

Further Thoughts About a Muslim Antichrist

By [Dr. David R. Reagan](#)

The [January-February 2009 issue](#) of our magazine, the *Lamplighter*, was devoted to the issue of whether or not the Antichrist could be a Muslim. I argued that there is no possibility.

Several readers questioned one of the points I made in the article, and I would like to respond to the question they raised. In the article I pointed out that those who believe the Antichrist will be a Muslim argue that he will be received by the Muslim world as their long-awaited Mahdi, or Messiah. I took the position that this is misleading to believe "that all the Islamic world is living in breathless anticipation of the appearance of the Mahdi, when the reality is that 90% of all Muslims — the Sunnis — are not looking for a Mahdi. In fact the concept of a Mahdi is not even found in orthodox versions of the Hadith like *Sahih al Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*." I further observed that "the Sunni Muslims are looking instead for the appearance of the Antichrist, whom they call the *Dajjal*. If a person were suddenly to appear on the world scene claiming to be the Mahdi, he would be automatically rejected by the vast majority of Muslims."

Those who questioned my position on this matter all pointed to two pieces of evidence which they said prove that Sunni Muslims do believe in the concept of a Mahdi. One was a *fatwa* issued by the Muslim World League, a Sunni organization, in 1976 which proclaimed that belief in a Mahdi is "obligatory." The other was a long article on the Internet entitled "[The Twelfth Imam](#)." In that article the author points out that there have been Sunni theologians throughout history who have believed in a Mahdi.

On the surface, both of these items seem to prove that the concept of a Mahdi is central to Sunni eschatology. But I would argue that both give support to my position.

Let me explain.

The *Fatwa* of the Muslim World League

First, let's consider the *fatwa*. For those who are not familiar with Islam, let me begin by explaining the meaning of this concept. In the Islamic faith a *fatwa* is a religious opinion on Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar. In Sunni Islam any *fatwa* is non-binding, whereas in Shi'a Islam it could be, depending on the status of the scholar.

Now, it is true that the Muslim World League issued a *fatwa* in October of 1976 commanding Sunni Muslims to believe in the concept of an Islamic Savior called the Madhi. But this League does not speak for the Sunni world, despite its very pretentious title. It is a council located in Saudi Arabia that dictates theology for a radical and violent sect of the Sunnis called Wahhabism. This is the sect that produced Osama ben Laden. At most, there are probably about 30 million Wahhabis in the world. That may sound like a lot, but it is not. The Wahhabis constitute about one-half of one percent of the Sunnis, who number over 900 million.

Further, the very fact that the leadership of this radical sect felt it necessary to command its followers to believe in the concept of a Mahdi is evidence that such a belief is not widespread among Sunnis.

Arguing that this *fatwa* is evidence that the Sunni world embraces the concept of a Mahdi is equivalent to someone arguing that because the Council of Apostles of the Mormon Church has proclaimed Joseph Smith to be a prophet of God, all professing Christians believe he was a prophet.

The "Twelfth Imam" Article

The second piece of evidence, the long article on the Internet entitled, "The Twelfth Imam" also falls short of proving that Sunnis have embraced the concept of a Mahdi. To begin with, the article was written by a Shiite who is trying to convince Sunnis that they should believe in a Mahdi. In the process, he points to a number of Sunni theologians throughout history who have accepted the concept.

The equivalent of this article would be one written by a Messianic Jew to the Jewish world trying to convince them that they should accept the idea that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah — and in the process quoting Jewish sages throughout history who did accept Jesus as Messiah. Would such an article prove that most Jews believe in Jesus as their Messiah? No, it would prove just the opposite. If the Sunni world embraces the concept of the Mahdi, then why is a Shiite trying so desperately to convince them that they should do so?

An Impossible Idea

Finally, I would contend that even if both the Sunnis and the Shiites believed in the concept of a Mahdi and were living in anticipation of the arrival of this Islamic Savior, there still would be no possibility that they would ever unite behind such a person, regardless of how charismatic and dynamic he might be. The very moment he declared himself to be the Mahdi, one question would enter the minds of all Muslims: "Is he a Sunni or a Shiite?" And if he were a Shiite, which he would most likely be, the 90% of the Islamic world that is Sunni would have nothing to do with him.

The idea of all Muslims uniting behind a Mahdi is about as absurd as the idea that any time before the Rapture all Christians in the world will one day unite behind the Pope.

Let me conclude by giving you my sources for my contention that the concept of a Mahdi is not something that is characteristic of Sunni end time thought:

1) Dr. Samuel Shahid, *The Last Trumpet: A Comparative Study in Christian-Islamic Eschatology*

(Dr. Shahid is a Middle East native who serves as director of Islamic Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas.)

This book contains the most detailed treatment of Islamic eschatology in the English language. In the book, the author devotes an entire chapter to the Shiite concept of a Mahdi. He states:

"The messianic Mahdi is the embodiment of the earnest longing and hope of the Shi'ites who have been oppressed and persecuted through the course of history..."

He points out that a major point of controversy between Shiites and Sunnis is the interpretation of Sura 43, verse 61 in the Quran which states:

"and he shall be the sign for the Hour."

Shiites argue that this refers to the Mahdi. Sunnis claim it refers to Jesus. He points out that Shiites "emphatically argue that Islamic messianism is an essential part of Islam, *a concept that is alien to orthodox Islam.*"

2) Riffat Hassan, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, "Messianism and Islam," Spring 1985

(Riffat Hassan is a Pakistani Muslim who has taught at Harvard University. She currently serves as professor of religious studies at the University of Louisville.)

In this article she emphasizes that one of the distinctive characteristics of the Shiite branch of Islam is its emphasis on the messianic concept of a Mahdi, even though there is no direct reference to such a person in the Quran. She sums up her discussion with this observation:

"Shi'a Islam has developed a network of intense messianic expectation around the idea of the Madhi's return."

3) Encyclopedia Britannica

Mahdi: (Arabic: "divinely guided one"), in Islamic eschatology, a messianic deliverer who will fill the Earth with justice and equity, restore true religion, and usher in a short golden age lasting seven, eight, or nine years before the end of the world. The Qur'an (Islamic sacred scriptures) does not mention him, and almost no reliable Hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) concerning the Mahdi can be adduced.

Many orthodox Sunni theologians accordingly question Mahdist beliefs, but such beliefs form a necessary part of Shi'i doctrine.

4) Wikipedia

In Islamic eschatology the Mahdi (also Mehdi; "Guided One") is the prophesied redeemer of Islam who will stay on earth seven, nine, or nineteen years (depending on the interpretation) before the coming of the day, Yaum al Qiyamah (literally "Day of the Resurrection" or "Day of the Standing"). Muslims believe the Mahdi will rid the world of error, injustice and tyranny alongside Jesus. The concept of Mahdi is not mentioned in the Qu'ran nor in the Sunni Hadiths such as *Sahih al Bukhari*. Many orthodox Sunni theologians accordingly question Mahdist beliefs, but such beliefs form a necessary part of Shi'ite doctrine.

According to scholar Cyril Glasse, the advent of Mahdi is not a universally accepted concept in Islam and among those that accept the Mahdi there are basic differences among different sects of Muslims about the timing and nature of his advent and guidance. The idea of the Mahdi has been described as important to Sufi Muslims, and a "powerful and central religious idea" for Shia Muslims who believe the Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al Mahdi who will return from occultation. However, among Sunni, it "never became a formal doctrine" and is neither endorsed, nor condemned "by the consensus of Sunni Ulama." It has "gained a strong hold on the imagination of many ordinary" self described orthodox Sunni though, thanks to Sufi preaching.

Another source distinguishes between Sunni and Shia beliefs on the Mahdi saying the Sunni believe the Mahdi will be a descendant of the Prophet named Muhammad who will revive the faith, but not necessarily be connected with the end of the world, Jesus or perfection.

Among Shi'a Muslims "the Mahdi symbol has developed into a powerful and central religious idea." Shi'a Muslims believe that the Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al Mahdi, the Twelfth and last Imam, who was born in 868 AD and was hidden by God at the age of five. He is still alive but has been in occultation "awaiting the time that God has decreed for his return."

The coming of the Mahdi is a disputed notion within Sunnis. The concept is not mentioned directly in the Quran or *Sahih al Bukhari*; however, the Mahdi is mentioned in the *Sahih Muslim* collection of Hadith [depending on interpretation]. According to scholar Cyril Glasse,

"Belief in the Mahdi has been rejected by noted Sunni authorities as being a Messianism... various Hadith about the Mahdi appear to be inventions to support political causes."

5) LookLex Encyclopedia

The Mahdi is a saviour figure in Islam, for which there are several different interpretations in Sunni Islam, and one dominant interpretation in Shi'i Islam. In Sunni Islam, the "Mahdi" is just one of several important figures, while the "Mahdi" of Shi'i Islam has a real eschatological importance, and is in the future the most important figure for Islam as well as the world.

The Arabic term "Mahdi" is best translated with "divinely guided one".

The main principle of the Mahdi is that he is a figure that is absolutely guided by God. This guidance is stronger form of guidance than normal guidance, which usually involves a human being willfully acting according to the guidance of God. The Mahdi on the other hand, has nothing of this human element, and his acts will be in complete accordance to God's will.

The figure of Mahdi, and his mission, is not mentioned in the Koran, and there are practically nothing to be found among the reliable Hadiths on him either. The idea of the Mahdi appears to be a development in the first 2 3 centuries of Islam. In the case of the Shi'i Mahdi many scholars have suggested that there is a clear inspiration coming from the Messiah figure of Christianity and its ideas of a judgement day in the hands of a religious renewer.

While there are many similarities between the Mahdi and Messiahs, there are also many variations over the Mahdi theme, which have differed from time to time and from region to region.

The first time we hear of the term "Mahdi" is in 686 CE, by the Muslim leader Mukhtar Thaqafi, for Muhammad bni l Hanafiya (see below).

Shi'i Islam

Even in Shi'i Islam, there are variations, but these all give the Mahdi an elevated and unique position. In Shi'i Islam, the Mahdi is central to the creed, contrary to Sunni Islam.

Sunni Islam

There are more than one way of defining the Mahdi in Sunni Islam, but never is it given such an importance as we can see it in Shi'i Islam. He is generally a restorer, the one who will secure a system where Muslims can live according to the principles of Islam.

6) New World Encyclopedia

The Mahdi, according to Shi'ite tradition, will arise at some point before the day of judgement, institute a kingdom of justice, and will in the last days fight alongside the returned Jesus against the Dajjal, the Antichrist.

However, like most religious concepts, various Muslim traditions have ascribed different characteristics to the Mahdi. Also, as Mahdiism is closely related to the leadership of the Ummah, it has had the potential to be abused as some leaders of secularly focused politico religious movements in the name of Islam who have claimed to be the Mahdi.

Of those Sunnis that hold to the existence of the Mahdi, some believe the Mahdi will be an ordinary man, born to an ordinary woman. Umm Salamah said:

"I heard the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) say: 'The Mahdi is of my lineage and family.'"

The Shi'a belief is that Mahdi has been alive and in occultation for 1200 years and is eleven generations down from Muhammad, i.e. the twelfth Shi'a Imam Muhammad al Mahdi.

The coming of the Mahdi is a disputed notion within Sunnis, with the claim being denied by some Muslims who regard the Qur'an as the sole authority in Islam. Mahdi is not mentioned in the Qu'ran and there are few authentic hadiths that mention him in detail.

7) Dr. J. Dominguez

["Branches of Islam"](#)

Asserts that one of the fundamental differences between the Shi'ite and Sunni branches of Islam is that the Shi'ites believe in a Messianic Mahdi.

8) Dr. Jim Eckman

["Sunnis versus Shiites: What's the Difference?"](#)

Finally, permit me a review of the major theological differences between Shiites and Sunnis.

- Shiites and Sunnis agree on core beliefs of Islam—the Quran and the Five Pillars.
- Shiites believe that the original Imams were divinely inspired and infallible in their judgments.
- Shiites clerics (imams) hold an elevated spiritual status forbidden by the Sunnis.

- Sunnis reject the teaching of a "hidden" imam but do accept the end time beliefs of the Quran.
- Shiites have a deep regard for martyrdom, incorporating many rituals and demonstrations absent in Sunnis.
- Shiites are more eschatological than Sunnis.
- Shiites believe that the Imam al Mahdi, the "Expected or Awaited" leader, will herald the end of time when he returns. The Mahdi and his army of followers will in effect be the army of Jesus before he returns. They will join Jesus in defeating the Antichrist, liberate Palestine and unite the world under Islam. Again, this belief is what drives the current Iranian president.

9) Mideast and North Africa Encyclopedia

In Arabic, the term al Mahdi means "the guided one." For Islam, the term developed through medieval Shi'ite thought into a concept charged with genealogical, eschatological (referring to the end of the world), and political significance. By the eighth century, the Mahdi would be characterized as a descendant of the prophet Muhammad, whose appearance as the redeemer, or messiah, presaged the end of the world and all earthly political and religious corruption.

Today, in Iraq and Iran, and in portions of Arabia and the gulf, the Shi'a branch of Islam is represented by Twelver Shi'ites, who believe in the return of the hidden twelfth descendant of Muhammad as the Mahdi. Until he reappears, Twelver Shi'ites believe that only their mujtahids (an elite group among their religious learned) have the power as the Mahdi's intermediaries to interpret the faith.

The concept of the Mahdi is not central to the beliefs of Sunni Islam, but it has popular appeal.