

A Discussion Concerning the Mahdi ('a)

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The concept of the Mahdi is not just the embodiment of an Islamic doctrine possessing a religious character but rather signifies a universal aspiration of mankind with the variety of its religions and creeds. It represents an innate aspiration through which people, despite the variety of their beliefs and their means of recourse to the Unseen (*ghayb*), perceive that there is, for all mankind on the earth, a promised day wherein the divine messages with their momentous significance will be fulfilled and their ultimate objective will be realized, bringing the long and arduous human journey through history to its ultimate destination. In fact, the consciousness of this unseen day and the awaited future is not limited to the religious believers in the Unseen (*ghayb*), but includes others as well, being reflected even in ideologies and creeds most vehement in their rejection of the Unseen and everything that relates to it, such as dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism, which interprets history in terms of contradictions, believes in a promised day in which all the contradictions would be resolved and peace and harmony will prevail. Similarly, we find that the psychological experience pertaining to this perception of mankind through the course of history, is one of the most widespread of experiences and the most common among individuals.

When religion affirms this general perception and asserts that the world will eventually be filled with justice and equity after rampant injustice and oppression, it gives an objective value to this perception by transforming it into faith in the future of humanity. This faith is not merely a source of comfort and solace, it is rather a source of strength and resourcefulness, because the faith in the Mahdi is faith in the

removal of injustice and tyranny even if it darkens the entire world and is an inexhaustible source of strength and resistance, as it is a ray of hope which removes despair from the human spirit by keeping the flame of hope lit in gloomy times when injustice assumes monstrous dimensions. This is because the promise of such a day affirms the possibility of justice defying a world filled with injustice and oppression, by pulling down the foundations of injustice to rebuild a new structure in its place. It implies that when injustice becomes monstrous and worldwide and spread its tentacles over human destiny, that is an unnatural condition which is bound to terminate. This great and inevitable defeat of injustice, at a time when it is at its zenith, gives a great hope to every victim of injustice and reassurance to every oppressed nation of the ability to tilt the scales and build a new order.

As the concept of the Mahdi precedes Islam and is of a wider occurrence, the detailed teachings furnished by Islam, being more fertile and more powerful in arousing the sentiments of the oppressed and the tormented throughout the course of history, give a greater vitality to all the aspirations which led to the emergence of this concept at the dawn of religious history. That is so because Islam has shifted this concept from the plane of transcendence to that of concrete reality, from the future to the present, and from the expectations of a saviour to be born in a distant and unknown future into a faith in an actual saviour who awaits along with others the promised day when all the conditions allowing him to carry out his great role are fulfilled.

Hence the Mahdi is not a saviour whose birth is awaited or a prophecy whose fulfillment is sought; rather he is a present reality whose active involvement is awaited and a particular individual living with his flesh and blood in our midst, whom we see and who sees us. With us he lives through our hopes and sufferings and participates in our joys and sorrows. He witnesses everything going on in the world stage, the sufferings of the tormented, the misery of the miserable, and the tyranny of the tyrants, and, from far and near; feels them all intensely, and, with his grief, await for the moment when he may extend his hand towards every victim of oppression, deprivation and distress, and crush the tyrants.

It has been decreed that this awaited leader shall not make himself known publicly nor disclose his life to others although he lives in their midst awaiting the promised moment.

It is also obvious that these Islamic teachings close the gulf of transcendence between the oppressed and their awaited saviour, building a bridge, in their inner consciousness, between them and him, regardless of the length of the period of waiting.

When we are called upon to have faith in the Mahdi as a particular individual, alive, who lives like we do and waits as we wait, the purpose is to instill in us the notion that the absolute rejection of all oppression and tyranny, whose embodiment is the Mahdi, is personified, in the very present in a waiting leader who rejects all injustice and who will appear in a state when he is free from any impediment arising from oath of allegiance to any tyrant, as reported in the traditions. Faith in him stands for faith in this living embodiment of unflagging rejection of injustice and standing by his side.

There is, in the traditions, a continuous exhortation to await 'the day of relief' (*intizar al faraj*) and a demand upon the believers in the Mahdi to await him. In this manner a conscious link is established between them and the leader and all the values which he represents including the negation of injustice. This link and connection cannot possibly be established unless the Mahdi existed as a contemporary living person.

Similarly, we see that this embodiment gives a new impetus to the notion and transforms it, at a higher degree, into a source of resourcefulness and strength. Further, it also gives every individual taking an stand against injustice comfort and consolation and lightens the pain of injustice and privation as he realizes that his Imam and leader also shares and feels these pains as a contemporary human being, as he is not merely a notion relating to the future.

Some objections about the Mahdi ('a):

However, at the same time, the existence of this contemporary person has led to negative attitudes towards the notion of the Mahdi itself among a group of people on account of the difficulty to conceive such a personification.

Hence they ask: If the Mahdi is a living person who has been contemporaneous with successive generations for more than ten centuries and will continue to be such for the coming generations until he appears on the world stage, how is it possible for him to live for a such a long time and remain immune to the natural laws which cause old age and senility in a much lesser time, leading ultimately to death. Is this not practically impossible?

They also ask: Why should God, the Glorious and the Exalted, be so keen in respect of this particular person to suspend the natural laws for his sake and carry out that which is impossible to prolong his life and save him for the promised day? Has mankind become barren and incapable of producing capable leaders? Why should not the promised day be left for a leader to be born at the dawn of that era, someone who would grow up like other people and carry out his role gradually until the world is filled with justice and equity after having been filled with injustice and oppression?

They also ask: If the Mahdi is the name of a particular person, the son of the Eleventh Imam from among the Imams of the Prophet's family (‘a), who was born in 256/870 and whose father died in 260/873-4, this implies that he was a small child, not exceeding five years, at the time of his father's death, and this age is not sufficient for covering the stages of intellectual and spiritual perfection under his father's tutelage. Therefore, how could he have acquired the preparedness for fulfilling his great religious and intellectual role?

They also ask: If the leader is well prepared, then what is the need for this long waiting extending over centuries? Hasn't the world witness enough of social ordeals and calamities that might call for his appearance on the world scene for the establishment of justice?

They further ask: How can we possibly believe in the existence of the Mahdi even if we were to presume its possibility? Is it justifiable to believe in the truth of this kind of hypothesis without scientific or religious evidence in its favour? Do a few traditions narrated from the Prophet (‘s), the degree of whose authenticity is unknown, suffice for accepting the above-mentioned hypothesis?

They have also questions concerning the role he is destined to play on the promised day. Is it possible for an individual to play such a great and decisive global role? A mere individual, however great he may be, how can he create history by himself and usher in a new era? For the seeds and roots of historical movements grow and develop under certain objective conditions and their contradictions; the greatness of the individual only places him in a position to channel these objective circumstances for bringing about practical changes to achieve the sought solutions?

They also raise another question: How can one imagine that this person will accomplish the task of bringing about such a terrific change and achieve a decisive victory of justice and its message over the entire systems of injustice, oppression and tyranny, despite the fact that they enjoy authority and influence and possess the means of mass destruction, along with tremendous scientific capability as well as political, social and military power?

These are questions which are raised regarding this issue and they are posed in one form or another. But the real motives behind these questions are not just intellectual. There is a psychological reason behind them as well, consisting of the feeling of awe about the reality dominating the global scene and the slightness of any chance of altering it fundamentally. The greater the awe produced by this reality dominating the world through the course of history, the more are the doubts and the questions that are raised. This is how defeatism and the feeling of pettiness and weakness lead man psychologically into a state of severe impotence at the mere idea of a great global change that would liberate the world from all its contradictions and injustices that have marked its history and give it a new content based on justice and truth. It is this feeling of impotence that gives rise to the doubts concerning this picture and inspires the attempt to reject it for some reason or another.

Here we will take up these questions, briefly examining each of them to the extent permitted by the scope of these pages.

The Mahdi's Long Life:

Is there a possibility that a human being may live for so many centuries as is supposed in the case of this awaited leader who would change the world, whose blessed life now exceeds eleven hundred and forty years, or nearly fourteen times that of the age of an ordinary human being who passes through all the usual stages of life from infancy to old age?

'Possibility' here has one of three meanings: practical possibility, scientific possibility, and logical or philosophical possibility: By *'practical possibility'* I mean that a thing should be possible for anyone to carry out. Thus crossing an ocean, going into the depth of the sea, and traveling to the moon are things which have now become practically possible. Hence there are people who are presently engaged in doing these one way or another.

By *'scientific possibility'* I mean things which may not be practically possible for anyone at present with the aid of the existing means, but from the viewpoint of science there is nothing to preclude their possibility provided proper conditions and means become available. Hence the possibility of man traveling to Venus is not precluded by science. In fact, the present trends point to its possibility, though

it may not be possible for anyone at present, because the difference between journey to the moon and journey to Venus is one of degree, and traveling to Venus does not involve anything more than overcoming the additional difficulties arising from greater distance. Therefore, traveling to Venus is possible scientifically although it has not yet become a practical possibility. As against this, the idea of a space journey to the sun is scientifically impossible, i.e. science does not consider it possible because scientifically and experimentally the possibility is inconceivable of making a shield against the heat of the sun which is like a gigantic blazing furnace with unimaginably high temperatures.

By logical or *philosophical possibility* I mean the absence, on the basis of a priori rational laws (i.e. prior to empirical experience) of any rational obstacle to the existence of anything. Hence it is logically impossible to divide three oranges into two equal parts without cutting one of them into two halves. Because, prior to any experience, reason knows that three is not an even but an odd number and it is not possible to divide it into two equal whole numbers because that would imply that it is both an odd as well as an even number at the same time, and this is a contradiction, which is impossible. But it is not logically impossible for man to enter fire without being burnt or to make the journey to the sun without being burnt by its heat, because no contradiction is involved in assuming that heat may not travel from a body at a higher temperature to one which is less hot, although it is contrary to our experience which shows that heat travels from a body at higher to one at a lower temperature until their temperatures are equal.

Thus we see that logical possibility has a wider scope than scientific possibility, and the latter in its turn has a wider scope than practical possibility.

There is no doubt that it is logically possible for a person to have a life-span extending over thousands of years because this is not something impossible from a purely rational point of view, considering that it does not involve any contradiction, for the concept of life undoubtedly does not in itself imply the idea of speedy death.

Similarly, there is no doubt that such a long life is not a practical possibility, like the possibility of reaching the sea floor or making journey to the moon. That is because science cannot, with the present means and experience, prolong human life for hundreds of years. Hence we see that those who have the greatest desire to live and also access to all scientific resources, do not live longer than what is usual.

As for scientific possibility, there is nothing in today's science that might negate the theoretical possibility of a very long life-span. This actually relates to the physiological significance of the phenomenon of old age and senility in man. Does this phenomenon represent a natural law which makes tissues and cells in the human body, after the peak of their growth, to age gradually and become less capable of sustained activity until they finally stop working at some moment, irrespective of the influence of any external factor? Or is aging and creeping infirmity of bodily tissues and cells in performance of their physiological functions a result of their battle against such external factors as microbes and toxicity which enter the body as a result of consuming improper food or some other factor?

This is a question raised by science today and it seeks to answer it, whereas there continue to be several answers for it on the scientific level. Therefore if we accept the scientific view which inclines towards interpreting aging and the mounting debility accompanying it as a consequence of the body's battle and resistance against certain external factors, it means that if the bodily tissues were insulated from these factors it is theoretically possible to increase the life-span, to overcome the phenomenon of aging and finally triumph over it.

But if we opt for the other viewpoint *which* favours the hypothesis that aging is a natural law of cells and living tissues, in the sense that they carry within themselves the seeds of their inevitable destruction through aging, senility and finally death, we may still say that this does not mean that there is no flexibility in this natural law. Rather, if such a law presumably exists it is a flexible law, because as we find in our daily lives and the scientists in their experiments, old age is a physiological and not a temporal phenomenon. At times it sets in early and at times it is delayed until late in life. Some old people possess young-looking organs and tissue despite being advanced in age, as reported by physicians, and they show no signs of old age. In fact, scientists have been practically able to benefit from the flexibility of this supposed natural law and have extended the age of some animals by hundreds of times of their natural age. They have achieved this by creating such conditions and factors which delay the operation of the law of aging.

This proves that slowing down of this law is scientifically possible by creating specific conditions and factors, although science has not yet acquired the ability to bring it about in relation to a complicated being such as man. However, this is only due to the relatively greater difficulty involved in achieving this in relation to man, in contrast to other living beings. This means that from a theoretical point of view science, to the extent indicated by its moving trends, does not have any basis for rejecting the possibility of extending the human life-span, irrespective of whether we interpret aging as a consequence of the

combat and resistance against external factors, or as consequence of a natural law of the living cell itself which compels it towards destruction.

What has been mentioned can be summarized as follows: To be sure, the extension of a man's life for several centuries is something possible logically and scientifically, although it continues to remain practically impossible. But science is moving on the path, albeit a long one, of realizing this possibility.

In the light of what has been said, we may approach the issue of the Mahdi's life-span and the questions and incredulity that surround it. We may note that such a long span of life is logically-and scientifically possible, and science is gradually moving towards changing this theoretical possibility into a practical one. Hence there remain no grounds for wonder and incredulity except that the Mahdi should have outstripped science itself by changing the theoretical possibility into a practical one in his own person before science could reach the level of competence to bring it about. But this is something similar to a person outdistancing science by discovering a cure for meningitis or cancer.

If the problem is as to how Islam, which has determined the age of this awaited leader, has outstripped science in bringing about this change, the reply is that this is not the only area in which Islam has outstripped science. Has not the Islamic Shari'ah in general outstripped science and the natural development of human thought by several centuries? Did it not lay down prescriptions setting forth a program for implementation, whereas it took man several centuries to acquire the maturity to arrive at them independently? Did it not bring the divine laws which represent ultimate wisdom and whose secrets and judiciousness could not be comprehended until recent times? Didn't its heavenly message disclose cosmic secrets which had never occurred to man's mind and which were proved and confirmed by science only later on? Thus if we believe in all this, why should we regard it with incredulity if the Author of this message, the Glorious and the Exalted, has presaged and outdistanced human science in determining the age of the Mahdi?

Here I am not speaking about anything except cases of such presaging which we are able to perceive directly, and it is possible to add to these other instances of presaging mentioned in the heavenly message itself. An example of this is in the Qur'an where it informs us about the nocturnal ascension of the Prophet (s), a journey in which he was taken from the Holy Mosque in Makkah to the Masjid al-Aqsa. If we want to understand this nightly journey within the framework of natural laws, it may be considered as a use of natural laws which science did not discover except hundreds of years later. Therefore, the same divine knowledge which made it possible for the Prophet (s) to travel at that speed before science could understand it, has granted the last of his God-designated vicegerents a long life before science could accomplish anything of the kind.

Indeed this long life bestowed upon the awaited saviour by God, the Exalted, seems strange from the viewpoint of what is regarded as usual and familiar until today and in the light of what has been presently achieved by scientific experiments. But isn't the saviour's very role of bringing about a tremendous change, for which he has been prepared, something strange, unusual and unprecedented in history? Is he not entrusted with the task of changing the world and rebuilding a new civilization on the basis of truth and justice.? Such being the case, why should we consider it strange if the preparation for this great role is marked with certain strange and unusual phenomena such as his long life-span? However strange and unusual these phenomena may appear, they are not more strange than the great role which he is to play on the promised day So when we accept his unique historical role despite its being without a precedent in the history of mankind, then why should we not accept his long life span which has no precedent in ordinary life?

I do not know whether it is a matter of accident that only two individuals are entrusted with the mission to purge human civilization and build it anew, and both have long life-spans, several times the normal? One of them who performed such a role in the past was Noah, about whom the Noble Qur'an explicitly says that he remained among his people for a period of nine-hundred and fifty years and it became possible for him to create a new world after the flood. The other, who will perform his role in future, is the Mahdi who continues to be among his people for more than a thousand years, and who will be enabled to create a new world on the promised day in the future. If we accept the case of Noah who lived for at least a thousand years, why should we not accept the case of the Mahdi?

Miracle and Long Life:

Until this point we have observed that a long life-span is scientifically possible. But if it is supposed that it is not practically possible and the law of aging is an inflexible law, which mankind has not been able to overcome until today and to alter its conditions, what does that imply? It implies that prolonging the human life-span for several centuries, such as in the case of Noah and the Mahdi, is against natural laws as proved by the modern scientific methods of experimentation and induction. As a consequence this becomes a miracle wherein a natural law is suspended in a specific situation for preserving the life of a person entrusted with safeguarding the celestial message. This miracle is neither the only one of its kind nor is it incredible from the viewpoint of Muslim belief based upon explicit Quranic verses and the Prophet's traditions. That is because the law of aging is not more inflexible than the law of heat transfer, according to which heat flows from a hotter body to one at a lower temperature until the two are at an

equal temperature. This law was suspended for the sake Abraham ('a) when the only way to save him was to suspend this law. Hence when Abraham was thrown into fire, it was told:

قُلْنَا يَا نَارُ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ

"[We said:] O fire, be coolness and safety for Abraham". [\(Al-Quran, 21:69\)](#)

Thereat he came out from it unhurt and untouched by fire. Similarly other natural laws were suspended for the sake of support to other figures from among the prophets and testaments of God upon the earth, such as the parting of the sea for Moses, the illusion of the Romans that they had arrested Jesus while in fact they had not arrested him, and the Prophet Muhammad's (s) going out unseen from his house which had been besieged by the Quraysh who lay in wait for hours to attack him and God concealed him from their eyes when he walked out through their midst. All these cases represent suspension of natural laws for the support of an individual whose preservation is desired by providence. The law of aging might be one of those laws.

From this we may derive a general notion that whenever the preservation of the life of a human testament (*hujjah*) of God on earth-which is necessary for the fulfillment of the mission for which he has been prepared-depends upon suspending a natural law, divine providence intervenes to suspend that law for the sake of the fulfillment of that mission. Conversely, if the mission for which the individual has been prepared is completed, he dies naturally or is martyred in accordance with the workings of natural laws.

Concerning this general notion we are usually faced with the following question: *How is it possible for the laws of nature to be suspended, severing the necessary relationship between natural phenomena? Is this anything except negation of science which has discovered natural laws and determined the necessary relationship on the basis of the principles of experimentation and induction?*

The answer is that science itself has answered this question by relinquishing the concept of necessity in relation to natural laws. To explain, science discovers natural laws on the basis of experiment and systematic observation. That is, when a particular natural phenomenon follows another phenomenon, science infers from this succession a natural law that whenever the first phenomenon occurs the second

follows it. But in this law science does not presume the existence of a necessary relationship between the two phenomena arising from their essences, because necessity is an unobservable condition which cannot be proved by experimentation and instruments of scientific induction. It is for this reason that the logic of modern science emphasizes that natural laws, as known to science, do not speak of a necessary relationship but of association between two phenomena. Hence if a miracle occurs and one of the two phenomena involved in a natural law is excluded, it does not involve breaking of a necessary relationship between two phenomena.

In fact, in the light of the logic of modern science miracle, in its religious sense, has become more comprehensible than it was in the light of the classical view relating to causal relationships. The earlier viewpoint conceived two phenomena which were constantly associated with one another as bound by a necessary relationship, and this necessity implied the impossibility of their separation. But this relationship has changed in modern science into the law of persistent association and succession between two phenomena which does not presume unobservable necessity.

On this basis, a miracle becomes an exception to the state of persistent association and succession without conflicting with necessity or leading to impossibility.

In the light of the principles of inductive logic, we concur with the modern scientific viewpoint that induction does not prove the existence of a necessary relationship between two phenomena. But we think that it does indicate the presence of a common interpretation for persisting association and succession between two phenomena. In the same way that this common interpretation may be justified on the basis of the assumption of essential necessity, similarly it is possible to justify it on the basis of Divine wisdom which prompts the orderer of the universe' to persistently link certain phenomena with others and it is this wisdom itself which at times demands an exception leading to the occurrence of a miracle.

God's Concern in Extending His Life:

We will now take up the second question which is, *why should God, the Glorious and the Exalted, show such special concern for this particular individual and suspend natural laws for the sake of prolonging his age? Moreover, why not leave the leadership of the promised day for someone to be born in the future,*

to be summoned by the signs of the promised day, to appear on the stage and carry out his awaited role? In other words, what is the benefit of this long occultation and what is its justification?

This question is asked by many people and they do not want a reply based on occult explanations, considering that we believe that the Twelve Imams ('a) form a unique chain of which not a single link can be altered. But those who raise this question demand a social interpretation of this stance based upon tangible realities of the process of change as such and understandable needs of the promised day

On this basis we will temporarily shift our attention from the, characteristics which we believe these infallible Imams to possess and raise the following question: Taking into account the process of awaited change on the promised day, to the extent it is understandable in the light of human life and experience, is it possible to consider the longevity of the leader reserved for that day as one of the factors greatly conducive to its success and its leadership?

Our reply to this question is in the affirmative for a number of reasons among which are the following:

The process of a great change requires that the leader who brings it about should possess a unique spirit which is full of consciousness and preeminence and awareness of the insignificance of the dominant arrogant systems for whose annihilation he has been prepared and to replace them with a new civilization and a new world order. And the more the revolutionary leader is conscious of the pettiness of the civilization which he combats and the more dearly he perceives that it is only a point on the long line of human civilization, the higher will be his morale in confronting it and continuing his campaign against it until victory.

It is obvious that the required measure of this awareness would be proportional to the extent of the change itself and the extent and hold of the civilization and regime to be annihilated. Therefore, confrontation with a mightier system and a more deeply-rooted civilization requires an awareness possessing greater force and vigour.

Considering that the mission of the promised day is to bring about a comprehensive change in a world filled with injustice and oppression by transforming all its cultural values and diverse systems, it is

natural that such a mission should require someone whose awareness is greater than that of the world in its entirety, someone who is not an offspring of that world grown up in the shadow of the civilization which he seeks to demolish and transform into a civilization based upon justice and truth. That is because someone who grows up in the shadow of a deep-rooted civilization and spend his life under the spell of its authority, values and ideas, dwells under a feeling of awe for it because it was already there when he was only an infant, a mighty adult when he still grew up as a child, and when he had opened his eyes on the world he did not see anything except its myriad faces.

As against this there is someone who has delved deeply in history and lived in the world before this age of enlightenment, and has seen great civilizations ruling over the world one after another and then decline and fall with his own eyes and not through books of history, seeing also the present civilization which constitutes the latest chapter in human history prior to the promised day. He saw it while it was still a small seed hardly visible. He then saw these seeds establish themselves in the body of society waiting for an opportunity to sprout and grow. He has witnessed its growth and march, its ups and downs, and observed it blossom and grow into a giant and gradually control the destiny of the entire world.

Surely such a person who has lived through all these stages with complete awareness and insight will mark this giant, which he intends to confront, through the long history he has personally observed, not as something read in books of history. He will neither view it as inevitable fate, nor as Jean Jacques Rousseau viewed France without a monarch, for it is said that he was terrified by the mere idea of France without a king, despite his being, intellectually and philosophically, one of the leading advocates of political change during that era. That was so because he had grown up in the shadow of monarchy and had breathed in its atmosphere throughout his life. But someone who has accompanied history itself carries within him the awe and force of history and profound awareness of the fact that the order and civilization that surrounds him is the offspring of a day from among the days of history that came into being due to certain conducive factors and which will perish when other factors appear, and in near or distant future nothing will remain of it in the same manner as nothing of it lasted in the past; that life-spans of civilizations and regimes, however long they may be, are not more than numbered days in the long course of history.

You may have read the Surat *al-Kahf*. It mentions the story of the youths who professed faith in their Lord: God had increased them in guidance at a time when they were confronted with a dominant idolatrous regime which, without pity and hesitation, ripped the *buds of tawhid* and stifled any effort to rise above polytheism. They were under great stress; despair had overwhelmed them and they had lost hope. Unable to find any solution, it appeared to them that falsehood would continue to rule and oppress for ever and to prevail over the truth, forcing into submission everyone whose heart leaned towards truth. They sought refuge in a cave seeking from God relief from their predicament. Do you

know what God did? He caused them to fall asleep for 309 years in the cave. Then he raised them from sleep and sent them forth on the stage of life after the regime that had overwhelmed them with its power and oppression had disintegrated and collapsed to become an inert and harmless part of history. All this was done so that those youths might witness the fall of untruth whose prevalence, power, and persistence seemed overwhelming to them, and that they might see its end with their own eyes and witness the triviality and insignificance of falsehood. If this clear vision -- with all its spiritual force and sublimity -- was realized by the Men of the Cave through this unique incident which extended their life-span by 300 years, a similar thing applies to the Awaited Leader in the course of his long life-span, which enabled him to witness the giant of a civilization when it was still a dwarf, the ancient tree when it was still a seed, and the epochs when they were taking their first breaths of life.

In addition, this experience of accompanying successive civilizations and direct contact with their movement and development, have a great role in intellectually preparing and deepening the leadership skills for the promised day, as they expose the reserved individual to the various efforts made by others along with their points of weakness and strength and all kinds of error and correct judgment, giving him the utmost ability to evaluate social phenomena with a complete awareness of their causes and historical conditions.

Further, the change that the Awaited Leader is destined to bring about is based upon a specific message, the message of Islam. It is but natural that it should require a leader who is nearer to the sources of pristine Islam, with a personality built in an entirely independent manner separately from the cultural influences he is destined to combat on the promised day. This is opposed to the case of a person who is born and brought up in that culture and whose thoughts and sensibilities take shape within its environs, because such a person is usually not free from the influences and tendencies of this culture even if he is leading a change against it. Therefore, for ensuring that the reserved leader is not influenced by the civilization for whose change he has been prepared, it is necessary that his personality be entirely built in an earlier civilizational stage closest in its general spirit and origin to the civilization *which* he seeks to realize on the promised day under his leadership.

How did His Personality Develop?

We now come to the third question: How did the Awaited Leader's personality develop despite his having lived with his father, Imam Askari ('a), for just about five years, and that too during infancy, which is insufficient for his personality to mature? So what were the circumstances that were instrumental in the development of his personality?

The answer is that the Mahdi (`a) succeeded to his father's office of the *Imamah* of the Muslim community, and this implies that he was an Imam possessing all the intellectual and spiritual qualities associated with *Imamah* from a very early stage of his noble life. The possession of the *Imamah* at an early age is a phenomenon which has precedents in a number of his forefathers (`a). Thus Imam Muhammad ibn Ali al-Jawad (`a) assumed the *Imamah* when he was 8 years old and Imam Ali ibn Muhammad al-Hadi (`a) when he was 9 years. Imam Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Askari, the father of the Awaited Imam, assumed the *Imamah*¹ when he was 28 years. Hence the phenomenon of assuming the *Imamah* at an early age reached its climax in Imam Mahdi (`a) and Imam Jawad (`a), and we call it a 'phenomenon' as it manifested itself as a tangible and practical reality in relation to some of the Mahdi's ancestors, which for the Muslims was a kind of living experience of the Imam. It is not possible for us to find any evidence that may be clearer and stronger than the experience of the Muslim community. We mention the following points to elucidate this matter:

1) The *Imamah* of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt was not an office associated with worldly power and influence which passes from father to son on the basis of heredity and is supported by state power, as in the case of the imamate of the Fatimid caliphs and the caliphate of the Abbasids. Rather, it acquired its wide popular base through spiritual power and the intellectual conviction it generated among the masses concerning the worthiness of this *Imamah* for the leadership of Islam in accordance with spiritual and intellectual principles.

2) The foundations of this popular base were laid during the early days of Islam and it blossomed and spread during the period of Imam Baqir (`a) and Imam Sadiq (`a). The school over which these two Imams presided generated a widespread intellectual current among the masses in the Islamic world, attracting hundreds of jurists, theologians, exegetes and scholars of various Islamic disciplines and other sciences known at the time. Speaking in this regard, al-Hasan ibn Ali al-Washsha' says: "On entering the Mosque of Kufah I saw 900 shaykhs all of whom would say, "*haddathna Jafar ibn Muhammad*" ("Ja'far ibn Muhammad narrated to us").

3) The conditions for determining the Imam and ascertaining his capacity for *Imamah*, to which this school and the people who formed its popular base in Islamic society subscribed and which they abided by, were very stringent, because they did not consider anyone an Imam unless he was the most teamed scholar of his time.

4) The school and the people constituting its popular base gave great sacrifices for their sustained faith in the *Imamah* as, from the viewpoint of the ruling caliphs, they formed a hostile front, at least in

respect of its doctrinal approach. This led the authorities to launch almost continuous assaults to liquidate or torture them. As a result many were killed and many more were imprisoned, and hundreds died in the dark of prison cells. This means that they had to pay dearly for their faith in the *Imamah of* the Imams of the Ahl *at-Bayt*, and it carried with it no attraction except a believer's appeal or his commitment for the sake of nearness to God, the Exalted.

5) The Imams in whose *Imamah* these masses had faith did not live secluded lives in ivory towers, as was the wont of kings vis-a-vis their people. They lived in constant contact with the people so long as they were not imprisoned or exiled by the rulers. This is known from the large number of narrators and traditionists who have narrated traditions on the authority of each of the eleven Imams as well as from the correspondence which each Imam held with his contemporaries. The journeys undertaken by each of the Imams, on the one hand, and the representatives which they appointed for the various regions of the Islamic world on the other, along with the practice of the Shi'ah from every region to pay regular visits to the Imams and meet them in Madinah during their journeys to the holy land for ha" pilgrimage- all this implies a continuous and clear interaction between the Imam and his followers who were spread all over the Islamic world and included both scholars and laymen.

6) The contemporary caliphate viewed the Imams ('a) and their spiritual leadership as a great threat to its existence and authority. Consequently it made every effort to weaken this leadership and endured many negative consequences arising from such measures. Occasionally, when their policies required, they manifested themselves in the form of ruthless tyranny, and the Imams themselves were repeatedly imprisoned and kept under continuous surveillance despite the shock and revulsion which it generated among the generality of Muslims and their followers in varying degrees.

If we reflect over these six points, which are all indubitable historical facts, it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that the phenomenon of assumption of *Imamah* at a young age was a reality and not a fantasy. Because the Imam who at a young age appears before the people and proclaims himself as the spiritual and intellectual leader of Muslims and whose *Imamah* and leadership are believed in by such a large and widespread body of people, must have possessed, quite clearly and remarkably, vast knowledge and wisdom, an extensive learning and expertise in law, exegesis and doctrine. Because, in its absence, he would have been unable to convince the various classes of people of his *Imamah*, especially in view of what we have mentioned concerning the continuous interaction between the Imams and their followers and the limelight that focused on their lives and different angles of their personality.

Therefore, is it likely that a child should invite people to his own *Imamah* as the standard of Islam, making himself the focus of the various segments of people, who believe in him and sacrifice for his sake their precious security and life without taking the trouble to inquire about him and without being jolted by the phenomenon of a child's *Imamah* into making an inquiry into the authenticity of the claims of the young Imam and an evaluation of his person? Assuming that the people did not make any immediate effort to discover the facts, is it possible for such a matter to continue for days and months, or even years, without the reality being disclosed despite normally continuous intercourse between the young Imam and the people? Is it reasonable to suppose that he could be truly childish in his thinking and knowledge without its coming to light during such a long period of interaction?

Even if we suppose that the supporters of the *Imamah* of the Ahl al-Bayt did not have the opportunity to unearth the reality, why did the caliphate of the period remain silent on the matter and did not make any effort to expose the facts when it was in its interest to do so? How easy it would have been for the authorities to do that had the young Imam possessed childish ideas and manners, as is usual for children. It would have been the most successful way of exposing the reality of the claims of this child to his followers and others, and of demonstrating his incapacity for spiritual and intellectual Imamate and leadership. If it is somewhat difficult to prove the incapacity of a person in his forties or fifties for the office of the *Imamah*, considering that by that time he could become largely acquainted with the cultural heritage of his era, there is no difficulty in proving the incapacity of an ordinary child, however intelligent and clever, for assuming the office of the *Imamah* as understood by Imami Shi'is. That would have been the easiest and most convenient measure as compared to the complicated and hazardous methods of repression adopted by the authorities at that time.

The only explanation for the reticence of the caliphate and its reluctance to play this card was that it had learnt that the assumption of the *Imamah* at a young age was a real phenomenon, not a pretension. In fact it had learned this practically after it tried to play this card and failed. History tells us about the efforts of this kind and their failure, while it does not mention a single instance wherein the *Imamah* assumed by an Imam at an early age might have been shaken, or wherein the young Imam faced a critical situation which exceeded his ability or which led the people's faith in him to be shaken.

This is what we meant when we said that the *Imamah* assumed at an early age was a real phenomenon in the lives of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and not simply a presumption. Further, this real phenomenon has its precedents in the Divine tradition which-covers prophetic missions and divine leadership. The life of John (`a), to mention one instance from the Divine tradition, suffices as a precedent for the phenomenon of assumption of *Inrainah* at an early age by the *Ahl al-Bayt* (`a) . God, the Glorious and the Exalted, says:

يَا يَحْيَىٰ خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ وَءَتَيْنَاهُ الْحُكْمَ صَبِيًّا

"O John, hold on to the Book firmly, 'and We gave him judgment while still a child.'" [\(Al-Quran, 19:12\)](#)

When it is established that the phenomenon of assumption of *Imamah* at an early age is a reality and something actual in the lives of the *Ahl al-Bayt ('a)*, there remains no doubt in this regard in the case of Imam Mahdi ('a) and his succeeding to his father's office as a child.

Belief in the Existence of the Mahdi:

We now come to the fourth question: Assuming the possibility of the hypothesis of the Awaited Leader with all its implications pertaining to his long life-span, the Imamah at an early age, and the period of silent occultation, this possibility is not sufficient to convince one that he presently exists. Therefore, how can one presently believe in the existence of the Mahdi? Notwithstanding the strangeness of such a hypothesis and its being contrary to the ordinary course of nature, are a few traditions from the Prophet ('s) narrated in books of hadith sufficient for totally convincing us about the Twelfth Imam? How is it possible to prove the historical existence of the Mahdi, and how do we know that it is not a mere assumption created by psychological circumstances to establish it in the minds of a large number of people?

The answer is that the concept of the Mahdi as an awaited leader who would change the world for the better occurs in the traditions of the Prophet ('s) in general and the narrations of the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* in particular. It is emphasized to-such a degree in a large number of explicit traditions that it is not possible to doubt it. Four hundred traditions of the Prophet (s) transmitted only through chains of authorities belonging to our Sunni brothers have been identified, while the total number of traditions about Imam Mahdi, including those transmitted by Sunni and Shi'i chains, is more than six thousand. This is a very large number and one cannot find a similar number of traditions on any of the many Islamic matters which are considered as evident and which no Muslim usually doubts.

As to the Twelfth Imam (`a) being the embodiment of this concept, there is sufficient and clear justification and evidence for this claim. This can be summarized in the form of two proofs, one of which is Islamic and the second scientific. We prove the existence of the Awaited Leader with the means of the Islamic proof, and by employing the scientific proof we establish that the Mahdi is not a myth and conjecture, but a reality whose existence has been affirmed by concrete experience through history.

As to the Islamic proof, it is in the form of hundreds of traditions transmitted from the Prophet (s) and the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt (`a)*, and which identify the Mahdi as belonging to the *All al-Bayt*, stating that he is a descendent of Fatimah in the lineage of Husayn and his ninth descendant. They also state that the Prophet's successors (*khulafa*) are twelve in number. These traditions define the general notion and identify its embodiment in the person of the twelfth Imam from among the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. These traditions have been narrated in a great number and have been widely known despite the caution observed by the Imams (`a) in raising this issue in public for the sake of protecting their worthy descendent (the Mahdi) from being assassinated or put to death immediately

The number of these traditions is not the sole criterion for their acceptance. There are in addition other indications which prove their validity.

Thus the Prophetic tradition mentioning the Imams, *khulafa* or *umara'* succeeding him and their number, that there shall be twelve Imams, *khulafa-*' or *umara'*, in accordance with the varying texts of the tradition as transmitted by different chains, occurs in the form of narrations collected by some compilers which form more than 270 narrations taken from the most famous Shi'i and Sunni compilations of hadith, including the works of Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his *Musnad*, and al-Hakim in his *Mustadrak `ala al-Sahihayn*. It should be noted here that Bukhari, who transmits this hadith, was a contemporary of Imam Jawad as well as the Imams al-Hadi and al-Askari, and this is of great significance because it proves that this hadith was recorded from the Prophet (s) before its subject had materialized and before the concept of Twelve Imams had been practically completed. This implies that there exists no ground for the doubt that the transmission of this hadith might have been influenced by the actual situation of the Twelver (*Ithn Ashari*) Imamism or was a reflection of it, because forged traditions attributed to the Prophet (s) that are either reflections or justifications of a later event do not go back, in their origin or recording in books of hadith, to a date earlier than that event. Now that we possess concrete proof that the above-mentioned tradition historically precedes the Twelve Imams and that it had been recorded in books of hadith before the completion of the Twelver Imami reality, it is possible for us to assert that this hadith is not a reflection of some event, but an expression of a Divine reality by someone who did not speak out of selfish motives. Hence he (s) said:

"Indeed there will be twelve khulafa' after me."

And this Ithna Ashari Imami historical reality which begins with Imam Ali (`a) and terminates in the Mahdi (`a) is the sole rational interpretation of this noble Prophetic tradition.

As to the scientific proof, it comprises of the experience of a religious community extending for a period of nearly seventy years which is known as the period of the Lesser Occultation (*al-ghaybat al-sughra*). As a prelude to the explanation of this matter we shall give a short description of the period of Lesser Occultation.

The Lesser Occultation (of Imam Mahdi) is the first stage in the *Imamah* of the Awaited Leader, may Peace and God's blessings be upon him.

From the time of assumption of tile office of the *Imamah* it was decreed for this Imam to conceal himself from the public view and to keep himself apparently at a distance from events while remaining at close with his heart and mind. It has been observed that if his occultation (*ghaybah*) had occurred suddenly, it would have delivered a great blow to the community of adherents of the *Imamah* within the Islamic ummah because they were used to close contact with the Imam during every age and to interaction with him, referring to him various problems for solution. If the Imam were to disappear suddenly from the view of his followers and were they to realize that they had been cut off from their spiritual and intellectual leader, it would have given birth to a feeling of a great and catastrophic void which could shake the entire system and shatter its unity Therefore, it was necessary that there be a preparatory period for this occultation so that the community might gradually get used to it and adapt itself. This preparatory period was that of the Lesser Occultation in which Imam Mahdi remained hidden from the public, although he was in constant contact with them through his deputies, representatives and trustworthy companions, who acted as a link between him and the community of the believers in his *Imamah*. During this period, the task of representing the Imam was carried out by four persons whose piety, God-fearing and honesty were endorsed by the community within which they lived. They were: 1) Uthman ibn Said al-Amri, 2) Muhammad ibn Uthman ibn Said al-Amri, 3) Abu al-Qasim al-Husayn ibn Ruh, 4) Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad al-Samarri.

These four deputies (*nuwwab*), in succession, in the order mentioned above, performed the task of representing the Imam and when one of theirs died he was succeeded by the next one appointed by

Imam Mahdi ('a). The deputy who was in contact with the Shi'i community, would communicate their questions and their problems to the Imam and bring back to them his replies, which were at times verbal and often written. The community which had been deprived of the sight of their Imam found comfort through these letters and indirect communications. It is noteworthy that these letters and messages issued by Imam Mahdi ('a) were in a single handwriting and style throughout the period lasting for nearly seventy years when these four persons acted as his deputies. Later, al-Samarri who was the last of the Imam's deputies, announced the end of phase of Lesser Occultation, which is marked by the presence of specifically appointed agents of the Imam, and the beginning of the Greater Occultation (*al-ghaybat al-kubra*) in which no specific persons were appointed as intermediaries between the Imam and his followers. This transition from the Lesser to the Greater Occultation signifies the fulfillment of the goals of the former and the conclusion of its role, because through this gradual process it protected the Shi`ah from a shock and confronting a great void arising from the occultation of the Imam. It was able to make the Shi`ah acclimatized to the era of Occultation, preparing them gradually for acceptance of the notion of general representation (*al-niyabat al`ammah*) of the Imam. Thus from that of directly appointed deputies during the Lesser Occultation, the mode of representation of the Imam changed during the Greater Occultation to a general one by *mujtahids* of integrity (*al-mujtahid al-`adil*) possessing insight into temporal and religious matters.

In the light of what has been said one can evaluate the situation so as to clearly perceive that the Mahdi is a reality experienced by a community of people through the mediation of representatives and deputies for a period of seventy years in the course of their interaction with others. During this period not a single person ever accused them of prevarication, fraudulent conduct, or inconsistency in their role as messengers. Hence is it conceivable that a fraud should remain undetected for seventy years while four individuals practice it consecutively and consistently and continue to deal with the community on its basis as if it were a part of their lives and something they saw with their own eyes without doing anything to cause doubt and without their being any special relationship among them that might enable them to 'conspire in some manner, thus acquiring through their genuine conduct the confidence of everyone and confirming their faith in the truth of something that they claimed to experience and live with?!

An ancient saying states that falsehood is short-lived, and the logic of life also proves that in accordance with the law of probability it is scientifically impossible for a lie of this proportion and extending over such a period to acquire the confidence of everyone around it throughout such continuous contacts and dealings.

Thus we learn that the phenomenon of the Lesser Occultation can be considered a scientifically justifiable experience for proving its objectiveness and for acknowledging Imam Mahdi, the fact of his

birth, life, occultation and general proclamation concerning the Greater Occultation as a result of which he kept himself offstage and did not revealed himself to anyone.

The Reasons for His not Appearing Publicly:

Why didn't the Leader appear during this period? If he has prepared himself for a social mission, what stopped him from appearing on the stage during the period of Lesser Occultation or at a later time, instead of changing it into a greater occultation, as the conditions for social activism and change were simpler and easier at that time? Further, his links with the people through the set-up of the Lesser Occultation provided him with the opportunity to gather his forces and launch his movement with a powerful initiative. The ruling forces around him too had not yet acquired the terrible power and strength which mankind acquired afterwards as a result of scientific and industrial progress.

The answer is that the success of any activity involving social change depends upon certain concrete conditions and circumstances and its objective cannot possibly be achieved unless these conditions and circumstances are realized. The missions of a celestial origin for initiating social change in the world are distinct in their absence of dependence on existing circumstances when their apostolic dimension is taken into consideration. Because the message upon which this process of change is based is divine and a celestial product, not the outcome of prevailing circumstances. However, from the viewpoint of its execution, it depends on presence of certain objective conditions for its being successful and timely. It is for this reason that the Heavens had to wait for five centuries of *Jahilliyah* to pass before sending its final message through the Prophet Muhammad (s) because the dependence of its execution on objective conditions necessitated its delay despite the world's long-standing need.

Among objective conditions which affect the executive aspect of the process of change are those which form a conducive atmosphere and general climate for the intended change, as well as some details which are essential for the process of change in its detailed course. Taking into consideration, for example, the process of successful change led by Lenin in Russia, we see that it was linked to such factors as the outbreak of the World War I and the decline of Czarist rule, and this facilitated the creation of a suitable atmosphere for revolutionary change. It also depended on certain other specific and limited factors such as Lenin's surviving his journey while infiltrating into Russia to lead the Revolution. For any incident impeding him could result in the Revolution losing its impetus in arising swiftly on the political stage.

In the process of divine change it is an unchanging wont of God Almighty that is limited in its executive aspect by objective conditions which create a conducive climate and general atmosphere for successful accomplishment of change. Consequently, the advent of Islam did not occur except after a long period of suspension in the coming of prophets, a long gap continuing for centuries.

Therefore, despite that God Almighty possesses the power to surmount all obstacles in the path of a divine mission and to create miraculously a conducive climate for it, He does not choose these methods because the trials, tribulation and ordeals through which man attains perfection require that the activity of divine change be natural and objective in this regard. This does not stop God, the Glorious and the Exalted, from intervening at times in certain details which by themselves do not create the conducive climate but are catalysts which speed up the process within the prevailing conducive climate. To this class belong the providential favours and help which God grants to His friends (*awliya'*) in times of difficulty, thereby supporting His mission. Thus the fire lit by Nimrud is changed into coolness and safety for Abraham, the hand of a treacherous Jew is paralyzed when he raises his sword over the Prophet's head, and a powerful windstorm blows away the tents of the infidels and idolaters who besieged Madinah during the Battle of the Ditch, striking terror into their hearts. But all these are only details and instances of providing help in decisive moments following the presence of a conducive atmosphere and climate for a general change that advances in a natural way under the influence of objective conditions.

In the light of this, we can study the position of Imam Mahdi (`a) and see that, like any other social change, the change for which he has been prepared depends, from the standpoint of execution, on concrete factors conducive to the emergence of a suitable climate. Consequently, it is natural that this change should be timed accordingly. Obviously, the Mahdi has neither prepared himself for a social change of limited dimensions nor is it limited to some part of the world. The mission for which he has been preserved by God, the Glorious and the Exalted, is of global dimensions and involves the emancipation of all mankind from the darkness of tyranny into the light of justice. A change of such great proportions cannot be undertaken solely on the presence of a message and a worthy leader; otherwise these conditions were fulfilled during the time of the Prophet himself. It requires a suitable global climate and a general conducive atmosphere that may be brought about by the needed concrete conditions for the process of world-wide change.

From the human aspect, the feeling of the civilized human being of having reached a dead-end is an essential factor for creation of that suitable climate so that he may accept the new message of justice. This feeling of exhaustion is produced and deepened by a variety of cultural experiences from which the civilized man emerges burdened with the wrongs of his own making, to become conscious of the need for help, turning by his innate nature towards the transcendental and the unknown.

From a material aspect, the material conditions of modern life may be more helpful for carrying out a global mission than the past conditions of an earlier era such as the period of Lesser Occultation. This is due to the shortening of distances, the great possibility of interaction among different nations of the world, and the presence of the means of communication required by a central body for enlightening the nations and educating them on the basis of the new message.

As to the point raised in the question concerning the advancements in military power and equipment which the Awaited Leader will have to encounter on the promised day the more his advent is delayed, that is correct. But what benefit could an increase in material power bring to men who possess such power and equipment with a defeatist mentality and a shattered morale? How many times in history have the lofty edifices of civilizations collapsed at the first military stroke because of their having broken down earlier by loss of self-confidence and faith in their existence and dissatisfaction with their own reality.

Is That Possible for an Individual?

We now come to the last in the series of aforementioned questions. *Can an individual, however great, possess the capacity to play such a great role? Is the great man anyone except someone chosen by circumstances to spearhead their momentum?*

The idea expressed in this question is based upon a certain notion of history which interprets history on the hypothesis that human beings are a secondary factor, while the real forces surrounding him are the principal factor. On this basis, the individual, in the best of conditions, is nothing except an intelligent expression of the course determined by the principal factor.

We have explained elsewhere in our published works that history consists of two axes: one of them is man, and the other the material forces surrounding him. In the same way that the material forces and conditions relating to production and nature influence man, likewise man, too, influences the forces and conditions around him. There is no more ground for supposing that movement begins in matter and culminates in man than for supposing the converse. Therefore man and matter interact continually all along, and it is possible for an individual within this framework to perform a greater role than a spectator watching the march of history, especially when we take into account the factor of his links with the heavens. In that case this link becomes a force that spearheads the movement of history. This is

exactly what happened in the history of prophetic missions, especially during the final prophetic mission wherein the Prophet Muhammad (s), by virtue of his prophetic links with the Divine, took the reins of historical movement in his own hands and generated a civilizational wave which could never have been produced by the surrounding conditions, as explained by us in the second introduction of *al-Fatawa al-wadilah*.

That which took place at the hands of the Prophet (;) can again occur at the hands of the Awaited Leader belonging to his Ahl ul-Bayt, the good news of whose coming and the great role he would play has been proclaimed by him.

The Method of Change on the Promised Day:

We come finally to one point raised in the questions posed above. It relates to *the conceivable method by which decisive victory for justice will be achieved at the hands of the Mahdi and tyrannical regimes opposing him will be abolished*.

The answer to this question depends upon the knowledge of the time and stage at which Imam Mahd3 ('a) will be ordained to appear on the scene and the possibility of defiling the distinctive features and conditions of that phase so that i1i its light we can determine the form and course the process of change would take. And as long as we are ignorant of that stage and know nothing about its environment and conditions, it is not possible to predict what will happen on the promised day, though it is possible to form a subjective, if not an objective, conception of that which might take place.

There is one basic probability which can possibly be accepted in the light of relevant traditions and experience of great changes in history. This assumption is that the advent of Imam Mahdi (`a) will be subsequent to a great void resulting from a setback and a choking civilizational crisis. This void would open the way for the spread of the new message and the setback would prepare the psychological atmosphere for its acceptance. This setback will not be an accident in the history of human civilization, but a natural consequence of the contradictions of a history that has severed its links with God Almighty, and for which there are no definitive solutions. This will eventually set ablaze a fire which will not leave anything unconsumed, and at this time the light will appear to extinguish the flames and establish heavenly justice on earth.

I will confine myself to this brief summary, leaving an extensive study of this subject and its related details to the valuable book which is before me, the august encyclopedia of Imam Mahdi (`a) compiled by one of my sons and students, the learned researcher Sayyid Muhammad Sadr, may God Almighty preserve him. This encyclopedia is unparalleled in the history of Shi'i writings on Imam Mahdi (`a) from the viewpoint of the comprehensiveness with which it deals with the issue of the Awaited Imam. Its scope is vast and underlying it is an unflagging scholarly spirit and a masterful grasp of a variety of striking points which show the diligent efforts made by the compiler in preparing this unique work. I feel elated by the scholarship, perceptiveness and brilliance that it reflects and the significant gap that it has filled. I beseech the Lord, the Glorious and the Exalted, to delight me through him and make him an outstanding scholar of religion. All praise is for God, and may Peace and benediction be upon Muhammad and his immaculate *Ahl al-Bayt*.

The writing of these pages was begun on 13 Jumadi al Thani 1397 H. and finished on the afternoon of 17th day of the same month. And it is God who grants assistance and success.

Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr

al-Najaf al-Ashraf