

The Concept of Messiah in Islam

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reference : ,

INTRODUCTION

Islam, being the youngest of the three great revealed religions, shares many ideas and concepts with Christianity and Judaism because the origin of all three religions is the same God. One of those ideas is that of messianism, the idea of expecting someone who will come as the saviour to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

In today's talk, let us briefly look at the concept of messiah in Islam.

MESSIANISM IN ISLAM

Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last prophet and messenger of God. Muslims also believe that God will grant total and comprehensive victory to Islam over other religions. The holy Qur'ān talks about this promise in three different verses. It says:

He (Allāh) is the one who sent His Messenger (Muhammad) with the guidance and the religion of truth so that He may grant victory to it over every religion."

(The Qur'ān 9:33; 48:28; 61:9)

When and how will this promise of God be fulfilled?

According to the unanimously accepted saying of the Prophet Muhammad, God will bring about a saviour before the end of time to establish the global domination of Islam over all religions. In other words, the saviour will establish the Kingdom of God on this earth. In Islamic traditions, that saviour is known by the name of "al-Mahdi".

The establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth at the hand of the righteous people has been clearly mentioned in the holy Qur’ān. God says:

We would like to bestow a favour upon those who have been oppressed in the earth and make them leaders and make them inheritors (of the world)." (The Qur’ān 28:5)

He again says,

Certainly, We wrote in the Psalms (Zabur)... `As for the earth, surely My righteous servants shall inherit it." (The Qur’ān 21:105)

Even the present version of Psalms has this promise of God in chapter 37:1-29 where it says: "And just a little while longer, and the wicked ones will be no more...But the meek ones shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace...The righteous themselves shall inherit the earth."

This shows that the belief in the saviour is not unique to the Muslims. The Christians and the Jews are also waiting for him: the Christians are looking forward to the second coming of the Christ while the Jews are still waiting for the Messiah.

MAHDI IN ISLAM

The belief in al-Mahdi —as the embodiment of the messiah or the saviour who will appear at the end of time— is a belief in the fulfillment of God’s promise. It is a belief common to all Muslims based on the unanimously accepted sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).

Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century historian famous for his pioneering work in philosophy of history, writes in his *Muqaddima*:

"It has been (accepted) by all the Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time a man from the family (of the Prophet) will, without fail, make his appearance, one who will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi."

Ibn Khaldun clearly states that Muslims in each generation have accepted the belief in the Mahdi. The unanimity of this belief among the Muslims is furthered strengthened by the *fatwa* issued from the General Secretariat of the World Muslim League in Mecca on the 11th of October 1976. This *fatwa* was written by Shaykh Muhammad al-Muntasir al-Katani and approved by a committee consisting of four other scholars.

After listing the names of twenty companions of the Prophet who have narrated the Prophet's statements on the Mahdi, and after giving the names of the scholars who have written exclusively on al-Mahdi, the fatwa says:

"The memorizers and scholars of hadith have verified that there are reliable and acceptable reports among the ahadith on the Mahdi; the majority of them are narrated through numerous authorities. There is no doubt about their status as mutawatir and sahih reports.

"And the belief in the appearance of the Mahdi is obligatory, and that it is one of the beliefs of the people of the sunna and jama'ah; and none denies it except those who are ignorant of the sunna and innovators in doctrine.

WHO IS THE MAHDI?

In trying to identify the person who will be the Mahdi and the Saviour, the only source we have is the Prophet of Islam. According to his sayings, the basic characteristics of Mahdi are as follows:

1. He will be an Arab, from the tribe of Banû Hâshim.
2. He will be from the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima.
3. He will be the descendant of Husayn, son of Fatima and 'Ali.
4. He will appear in Mecca.
5. Finally, one of the most interesting thing that we find in the sayings of the Prophet is that Imam al-Mahdi will be helped by Prophet Jesus.

We are told that Jesus will descend to the earth soon after the appearance of the Mahdi; he will join the Mahdi in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth; and he will pray behind Imam al-Mahdi. The true Christians will follow Jesus in accepting Imam al-Mahdi as the leader at the time and become Muslims.

Let me share with you a thought that I heard from my father:

In the Qur'ân, God has selected Abraham and his descendants and preferred them over the

others. Abraham's children were from his two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. From the line of Isaac, we have all the great prophets of the Israelites (Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon and, finally, Jesus). From the line of Ishmael, we the Prophet of Islam and the Imams from his family, the last being Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi.

God has, by His decree, preserved the last representatives from both lines of Abraham for the establishment of His Kingdom. At the end of time, He will bring Imam al-Mahdi and Prophet Jesus together for the fulfillment of His plan.

This is the optimistic outlook that we have towards human history; and incidentally it also shows how closely the destiny of the Muslims and the Christians is linked together.

Ref: Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, This is the transcript of the talk given on "Islam in Focus" TV program on December 6, 1997.

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