 - 118; Samtu 'n-nujumi 'l- 'awali, vol.A, p. 144).

The fourth place is Kashan, a town in the centre of Iran south of Qum, and Yaqut in his Mu'jamu 'l-buldan (vol. 4, pp. 296 - 297) and al-Qazwini in A.tharu 'l-bilad (p.432) narrate a

similar story to the one narrated about Baghdad in connection with this town.

From all of these it is clear that the stories are extremely unreliable as statements of Shi'a doctrine, for not only do they make no sense chronologically, but they also contradict each other. Besides the fact that there is no reference to any cellar in Shi'a books, the following two passages quite clearly refute all the above tales as indicative of Shi'a doctrine. Al-Hafiz al-Ganji ash-Shafi'i (d. 658/1260) wrote in *al-Bayan fi akhbar Sahibi 'z-zaman* about the evidence of those who deny the existence of Sahibu 'z-zaman, peace be upon him: "They deny his continuing existence for two reasons. The first is the length of time (of his existence), and the second is that he lives in a cellar without anyone giving him food or drink, and this is quite extraordinary." (p.148). Abu'l-Hasan Ali ibn 'Isa al-Irbili, a famous Imami author (625/1228 - 692/1293) commented on the second proof of the Mahdi's non-existence given by al-Ganji: "This is an extraordinary thing to say and a peculiar idea, for those who deny his existence have no need of this [for if he never existed, a fortiori he never lived in a cellar], and those who affirm his existence do not say that he is in a cellar; rather they say [merely] that he is living and existent; he lives sometimes in one place, journeys to another, and travels around the world." (*Kashfu 'l-ghummah* , vol. 3, p. 283)

The second reference is from the famous narrator of ahadith, Mirza Husayn an-Nuri (1254/1838 -1320/1902), who gives an extended discussion of the occultation and the cellar as non-Shi'a authors have narrated it. He quotes what they say and refutes them, and says that in the belief

of the Shi'a there is no connection between the occultation and any cellar; the only reference to any cellar in their belief about the twelfth Imam is that he was seen in the cellar of his father's house reciting the Quran, and the only reason for their veneration of this place is that it was one of the locations in which he was seen. If this cellar, which is in Samarra', has become famous as the Cellar of the Occultation (Sardabu 'l-ghaybah) in the common view of the Shi'a, it is because it was made so by non-Shi'a sources; among the Shi'a 'ulama' there is no mention of such a name. (See *Kashfu 'l-astar*, pp. 210 - 216), as-Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin al-Amili, *al-Burhan 'ala wujud Sahibu ' z-zaman*, pp.102 – 103).