

THE GLOBE BEFORE AND AFTER THE ADVENT OF IMAM MAHDI, PART II¹

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ABSTRACT: Islamic sources hold a rich account of the ‘End of Times’ – an era described in the eschatologies of the dominant world religions. It refers to the world’s state of affairs before and after the coming of Imam Mahdi to establish worldwide justice and peace. The previous part offered an overview of the concept of the ‘End of Times’ from the viewpoint of the dominant world religions, as well as the Islamic perspective using the Qur’an and hadith as sources to envision what lays ahead of us, and with the purpose of increasing our knowledge on the advent of Imam Mahdi, establishing a positive relationship with the Imam, and preparing for his return. This part expands on the quality of the people during this time, including their intellectual condition and scientific and technological advancements.

Intellectual situation

In this part, the focus is on the intellectual situation of the people at the time of Imam Mahdi – the level of human understanding and thought. According to Islam, knowledge, understanding, thinking, contemplation and reflection are very important. Islamic sources use terms such as

¹ This series of papers is based on parts three and four of a series of lectures delivered by the author in Muharram 1428/January 2007 in London.

tafakkur, tadabbur, shu'ur, 'ilm, ma'rifah – all different terms that refer to the significance of understanding. Thus, we are to investigate the level of people's understanding before and after the advent of Imam Mahdi.

According to hadiths, many doubts during the “End of Time” will be prevalent among the people, almost like an epidemic illness – doubts with respect to many issues, although it will firstly manifest in the fundamental questions of life: our origin, what we will ultimately witness, what we should do to prepare for our end in this world, and so forth. It will be like a state of confusion that will be widespread; people will be, and perhaps currently are, faced with various ways of thinking about humanity, creation, and the proper course of action a person should take.

This will exist even among the believers and some Shi'a who will experience doubts in their hearts. They will say ‘If there is such a person as Imam Mahdi, then why has he not reappeared? How long do we wait for him?’ Such feelings of confusion will be widespread.

Shaykh Tusi narrates a hadith in *al-Ghaybah* referring to the end of time: “In that age, those after falsity (*mubtilun*) will be experiencing many doubts.”² However, these doubts will not be real or logical ones; they will be self-inflicted, as mentioned in the Qur'an:

وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكُمْ إِذَا لَأْتَابَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

² *al-Ghaybah*, p. 334 –

فَعِنْدَ ذَلِكَ يَرْتَابُ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

You did not use to recite any scripture before it, nor did you write it with your right hand, for then the impugners would have been sceptical. (29:48)

In other words, it did not matter what the Prophet did. Those who were committed to falsifying his message would constantly argue that the Qur'an was not from God. There is a difference between having genuine doubts and stubborn doubts.

There is a story of Avicenna and one of his students. On one occasion, they were together on a journey, and the student continuously praised Avicenna from time to time, saying that he was a genius and a great person,³ and that if he claimed some high position of authority people would follow him. Avicenna did not reply. In the middle of one cold night as they were asleep, when Avicenna asked the student for some water, he began to make excuses and avoided the subject. Avicenna asked him again, and he continued to make excuses. At the time of the morning prayers, the *muadhdhin*, or caller to prayer, began to recite the *adhan* (call to prayer). Avicenna then said to the student that this was the difference between himself and someone with real authority. The Prophet, who lived centuries ago and whom the caller to prayer has never seen, has enough love and authority to cause that man to leave his bed, go out into the dark and cold to pronounce the *adhan* every night, whilst he had known Avicenna closely for so many years, and as a teacher no less, yet still he did not listen to him and could not give him water when he asked for it. Such doubts and scepticism are self-inflicted.

³ Indeed Ibn Sina was a great man and most of his knowledge was gained through self-inspiration and not from any teachers.

Imam Ali quotes from the Prophet, as narrated in *Kamal al-Din* by Shaykh Saduq: “Mahdi is from my progeny; he will have an occultation and there would be perplexity due to which nations will go astray.”⁴

Another report reached us from Imam Sadiq, which is a good tidings for us; if we are truly believers then this will make us rejoice:

The time in which God is closest to His servant and happiest with him is when they miss the Hujjah (proof) of God [i.e. when the Hujjah is not with them]. He is not visible for them and they do not know where he is. But nevertheless they remain certain that the Hujjah of God is present. At this time these people should expect the advent (*faraj*) in the mornings and evenings [i.e. all day, every day]. On the other hand, the time in which God is most angry with His enemies is the time of *ghaybah* because the Hujjah is not physically present. God knew that genuine believers would not have doubt. And had He known that genuine believers would start doubting then He would not have taken away His Hujjah even for a blink of an eye.⁵

We may sometimes feel that we are at a loss because the Hujjah of our time is not physically accessible to us. Imam Sadiq, however, tells us that this is the time that God is most happy with us, even more so than the people who were able to sit with and listen directly to the other

⁴ Shaykh Saduq, *Kamal ud-Din wa Tamam um-Ni'mat*, p. 287

المهدي من ولدي ... تكون له غيبة وحيرة تضل فيها الأمم

⁵ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 95

أقرب ما يكون العباد من الله جل ذكره وأرضى ما يكون عنهم إذا افتقدوا حجة الله جل وعز و لم يظهر لهم ولم يعلموا مكانه وهم في ذلك يعلمون أنه لم تبطل حجة الله جل ذكره ولا ميثاقه فعندها فتوقعوا الفرج صباحا ومساء ، فإن أشد ما يكون غضب الله على أعدائه إذا افتقدوا حجته ولم يظهر لهم وقد علم أن أوليائه لا يرتابون و لو علم أنهم يرتابون ما غيب حجته عنهم طرفة عين

great personalities such as the Prophet and the other Imams. And He is angrier with His enemies in this time because the Shi'as are without their leader and are facing oppression, hence making the anger of God more severe with the oppressors. Indeed, we are the orphans of the Ahlul Bayt because our spiritual fathers are not with us. God is very much supportive of us and angry with those who are hostile to us.

The last part of the hadith suggests that the doubts are not genuine; they are pseudo-doubts, and a true believer would not doubt. Indeed, there is little difference whether the *ghaybah* is ten years or 10,000 years, as logically there is no difference. God knows that real believers would never doubt. If He knew they would doubt then He would never take away his Hujjah into occultation.

At the end of time, despite all the confusions and scepticism, there will be some people who possess a very profound and deep understanding. When Imam Zayn al-Abidin was asked about *tawhid* (the oneness of God), he replied, "God knew there would be people at the end of time so profound and deep in their understanding, and because of them God revealed the chapter "Say, *He is Allah, the One*" and the beginning of Surat al-Hadid up to "He is aware of what is in the breasts (57:1-6)."⁶

From this we conclude that there will be a group of people at the end of time with the profundity and depth sufficient to understand the meanings of these verses. God's names in these verses, such as *Samad*,

⁶ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 91

إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّوَجَلَّ عَلِمَ أَنَّهُ يَكُونُ فِي آخِرِ الزَّمَانِ أَقْوَامٌ مُتَعَمِّقُونَ فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى {قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ} وَالْآيَاتِ مِنْ سُورَةِ الْحَدِيدِ إِلَى قَوْلِهِ {عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ} فَمَنْ رَأَى ذَلِكَ فَقَدْ هَلَكَ

Awwal, Akhir, Zahir, and Batin cannot be explained without philosophical knowledge and insightfulness.

Of course, there were people before the end of time who read and understood these verses, but not with the truer and deeper meaning. In our time, we know so much more about these verses, and certainly we understand them in a much better way than those who came before us. It would not be difficult to argue – based on these hadiths – that at the end of time there would be some people who have no doubts; rather, they possess certainty and a profound understanding even before the advent of Imam Mahdi.

The best of people

In another hadith from Imam Zayn al-Abidin, we read:

The occultation of the twelfth successor of the Prophet will last a long time ... the people that live in that time of occultation who believe in his *imamah* and await his advent are better than the people of every other age. This is because God has given them so much intelligence and understanding that for them seeing or not seeing their Imam is the same.⁷

When the Imam says that the people of the end of time are ‘better than the people of every other age’, this is relatively speaking. It does not mean every single person of the end of time is better than every single person of other ages; rather, it is in a general sense.

⁷ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 122

تمتد الغيبة بولي الله الثاني عشر من أوصياء رسول الله صلى الله عليه واله وسلم والأئمة بعده ... إن أهل زمان غيبته القائلين بإمامته، المنتظرين لظهوره أفضل أهل كل زمان لأن الله تعالى ذكره أعطاهم من العقول والإفهام والمعرفة ما صارت به الغيبة عندهم بمنزلة المشاهدة

The enquiry we must now make is why are the people of the end of time better in a general sense than people of other times? Is it due to their extra worship, or that they work harder? According to this hadith, it is because they have a better understanding, stemming from the intellect.

Without a proper level of understanding, we risk being like the person described in a hadith: There was a person who was on an island and was satisfied with this way of life. He thanked God that everything around him was perfect: he had good health, food, and environment. But he had one complaint; he would say, “Where is the donkey of God so I can feed him properly.” In other words, despite much worship and being surrounded by many bounties, he had misunderstood God, thinking of Him as a being who rode a donkey. The value of such worship, when not coupled with proper understanding, is reduced.

Those who possess superficial knowledge must see realities in order to believe. While the people at the time of Prophet Musa requested him to ask God to show Himself to them, the people of the end of time appreciate their Imam whether they see him or not. Imam Zayn al-Abidin says, “These are the people who are true and sincere; they are the genuine Shi‘as, and they call to the religion of God secretly and openly [i.e. their very being is a call to Islam].”⁸

Intellects will be made complete

Al-Kafi contains the following hadith from Imam al-Baqir:

⁸ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 122

اولئك المخلصون حقا ، وشيعتنا صدقا والدعاة إلى دين الله سرا وجهرا

When our Qa'im comes, God will put his hand [either the hand of God or the hand of Imam Mahdi] on the heads of the servants; and God will bring together their intellects and then their understanding will become complete.⁹

We can infer the following points from this:

1. The change in understanding referred to in this hadith is a comprehensive and general change intended for humankind, rather than limited to any one group.
2. The nature of this event does not have a simple explanation. There is no mention of God sending any new book or message, nor any messenger; rather, it refers to placing a hand. Whether it is His hand or the Imam's hand is irrelevant. In any case, it is a divine act, a special providence for the people of that time, and Imam Mahdi is God's instrument on the most important part of a human being, i.e. his mind. From this we can conclude that God directly attends to human understanding.
3. The intellects are put together. This could mean:
 - a. Placing a hand on them brings about reconciliation and agreement among people, and will end combat and discrepancies, and increase cooperation and mutual understanding. As said in other hadiths, the cleverest person is he who brings together the knowledge and understanding of others, whereas an ignorant person is one who says he knows everything and thinks that he does not need anyone else.

⁹ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, Kitab ul-Aql wal-Jahl, No. 21

إذا قام قائمنا وضع الله يده على رؤوس العباد، فجمع بها عقولهم وكتبت به أحلامهم

Overall, this will enable people to set aside hostility, and will enter them into a harmonious way of thinking. Although the human population is more than six billion, our collective understanding and intellect is not multiplied six billion times. We somehow block and limit one another when our intellects clash.

- b. By placing a hand on them, God puts together the intellect of every individual and completes and perfects that person's own intellect. Perhaps the person's concentration is improved and he can avoid any distractions to focus on what is truly important. In modern life, we often feel that there are too many distractions with so many things happening around us, and it is difficult to concentrate properly. We end up losing an immense amount of understanding when we lose concentration. Hence, this placing of the hand could mean that people are directed to think about what is necessary and beneficial.
- c. The people's understanding becomes complete, which is a natural outcome of the act of placing the hand. Hence, we should not be surprised when we hear reports of many who believe in Imam Mahdi; their understanding has been raised and focused, thus making it easier to believe in him. Of course, there could be more interpretations than what we have presented.

So far we have discussed that when Imam Mahdi reappears, there will be a sudden change in the people's understanding in general, and particularly in a select group who are – relatively speaking – superior to

the believers in any previous age. The following introduces the condition with respect to science and technology.

Science and technology

We have reports from the Infallibles that suggest certain progressions will occur in the fields of science and technology. In *Bihar al-Anwar*, Imam al-Sadiq is reported to have said:

Knowledge consists of twenty-seven letters,¹⁰ and all the knowledge brought by the prophets only comprises two out of twenty-seven. Until now, people had not learned except two out of the twenty-seven. When our Qa'im comes, he will introduce twenty-five more parts of knowledge and will spread this knowledge amongst all people. And he will add this to the two parts from the previous prophets, so that the twenty-seven parts become complete.¹¹

Knowledge will reach its peak during the time of Imam Mahdi. It is not difficult to comprehend how knowledge may undergo a rapid expansion. If we compare the progress of knowledge, science, and new discoveries in the last fifty years with the rest of the progress in the history of mankind, then the last fifty years achieved more than what came before it. Hence, this assertion is not surprising. Indeed, in the field of knowledge, the more one knows, the more one is encouraged and intrigued to ask questions, which ultimately leads to more knowledge.

¹⁰ The word used is letters, but this may actually refer to types of knowledge, or parts of knowledge.

¹¹ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 336

العلم سبعة وعشرون حرفاً لجميع ما جاءت به الرسل حرفان فلم يعرف الناس حتى اليوم غير الحرفين فإذا قام القائم أخرج الخمسة والعشرين حرفاً فبئها في الناس وضم إليها الحرفين حتى يبئها سبعة وعشرين حرفاً

Regarding this hadith, we are unsure of whether it refers to a particular kind of knowledge or whether it refers to knowledge needed to achieve human perfection. In Islamic sources, knowledge is sometimes used in a broader sense and at other times it is used in a specific sense. For example, Prophet Muhammad said, “Seek knowledge even if it requires you to travel to China.”¹² In this instance, the mention of knowledge could not have been Islamic knowledge since China did not have Islam. In this instance, therefore, the meaning of knowledge is broad.

On another occasion, Prophet Muhammad noticed that people had gathered around a person and were asking him questions, and he was answering them. The people were amazed and impressed. When the Prophet enquired as to who this person was, they replied that he is an expert in genealogy of Arabs; he can describe any person’s forefathers. In response to this, the Prophet said, “Knowledge is three: beliefs (*ayah muhkamah*), morals (*sunnah qa’imah*), or duties and responsibilities (*faridah ‘adilah*). Anything extra to these three is a grace (*fadh*).”¹³

In other words, priority should be given to that which helps in human perfection. If a person does not know the depth of their genealogy, then it will not limit them in their pursuit of perfection. And when Imam al-Sadiq mentions the twenty-seven types of knowledge, we cannot say for certain whether they are all general knowledge, or the specific knowledge that is required to achieve human perfection. In any case, we can conclude that there will be an extraordinary expansion in knowledge.

¹² *Wasail ul-Shia*, vol. 27, p. 27

اطلبوا العلم ولو بالصين

¹³ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 32

انما العلم ثلاثة آية محكمة أو فريضة عادلة أو سنة قائمة و ما خلاهن فهو فضل

Communications technology

It seems that another area for expansion and advancement will be the technology related to communications. Imam Sadiq says, “When Imam Mahdi appears, God will strengthen the Shi‘as’ hearing and vision so much so that whilst the Imam is in his own place and they are in other parts of the world, they will be able to see and hear him without any intermediary.”¹⁴

Today, we can understand how this may happen. But fourteen centuries ago this would have been unimaginable. At that time, many were not able to read or write, and the most they could do was to send verbal messages. Again, we are unsure if this hadith is what we see in modern technologies or whether we will still witness further advancements.

A similar point is mentioned in another hadith from Imam Sadiq:

Surely a believer, during the time of Qa‘im, will be in the east and will be able to see his brother in the west, and a believer will be in the west and will be able to see his brother in the east.¹⁵

Once again, it cannot be concluded for certain whether this is technology or a special power granted to believers.

In sermon 150 of *Nahj ul-Balaghah*, Imam Ali speaks about the future, and many thinkers have considered this to be a reference to the time of

¹⁴ *Rawzat ul-Kafi*, p. 241

ان قائمنا اذا قام مد الله عزوجل لشيئتنا في اسماعهم و ابصارهم حتى لا يكون بينهم و بين القائم بريد، يكلمهم فيسمعون و ينظرون اليه و هو في مكانه

¹⁵ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 391

ان المؤمن في الزمان القائم و هو بالمشرق ليرى اخاه الذي في المغرب و كذا الذي في المغرب يرى اخاه الذي في المشرق

Imam Mahdi, because the description it gives is compatible with what we know already regarding the end of time. Imam Ali says:

The eyes of the people will be enlightened by the Qur'an, and the interpretation of the Qur'an will be thrown into their ears. And they will be given the cup of wisdom in the morning and in the evening.¹⁶

Perhaps this refers to the contemporary personal mobile devices, or even something more advanced. In any case, it was unimaginable for the people at that time. From this excerpt, it seems that the Imam is emphasising the universal distribution of wisdom, that every person in the end of time will have access to the interpretation of the Qur'an, and to wisdom.

This has been possible with the spread of knowledge through books, electronics, and social media. This is why this prediction is not difficult to accept now, albeit it was something difficult for people to fathom in the past. The reality today is that a person in a remote area may have the same access to information that we have in a major modern city.

Regarding the topic of communications during the time of Imam Mahdi, I wish to also highlight the following hadith from Imam Sadiq, "When Mahdi comes ... what you are supposed to do is in your hand. If something happens to you and you do not know what to do, look at your palm and there you will find your answer."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Nahj ul-Balaghah*, Sermon No. 150

¹⁷ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 365
 جلى بالتنزيل ابصارهم و يرمى بالتفسير في مسامعهم و يغتقون كأس الحكمة بعد الصبح
 اذا قام القائم بعث في اقاليم الارض في كل اقليم رجلا. .. يقول له الامام(ع) عهدك في كفك فاذا ورد
 عليك امر لا تفهمه و لا تعرف القضاء فيه فانظر الى كفك و اعمل بما فيها

In *Kamal al-Din* of Shaykh Saduq, Prophet Muhammad refers to the ninth Imam after Imam Husayn, i.e. Imam Mahdi, as: “He with whom God will fill the earth with light after darkness, and with justice after oppression, and with knowledge after ignorance.”¹⁸

This clearly shows that the Imam will bring not only justice, but also knowledge, to which everyone will have access without restriction. In turn, this will help in curbing crime. Imam Baqir states:

One of the reasons why Mahdi is called Mahdi [lit. the guided] is because whatever is hidden and secret will become known to him to the extent that a murderer or criminal who is in his own house will be detected without anyone knowing about him, but Imam Mahdi will command people to go and bring him from his house. And people in their own houses will be afraid to speak lest they say or do something wrong, as if the wall may bear witness against them.¹⁹ Such a situation may be due to a miracle that the Imam possesses, or through technology.

Transport

Regarding the modes of transport in the end of time, Imam al-Baqir says, “There is something kept for your master [i.e. Imam Mahdi] and it is called *sa’b* (difficult/strong).²⁰

¹⁸ *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni’mat*, p. 260

تأسعهم القائم الذي يملا الله عزوجل به الارض نورا بعد ظلمتها ، وعدلا بعد جورها ، وعلا بعد جهلها

¹⁹ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 390

اما سمي المهدي لانه يهدي الى امر خفي حتى انه يبعث الى رجل لا يعلم الناس له ذنب فيقتله حتى ان احدكم يتكلم في بيته فيخاف ان يشهد عليه الجدار

²⁰ *Bihar ul-Anwar*, vol. 52, p. 321

ذخر لصاحبكم الصعب

He was asked: ‘What is *sa’b*?’ The Imam replied: “Something like a cloud, but with thunder and lightning [i.e. electricity] and your Imam will mount it and ride on the clouds.”²¹ This seems to be a reference to a development in the technology of transportation.

Information

Another interesting report, which some people say may refer to today’s satellite technologies, or it could be something that is yet to be developed, is that Imam al-Sadiq tells his people:

When Imam Mahdi comes he will have knowledge about whatever is hidden in the earth, whether it is inside a high mountain or in the depth of a valley [i.e. inside the earth]; nothing of the treasures of the earth will be hidden from him.

Somehow the Imam would have this knowledge, and would not need to dig or explore to find out what is hidden inside the earth. We can see that some of this is already happening today, with the technologies and techniques that currently exist.

Again, Imam al-Sadiq states: “When our Qa’im begins to rise up, the earth will be shining and people will not be in need of the light of the Sun.”²² This may be referring to nuclear energy used for lighting, or to the current electrical methods used for generating light. Certainly in the past people would have been limited to the Sun for its light, but during the time of Imam Mahdi, the earth itself would be a source of lighting.

²¹ *Ibid*

²² ما كان من سحاب فيه رعد وصاعقة او برق، فصاحبكم يركبه اما انه سيركب السحاب ويرقى في الاسباب
Kashf ul-Ghummah, vol. 2, p. 464

إذا قام قائمنا اشرفت الارض بنور رها و استغنى العباد عن ضوء الشمس و ذهب الظلمة