

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The Mahdi and the end-times in Islam

Book Section

How to cite:

Beattie, H. (2013). The Mahdi and the end-times in Islam. In: Newcombe, Suzanne and Harvey, Sarah eds. Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 89–104.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2012 Ashgate



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

The Mahdi and the End-Times in Islam Hugh Beattie

‘The People of my House shall meet misfortune, banishment, and persecution until people will come from the east with black flags. They will ask for charity but will not be given it. Then they will fight and be victorious. Now they will be given what they had asked, yet they will not accept it but will finally hand it (sc. the earth) over to a man of My Family. He will fill it with justice as they had filled it with injustice (in Madelung, 2011a: 4).¹

This chapter begins by exploring the origins of mahdist beliefs in the first centuries of Islam, going on to look at some historical expressions of them, and then discussing some modern interpretations. Attention is drawn to some of the ways in which they may vary, and to some of the possible reasons for their past and present appeal.

origins

As well as being the final prophecy in the sense of divinely-inspired utterance, the belief is that the Qur’an also contains prophecy in the sense of the foretelling of future events, referring at a number of points to the resurrection, the last judgement, and the afterlife. The Qur’an tells us that we cannot know when the end of the world will come, but lists a number of things that will happen before it. It mentions, for example, Isa (Jesus)’s return (Qur’an. 43: 82), the release of Yajuj wa Majuj (Gog and Magog) (e.g. Q. 18:97-9), the emergence of a beast (Q. 27:82), the sky bringing forth clouds of smoke (Q. 44), and the darkening of the sun and the dimming of the stars (Q. 81).² However, it does not go into great detail about these developments, and does not refer directly to several events that later came to form part of the end-times narratives that subsequently became popular with many Muslims (Cook, 2005: 123). Among these are the appearance of the Mahdi and the Dajjal, the Antichrist or ‘false Messiah’ (*al-massih al-dajjal*) (see e.g. Saritoprak, 2003: 2).

Because of this, the ‘rich literature on the details of the events that signal the Hour’ is mainly derived from hadiths (‘traditions’ or ‘reports’) (Leaman, 2006: 198). The earliest apocalyptic predictions ‘took the literary form of the hadith in which either Muhammad or one of his close companions makes a statement about what will happen at the end of the world. The statements varied in length from phrases of several words to passages equivalent to several pages’ (the longer ones are assumed to be compilations of the shorter ones) (Cook, 2005: 7). These hadiths are the nearest equivalent in Islam to the literary apocalypse in Judaism and Christianity, of which Daniel 7-12 and the book of Revelation are the best-known examples (Cook, 2005: 7); they make up a ‘history of the future’ (Garcia-Arenal, 2006:15). The principal historical stimulus to the appearance of mahdist traditions in particular appears to have been the civil wars (656-661, 680-692, 744-750, and 809-813)³ which wracked

¹ This is in the collection of hadiths by Ibn Maja, usually regarded as the weakest of all the six major works of hadith literature (Leaman, 2006: 231).

² The view that Muhammad himself anticipated that the end of the world would come very soon and believed that God had chosen him to preside over it is found for example in P. Casanova’s *Mohammed et la fin du monde*, 1911.

Gog and Magog were penned up behind two ramparts, one of iron, the other of brass, by Dhu al-Qarnayn, the two-horned one, identified with Alexander the Great (Arjomand, 1998: 244, Qur’an 18:92-9).

³ all dates CE.

the early Islamic empire. During them ‘all parties ... looked to prophetic tradition for inspiration, arguments, and rallying cries’ (Filiu, 2008: 11, also 28). As a result ‘many historical details entered apocalyptic traditions after the event, and many of the principal figures in early Islam were transformed into apocalyptic figures’ (Arjomand, 1998: 254).

As regards the term Mahdi itself, it is derived from the Arabic root *h-d-y* which is used in the Qur’an in the meaning of divine guidance, and during the first days of Islam it was used as simply as an honorific. In the late 7th century CE opponents of the Umayyad caliphs used it to refer to ‘an expected ruler who would restore Islam to its original perfection’ (Madelung, 2011a: 1). Various prophetic traditions emerged as the term began to acquire messianic connotations. For example, in 683 an army was sent by the Umayyad caliph Yazid (from the Umayyad family formerly led by Abu Sufyan) from Damascus to suppress a rising by a rival claimant to the caliphate, Abdallah b. al-Zubayr, who lived in Medina. Abdallah moved to Mecca, which was attacked by Yazid’s army. When news of Yazid’s death came through the attack was called off and the troops returned to Syria. These events are reflected in an important hadith which includes references to an army sent or led by a descendant of Abu Sufyan, referred to as the Sufyani, the people of Mecca swearing allegiance to ‘a man of Medina’ between the *rukhn* (the Black Stone corner of the Kaba) and the *maqam* (Ibrahim’s station of prayer) in the Great Mosque in Mecca and to the disappearance of an army in the desert (Madelung, 2011a: 2, Arjomand, 1998: 249). Subsequently the ‘man of Medina’ was assumed to be the Mahdi.

Two years later in 685 a Persian convert, al-Mukhtar, actually proclaimed Muhammad b. Hanafiyya (a son of the 4th Caliph, Ali) the Mahdi in Kufa, and led an unsuccessful rising against Umayyad rule. Mukhtar’s followers included two groups that were familiar with messianic ideas. These were the newly-converted Persians led by Kaysan Abu ‘Amrah, and the southern Arabian tribes (Arjomand, 1998: 250). Despite the failure of the rebellion and the death of Muhammad b. Hanafiyya in 700, Kaysan’s followers claimed that he was in concealment or occultation in the Radwa mountains and would return as the Mahdi and the Qa’im (‘the living one’ or ‘the one standing permanently’) (Arjomand, 1998: 250). This is one example of how Islamic apocalypics were influenced by a range of existing ‘end paradigms’ which included Zoroastrian apocalyptic symbols and cosmological beliefs, the book of Daniel and late-Jewish apocalyptic texts, and Syrian and Byzantine motifs. Zoroastrian eschatology for example includes a belief in the *saoshyant*, a figure of sacred origin who will one day lead ‘the armies of his human and angelic supporters in a cosmic battle that ends with the destruction of evil and the reconstitution of the original and lasting order’ (Amanat, 2009: 27). Another borrowing from Zoroastrianism appears to have been the idea of the special significance of the millennium (Arjomand, 1998: 260). For their part, the formerly pagan southern Arabian tribes have been credited with introducing another figure to the mahdist scenario, the Qahtani, ‘the oldest nonbiblical figure in the Islamic apocalyptic tradition’ (Arjomand, 1998: 252-3).

The idea of the Mahdi as an apocalyptic leader spread widely beyond the Kaysaniyya and other extremist Shi’ite groups, as did the hadith (spread in Kufa in support of the Abbasid revolutionary movement in the 740s) about people coming from the east with black flags, part of which appears at the beginning of this chapter. However, a figure who is important in specifically Shi’ite messianism is the Yemeni (al-Yamani), whose

appearance is one of the five major signs of the Shi'i apocalyptic (Filiu, 2008: 27, 156).

Another influence on the development of mahdist traditions was 'the intermittent wars against the Byzantines [which] were persistently invested with messianic significance' (Arjomand, 1988: 225). As a result a truce with, and betrayal by, the Byzantines became one of the signs of the Hour, and the conquest of Constantinople came to be regarded as the prelude to the appearance of the Mahdi.

However, the fact that the Mahdi was not mentioned in the Qur'an meant that there continued to be doubts about him. The two most authoritative collections of hadiths, those by Bukhari (809-870) and Muslim (816-c.896) do not refer to him by name, although Muslim quotes a Prophetic hadith to the effect that 'There will be a caliph in the last (period) of my community who will freely give handfuls of wealth to the people without counting it', which is often taken to be a reference to the Mahdi (Aghaie, 2011: 3). The hadiths that Bukhari and Muslim regarded as reliable do however refer to the conquest of Constantinople, the descent of Jesus, and the appearance of Yajuj and Majuj. As well as introducing new phenomena, including tremors that open up the earth and bring widespread destruction, the rising of the sun in the west, and a fire covering the entire Arabian Peninsula (Filiu, 2008: 13-19), they also refer to the Dajjal, the 'false messiah' or the Antichrist.

The Dajjal is another critical figure in Islamic eschatology. Muslim quotes Muhammad as saying that he will be 'a young man with twisted, curly hair, and a blind eye ... he will appear somewhere between Syria and Iraq and will spread mischief right and left' (Muslim 41.7015 in Aghaie, 2011: 2). Sometimes it is said he will be a Jew, and will be followed by 70,000 Jews from Isfahan. He will test Muslims' faith because it will be difficult to doubt that he has divine authority; for example he will be able to raise the dead.⁴ He will lead an army, attack those who do not accept him, and conquer the whole world except for Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Many truly believing Muslims will gather in Jerusalem and he will besiege it (Cook, 2005: 195, Filiu, 2008: 15, Leaman, 2006: 164-5).

So during the first few centuries of Islam a full apocalyptic scenario about the events leading up to the last days developed. The basic details have remained more or less unchanged since, though there are some significant differences of opinion about the exact order of events and the parts played by the different figures.⁵ The events before the Hour were assigned to two categories, the small or lesser signs, and the major or greater signs. Among the many lesser signs were immorality, conflict and violence (Saritoprak, 2006: 198). The major signs include the emergence of the Mahdi. Descended from the Prophet, he will be 'a handsome young man with long dark hair, a broad forehead, and a ... prominent nose' (Aghaie, 2001: 3). Views on where he will appear differ. It may be in Syria, in Medina, or to the east in Khurasan, from where his forces carrying black banners will march west. The tyrannical Sufyani will emerge, and send an army against the Mahdi, who at this point will be living in Medina. He will go to Mecca and be proclaimed as Mahdi, but the army will

⁴ He has even been envisaged as riding on a donkey in a parody of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Cook, 2005: 81).

⁵ Some details were subsequently added by among others Al-Qurtubi in the 13th c. and Ibn Kathir in the 14th (for details see e.g. Filiu, 2008: 34-38).

disappear in the desert. There will be war between Byzantines and Muslims, and Constantinople will fall. This will trigger the emergence of the Dajjal, also from the east at the head of an army. However, on his appearance Jesus, who did not die on the Cross but was taken up to heaven (see Q. 3: 54-5), will return. He will descend at Damascus and with the Mahdi's help he will defeat the Dajjal, pursuing him to Lydda (Lod) where he will kill him.⁶ According to Muslim, Jews who have refused to convert to Islam will be put to death (Filiu, 2008: 17). The two tribes of Yajuj and Majuj will break out from their prison, but Jesus will defeat them too. He will then reign as caliph, and there will be a time of prosperity and peace when the world will turn to Islam (Anawati, 2012: 7). Views differ on whether Jesus is more important in all this than the Mahdi, or vice-versa; some have seen them as actually sharing power (Furnish, 2005, 97).

After some years, and there are different views on exactly how many, Jesus and the Mahdi will die a natural death, and there will be signs of the end. For example, there will be landslides, smoke will cover the whole world, and the sun will rise in the West. Then a beast (*dabbal*) will appear. According to some its task will be to distinguish the believers from the non-believers. With Moses' staff it will draw a line on the forehead of every believer so that their faces will become bright and luminous. It will seal the noses of the non-believers and their faces will become black. The fire will burn out from Yemen and drive people to the place of their assembly (Ali, 2001: 28). The four-winged angel Israfil, standing beneath the throne of God, will sound his trumpet. Men and women will be resurrected, and the day of judgement will follow (for details see e.g. Waines, 2003: 130).

Sunni and Shi'a

Belief in the Mahdi as a divinely-guided man with a mission to restore the faith became very widespread, even though it was never 'an essential part of Sunni doctrine' (Madelung, 2011a: 7, Sachedina, 1981: 172). Sometimes among Sunnis, as we see below, the Mahdi's role has overlapped with that of the *mujaddid* (Aghaie, 2011: 3-4; see also Amanat, 2009: 41, 49). This is because there was an important prophetic tradition that at the turn of each century God would send someone to restore or renew Islam (Waines, 2003: 210). However, because his arrival signals the beginning of the end, unlike the *mujaddid*, the Mahdi has an apocalyptic role too (Garcia-Arenal, 2006: 4).

In the Shi'ite traditions by contrast, belief in the Mahdi was usually central. From the early days of Islam Shi'ites believed that an inspired descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imam, should rule the Muslim community; unlike the Sunni caliph, who in theory was chosen by the community, he was designated by God. Since the assassination of the first Shi'ite Imam, Ali, in 661, however, the Imam has never actually held the reins of power. Nevertheless the return of the Imam continued to be a central article of faith, though different Shi'ite groups have different views on exactly who he is (Aghaie, 2011: 5). Ismailis (sometimes referred to as Seveners because they believed in seven visible Imams), believed that some of the predictions regarding the Mahdi were realised by the Fatimid caliph Mahdi, the founder of the

⁶ See e.g. Saritoprak, 2004: 3-4, Cook, 2005: 9.

Fatimid dynasty (see below). Their eschatological Imam and 7th Apostle, still expected for the future, was called the Qa'im (Madelung, 2011a: 10). However, for the Imamis or Twelvers (who believe there were 12 Imams), the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Muntazar (the awaited Imam), who disappeared in about 873/4 (Amanat, 2009: 49) and has been in concealment (*ghayba*) ever since, is the Mahdi. He is the restorer of the faith and creator of a just social order, as well as the harbinger of the end, and in Shi'i traditions he, not Jesus, kills the Dajjal (Sachedina, 1981: 172).

Although the claim that the Mahdi will restore justice on earth has also been an important one, and has been 'the chief doctrinal basis for intermittent messianic claims to authority in the Sunni world' (Filiu, 2008: 59), there has been more of an emphasis in Shi'i traditions on this just social order, a period of peace and plenty, which precedes the end. Whereas the Sunni scenarios usually envisage a relatively short period between the defeat of Yajuj and Majuj's armies and the resurrection and the Day of Judgement, between seven and forty years, some Shi'ites spoke of a much longer period, 309 years for example (Sachedina, 1981: 176).

The next section discusses some Shi'ite and Sunni movements in which mahdist ideas played an important role. Before this, however, it is worth noting that one feature of apocalyptic imagining has been attempts to 'date the end of the world using various methods' (Cook, 2005: 85). Although God alone knows the Hour, there are many 'signs of the hour' which, it is often believed, can be detected (Umar, 1999: 65).

Mahdis in history

Shi'i Mahdism was expressed in a range of revolutionary movements in the medieval and early modern period. The most important were the Fatimids in 10th century North Africa and the Safavids in late 15th century Iran. In 286/899 the fourth head of the Ismaili Shi'a, named Ali or Sa'id, put forward a claim to be the awaited Imam and Mahdi. In 909 his followers captured Kairouan in modern-day Tunisia and set up a rival Ismaili caliphate in opposition to the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad (Madelung 2011b: 5-6, Halm, 2004: 168). In 969 they conquered Egypt and founded Cairo which became the capital of this new state, usually referred to as Fatimid because its rulers claimed descent from Fatima and Ali. However, as so often happens with movements basing their cause on their supposed messianic role, once they taken power, they renounced the eschatological expectations which had helped them to gain it

The Fatimids had already been replaced as rulers of Egypt when in the mid-13th century the Middle East suffered the catastrophic Mongol invasion. The instability and violence of the post-Mongol era allowed chiliastic movements to flourish in Iran, Iraq and eastern Anatolia, and various pretenders appeared, often with strong Sufi connections, claiming to be the Imam-Mahdi (Halm, 2004: 73). The most successful was that of the Safavids who used the spiritual capital built up in the earlier 14th century by their ancestor, a Sufi named Safi-al-Din, to generate support among the nomadic Turcoman tribes, and in 1499 the 12-year old Ismail became its leader. Claiming to be not only the Mahdi but also a reincarnation of Ali and the twelve Imams, he established himself as ruler of north-western Iran and eastern Anatolia in 1501, and went on to conquer much of the rest of modern Iran and Afghanistan. As

with the Fatimids, Mahdist claims were abandoned once Ismail had secured his position, in this case in favour of orthodox legalistic Twelver Shi'ism (Halm, 2004: 80).

In the meantime Sunni Mahdism had been prominent in north-west Africa and Spain. The most influential Sunni Mahdist movement was founded by Ibn Tumart (d.1130) in the early 12th century. He developed and expounded 'a doctrine of divine oneness (*tawhid*)' and gave his followers the name of al-Muwahhidun (unitarians). Condemning the ruling Almoravids for corruption and immorality, he established himself in the remote mountain village of Tinmallal in the Atlas mountains. From here 'revolutionary and messianic propaganda' was disseminated (Filiu, 2008: 60). He took up arms against the government, and led an attack on Marrakesh in 1130 in which he was killed. He had already designated a successor, Abd al-Mu'min, who finally took Marrakesh in 1146 and went on to found a dynasty and establish his authority over Muslim Spain as well as Morocco.

A very different Mahdist movement, the Mahdawi movement, was founded in Jaunpur in Gujarat in western India in the later 15th century by Sayyid Muhammad. He claimed descent from the Twelver Shi'a's seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, so was able to appeal to Shi'ites too. He emphasised social justice as well as the need to practise Islam more rigorously. The movement survived his death, spreading south into the Deccan. It predicted that Jesus would appear in the year 1000 AH (1591 CE) and his failure to do so contributed to its extinction in the 17th century (Hodgson, 1974: 70-1, Furnish, 2005: 38-41, Lapidus, 2002: 366-7). It should be noted, however, that Mahdist discourse was not confined to opposition movements. For example the Ottoman Sultan Selim (1512-1520) referred to himself as Mahdi of the Last Days and Alexander the World Conqueror, and his successor Suleiman the Magnificent's rule (1520-1566) was presented as the millennium (Garcia-Arenal, 2006: 292).

Mahdism since c.1800

In Africa from the later 18th century on, various leaders who were regarded by at least some of their supporters as Mahdis as well as *mujaddids*, emerged. For example Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817) conducted a jihad in what is now northern Nigeria against those whom he accused of being only nominal Muslims (Heine 2000). His son, Muhammad Belo, became the first caliph of Sokoto, a new Muslim state. A little later Al-Hajj Umar ibn Sa'id, who claimed among other things to be the wazir of the Mahdi, conquered Futa Toro in northern Senegal in 1852. Leading his followers west, he was killed in 1864, but his followers established a state in part of what is now Mali. The French conquest of Algeria which began in 1830 sparked off a series of millenarian uprisings led by men claiming to be Mahdis (see e.g. Lapidus, 2002: 420, 424-5, 588).

The most important 19th century African Mahdist movement was that of the Sudanese Mahdi, Shaykh Muhammad Ahmad (1848-85). Much of eastern Sudan had been conquered by Egypt during the 19th century, and the movement combined Muslim revival with anti-Egyptian feeling. He was initiated into the Sammaniyah Sufi order, and following a series of visions revealed himself as Mahdi in 1881. He established himself in the Jabal Qadir mountains in Kordofan, south-west of Khartoum, and

introduced a puritanical Islamist regime. In 1885 he took Khartoum, but died in the same year; his successor was defeated by the British at Omdurman in 1898 (see e.g. Holt, 1970, Hunwick, 2011: 1-2). Mahdist expectation also surfaced in Nigeria when ‘a wave of revolutionary Mahdism swept through the western emirates of the Sokoto caliphate during the years of the colonial conquest’ (1897-1903) (Lovejoy and Hogendorn, 1990: 217). Mahdist literature and ideas continued to circulate in West Africa (Falola, 2001: 233). For example, to the west in Senegal, some of the followers of the Tijani Sufi leader, Ibrahim Niass (1900-1975), regarded him as *mujaddid* and even Mahdi (Lapidus, 2002: 747).

In other parts of the Muslim-majority world, during the 20th century mahdist ideas also remained popular at the grass-roots, but rarely expressed themselves in political movements.⁷ In November 1979 however occurred the century’s most dramatic expression of Mahdism. On 1 Muharram 1400 (20 November 1979) Juhaymun al-Utaybi, a former member of the Saudi National Guard, Muhammad al-Qahtani, his brother-in-law, and some 300 followers seized control of the Great Mosque in Mecca. Al-Qahtani possessed several of the attributes of the Mahdi according to the hadiths; for instance his name recalled the apocalyptic figure of the Qahtani. Juhaymun’s aim was to consecrate him as Mahdi between the *rukn* and the *maqam* in the Great Mosque and await the arrival of the army from the north as predicted by the traditions. The mosque was surrounded by troops; Qahtani was apparently killed on the 3rd day of the siege and by early December all resistance had ended (Hegghammer and Lacroix, 2007: 106, 112).

During the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s Mahdist ideas were taken up by the Palestinian ‘theoretician of global jihad’ (Filiu 2008: 177), Abdullah Azzam, who helped to organise the resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Azzam identified Afghanistan as ‘the new Khurasan’, ‘the heart of a revived caliphate that would eventually encompass the entire Muslim world’ (Cook, 2005: 174). Although the Al-Qaida leaders, Osama bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, rarely if ever made apocalyptic references, Mahdist ideas surface in a book written by an associate of Azzam’s who joined the Afghan Mujahidin in 1987, and from 1997 to 2001 collaborated with Al-Qaida. The book was *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance* (2004); it was written by a former member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, who took the name Abu Musab al-Suri (Filiu, 2008: 186-7).⁸

More peaceful Mahdist scenarios have also been promoted by Sunnis during the 20th century. The Kurd, Said Nursi (1878-1960), who founded the influential Nurchuluk movement, identified the Mahdi role with that of the *mujaddid* and said it could be performed by different people (Leaman, 2011:2, 4).⁹ The movement has continued to display an interest in the end of the world, the Mahdi, and the Signs of the Hour (Damrel, 2006, 121). The fact that it emphasizes that Jesus will play a central role in

⁷ A rare exception was a brief mahdist outburst in December 1930 in west-central Turkey (see e.g. Furnish, 2005: 59).

⁸ For Amanat the rise of bin-Laden and Al-Qaida are manifestations of fundamentalist apocalypticism (Amanat, 2009: 70). In 2002, however, Al-Qaida published a statement intended to dampen down Mahdist expectations entitled *God Does Not Entrust Knowledge of the Mahdi to Anyone before His Appearance* (Furnish, 2005: 153). Filiu also refers to what he calls the ‘vengeful millenarianism’ of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam (2008: 180)

⁹ As does Fethullah Gulen, Leaman says (2011: 4), who sees himself as carrying on Said Nursi’s approach.

this has helped it to cultivate an ‘ecumenical image’ (Filiu, 2008: 173). The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order, to take another example, currently led by Shaykh Nazim, has developed its own end-times scenario, which also emphasises Jesus’ role in the end-times (Filiu, 2008: 169). According to this ‘the Dajjal and the Mahdi are both alive now, apocalyptic global conflict is imminent, and the fate of the world is sealed’. The Mahdi is at present waiting in a cave in the ‘Empty Quarter’ in Saudi Arabia and has commanded Shaykh Nazim to prepare his helpers – ‘the Muslims and non-Muslims who will rally behind the ‘rightly-guided one’ when he declares his redemptive mission’ (Damrel, 2006, 122; see also Furnish, 2005: 153).¹⁰

modern Sunni apocalyptic

A very different scenario is envisaged by writers belonging to what Cook calls the radical school of apocalypticism, who since the 1980s have created ‘new apocalyptic scenarios based on classical Muslim material, more or less in the same manner that evangelical Christians use biblical material’ (Cook, 2005: 15). Often practising ‘newspaper exegesis’ - looking for signs of the Hour in contemporary political events, writers in this genre have helped to create a popular subculture (Furnish 2005: 102, Filiu, 2008: 92). One of the most influential examples is *al-Masih al-Dajjal* (The False Messiah), published in 1987 by an Egyptian journalist, Sayyid Ayyub. This claims to present objective research on the foundations of the great religions. In fact it focuses mainly on the supposedly nefarious role of the “Jewish” antichrist throughout history, ‘leading up to the moment when Islam, his sworn enemy, will bring against him the decisive and apocalyptic battle’ (Filiu, 2008: 83). Ayyub influenced Muhammad Isa Da’ud, who has written a number of books on apocalyptic themes. His *Al-Mahdi al-muntazar ‘ala al-abwab* (The awaited Mahdi at the doors), for example, is a complete apocalypse in the sense of a future history, a narrative about the ‘end-times’ rather like those written by the American writers LaHaye and Jenkins in the *Left Behind* series (Cook, 2005: 129, 145). According to this the Mahdi will appear, there will be a series of wars with the West, but ultimately the Mahdi will triumph. The Jews will either be wiped out or turn to Islam, the Catholic Church will be destroyed, and the Mahdi will start to build his messianic kingdom (Cook, 2005: 129-49). Other writers who have followed in Ayyub’s footsteps include Amin Muhammad Gamaledin, whose *Armageddon* was published soon after 9/11. The war in Afghanistan was, he suggested, only the prelude to a wider global conflict in which Israel would be destroyed, and the Mahdi conquer the world (Filiu, 2008: 110, 112). One feature of this genre is its anti-Semitism. Another is the way it draws on the Bible, and evangelical Christian interpretations of it, or plays off them (Cook, 2005: 35, 123, 216). Ayyub for instance draws on Revelation and identifies the Mahdi with the rider on the white horse mentioned in 19:11-13 (Cook, 2005: 39). Another writer in this genre, Bashir Abdallah, suggests in *Zilzal al-ard al-‘azim* (1994), that the Mahdi is the child born in Rev. 12: 5 (Cook, 2005: 199). Beyond the Arabic-speaking world, apocalyptic writing from the Sunni viewpoint has been produced by, for instance, the British convert Ahmad Thomson, and the Turkish pamphleteer Adnan Oktar (pen name Harun Yahya) (Filiu, 2008: 171). There is also a range of Sunni Mahdist websites (Furnish, 2005: 110-115).

¹⁰ So has the Algerian shaykh Khalid Bentunes, guide of the Sufi Allawiya order, ‘whose tolerant mysticism attracts many Western converts’ (Filiu, 2008: 169).

the end-times in modern Shi'ism

As we have seen, belief in the return of the 12th Imam, the Imam-Mahdi, became a central feature of Twelver Shi'ism. In the later 18th century the Shaykhi movement, founded by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i (1756-1826), came up with a new understanding of the millennium. This envisaged the Imam as an ordinary human being, not a superhuman being with extraordinary powers, and the millennial restoration of truth and justice as being a process that would only be achieved through 'the support and sacrifices of his followers' (Amanat, 2009: 52-3).¹¹

Ideas of this kind were to be important in the later 20th century. One of the principal ideologues of the Iranian Revolution, Ali Shariati (1933-77), for example, turned Shi'i messianic expectations into a revolutionary ideology (Amanat, 2009: 63). Murtaza Mutahhari, a student of Ayatollah Khomaini's, treated the advent of the Lord of the Age 'no longer as a sudden and cataclysmic event outside the pale of history, but as the final stage in an ideologically driven revolution to establish Islam's "ideal society"' (Amanat, 2009:64). For him and others who shared this approach the establishment of a 'just state' would help to bring about the Mahdist revolution. Mahdist ideas played a role in the Islamic Revolution in 1978-79, when for example Ayatollah Khomaini was sometimes seen by his supporters as the Imam (Amanat, 2009: 65, 67).¹²

After the Islamic Republic was established, there was less emphasis on the Mahdi and his revolution; the idea of the 'authority of the jurist' with which Ayatollah Khomaini was particularly associated, was seen as rendering it superfluous. However, after the Muhammad Khatami's victory in the 1997 elections, his inability to do much to change the system encouraged a 'new spirit of messianic expectations and popular religiosity' (Amanat, 2009: 226). Meanwhile conservative figures launched a propaganda campaign to promote the Mahdi 'as an absolute sacred source of authority' with the object of undermining parliament and the reformers (Amanat, 2009: 225). Groups within the Islamic Republic began to publish journals (e.g. the *Mouood* magazine), and host a range of websites dealing with the Mahdi, not just in Persian, but in a range of other languages. They started to organise conferences, seminars, youth camps, night vigils and mourning ceremonies, study groups and lavish commemorations of the birthday of the Mahdi on the 15th of Sha'ban. Visits to shrines connected with the Imams and beliefs in their healing qualities, eulogies for the Mahdi, and pietistic congregational prayers to hasten his return became including more popular than ever. This 'proto-messianic mood' was heightened by the US invasion of Iraq, with its considerable Shi'i population and its key Shi'i shrines, in 2003, and by the 'confrontations with U.S. forces in historic venues of immense messianic significance' (Amanat, 2009: 227, also 226, 233-6). These included Kufa and Najaf, where Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army fought American troops in 2004 (Cockburn, 2008: 227).

¹¹ The Bahai religion derived from a 19th century Iranian messianic movement inspired by Shaykhi ideas. The Ahmadiyya movement was founded by a self-proclaimed Mahdi, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadyani (1839-1908) (see e.g. Amanat, 2009: 53-61).

¹² In fact fighting against oppression would generate violent hostility which would hasten the coming of the Imam as he would stand by his community (Chehabi, 2011: 443).

This revived interest in the Mahdi can be seen for example in the growing popularity of what was virtually a new pilgrimage. In 974 at Jamkaran a few miles west of Qom, a local landowner had had a vision of the twelfth Imam and built a small mosque; behind it is a dried-up well which is believed to be a channel of communication with the Imam. Since the 1990s this has been transformed into a major pilgrimage site, with five enclosures, twelve minarets, and vast interior courtyards and facilities for hundreds of thousands of visitors. Attracting many pilgrims, its midnight congregational prayers for deliverance (*faraj*) have become especially popular. An online library offers books and treatises dealing mainly with the Jamkaran vision and other sightings of the Mahdi (Amanat, 2009: 237-231). Text messaging is available, as is downloadable wallpaper for cell phones and computer screensavers with 'images of Jamkaran and calligraphy with Mahdistic images (Amanat, 2009: 232).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current Iranian President, is a firm believer in the Mahdi, and spoke about him to the UN General Assembly in 2005 and 2006. In spite of his Holocaust denial and his call for the destruction of the Israeli state, Ahmadinejad maintains that the Advent of the Saviour will be the 'prelude to peace, social justice, prosperity, and happiness for all humanity' (Amanat, 2009:242) (a rare example of government support for Mahdism in Shi'i tradition, Amanat suggests (2009: 244)). The Iranian government continues to promote mahdist ideas. In 2007, for instance a series of 12 government radio programs on the Mahdi was posted on its website.¹³ In 2011 it distributed a DVD entitled 'The reappearance is Nigh' in which recent events are taken as signs of the 12th Imam's imminent return. In this the Supreme Guide Khamenei is identified with the Khurasani, President Ahmadinejad with the Khurasani's lieutenant, Sho'aib bin Saleh, and the head of Hizbullah's militia in Lebanon with the Yemeni (Furnish, 2011: 2-3, Yaluh, 2011).¹⁴ Militant messianism is also evident in publications by non-Iranian Shi'ites. These include *Ahmedinejad and the Forthcoming World Revolution* by a Lebanese publisher, Shadi Faqih Naim Qassim, and *Mahdi the Savior*, published in 2007 by the Hizbullah deputy secretary-general, Shaykh Naim Qassim. This refers to Hizbullah's struggle as part of 'the movement of the appearance' and associates the 'black banners' of Khurasan with contemporary Iran and its leaders (Filiu, 2008: 153, 157).

The American occupation has, not surprisingly, had a major impact on mahdist ideas and activity among Iraqi Shi'ites too. During the 1970s the Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr wrote a booklet about the Mahdi in which he argued that although his reappearance could not be predicted, the present times were propitious for it. His relative, Muqtada al-Sadr, explicitly invoked the eschatological heritage by calling the militia he founded in 2003 the Mahdi Army (Filiu, 2008: 140-3, 147, Furnish 2005: 160). Clashing with American troops in 2004, it became the most powerful militia in Iraq. Another Iraqi Shi'ite who drew on messianic themes was Ahmad al-Hasan, an engineer from Basra, who claimed to be the 'representative' of the Hidden Imam', and founded a movement called the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi, which was involved in fighting in 2007 and 2008 (Filiu, 2008: 160-1).

¹³ In these the Sufyani supplants the Antichrist as the chief villain of the piece (Filiu, 2008: 152-3).

¹⁴ These views are not of course shared by all Twelvers – see e.g. Amanat, 2009: 248-50, Leaman 2011: 3). Some Sunni writers, it is worth noting, cast President Khatami as the Dajjal (Furnish, 2005: 101).

the appeal of Mahdism

It is only possible here to offer some brief comments on the reasons for the appeal of Mahdism. The concept has been a recurrent theme in Islamic history partly because it could be used for political purposes, and one way of trying to account for the emergence of Mahdist movements is to think of them as expressing popular resentment of political, social and economic inequality (Amanat, 2009: 34, 36). This approach might help us to understand features of some of the early Mahdist movements like that of Mukhtar in the late 7th century CE. Somewhat similarly, scholars have drawn attention to the revolutionary aspects of the anti-colonial West African mahdist movements (e.g. Lovejoy and Hogendorn, 1990: 279). However, there is no necessary relationship between deprivation and Mahdism. Those in power can construct eschatological discourses too, and Mahdism is not necessarily oppositional. As in contemporary Iran for example, it has sometimes been used by the ruling elite to bolster their power (Amanat, 2009: x-xi, Bowie 1979: 13, Umar, 1999: 80).

Nor is it necessarily linked with violence. Mahdist beliefs and faith in a future golden age can in fact act as a kind of theodicy; human suffering can be interpreted as ‘a providential design to expedite the millennial relief’, to be endured patiently (Amanat, 2009: 29). In the late 19th century in West Africa for example, jihad was not the only reaction to colonial intrusion. Given that this intrusion was often seen as a sign of the end, some people advocated withdrawal and others ‘moral regeneration and religious revival’ (Umar, 1999: 67-70). Arguably, rather than inciting violence, the fantasies about the Mahdi, the restoration of Muslim power and the destruction of Islam’s perceived enemies that we have looked at might express and help people to cope with the humiliation and frustration caused by events such as Israel’s triumph during the Six-Day War in 1967, the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹⁵

Nor is it the case that modern Mahdism generally expresses a traditionalist reaction. Rethinking Mahdism can be a way of engaging with Westernisation and modernisation (Amanat, 2009: 251). Besides it makes full use of modern communication technologies. Any Muslim can now look at the sources and create his or her own apocalyptic scenario and the post-modern character of recent Mahdism can be seen in the way that it draws on unfamiliar sources, and often rejects the authority of the religious experts (Cook, 2005: 215, Filiu, 2008: 163).

In any case to see Mahdism as simply a vehicle for political and economic concerns is too simple. Mahdist resistance to colonialism in West Africa for instance was not necessarily an end in itself. Mahdist beliefs and themes were part of a ‘total pattern of prophecy’, so that as one of the signs of the imminent end of the world, the issue was what Muslims should do ‘individually and collectively to secure salvation and avoid damnation in the world to come’ (Umar, 1999: 72). As Amanat argues, to understand the appeal of Mahdism better we need to take into account the way exposure to and participation in millenarian discourse can create a ‘community of interpretation’ and

¹⁵ Amy Frykholm’s study *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America* (2004), particularly Chapter 8, might help us better understand the appeal of this kind of writing.

‘a millennial rationale’, and engender ‘a sense of adherence more compelling for believers than any ulterior motive’ (Amanat, 2009: 34-5).¹⁶

conclusion

This chapter has surveyed beliefs about the Mahdi and his role in apocalyptic expectations of Muslims since the 8th century CE, and looked at some of the movements with which they have been associated. The resurrection, the last judgement and the afterlife are described in the Qur’an, and Jesus’ return is mentioned, but the Mahdi himself is not, nor is his adversary, the Dajjal. However, pre-Islamic influences and the traumatic impact of the civil wars in the first century and a half after the Prophet Muhammad’s death contributed to the development of a detailed apocalyptic scenario, in which the Mahdi often played a very important role. In this minor and major signs are identified; the latter include the appearance of the Mahdi, followed by the Dajjal, who is set to conquer the whole world when Jesus returns, and he or the Mahdi, or both together, defeat him. The two tribes of Yajuj and Majuj break out of their prison and threaten further destruction, but Jesus defeats them too. After some years (there are different views on how many) the Mahdi and Jesus die. There will be further signs of the end, among them the appearance of the beast, men and women will be resurrected and the day of judgement will follow.

Understandings of the Mahdi varied between Sunnis and Shi’ites. Shi’ites came to identify him with the divinely-inspired Imam, and for Imami (Twelver) Shi’ites in particular he is the expected 12th Imam; currently hidden, he will return to inaugurate a period of peace and prosperity when the whole world will turn to Islam or accept Islamic rule. Two very important Shi’ite Mahdist movements were those of the Seven Fatimids in North Africa and later the Twelver Safavids in Iran.

Although for Sunnis belief in the Mahdi was never essential, and sometimes overlapped with belief in the centennial renewer, the *mujaddid*, Sunni Mahdism has sometimes played an important role: it was particularly strong in Islamic Spain and North Africa, and expressed itself in a number of movements, most notably that of the Muwahiddun. In the 19th century a number of Mahdist movements emerged in parts of the Sudan and North and West Africa, the most famous that of the Sudanese Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad. The most spectacular Mahdist event in the 20th century was the takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca by a group of Sunni militants late in November 1979. Mahdist ideas were also popular with some of those involved in the anti-Soviet jihad. However, although some had links with Al-Qaida, there is little evidence that the Al-Qaida leaders had Mahdist expectations. Mahdist beliefs and apocalyptic scenarios have also been the basis for a genre of apocalyptic writing, mainly but not only in Arabic, which envisages global war, the destruction of Western power, and the triumph of Islam (and betrays pronounced anti-Semitic attitudes). Some Sufi and Sufi-influenced movements have developed more irenic end-times scenarios.¹⁷ Mahdist ideas did also play a part in the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and since the mid-1990s have been emphasised by groups and figures within the

¹⁶ See for instance Nels Johnson ‘Religious Paradigms of the Sudanese Mahdiyyah’, *Ethnohistory*, Spring, 1978, 159-178.

¹⁷ Space has not permitted a discussion of the links between Sufism and Mahdism, but on this topic see e.g. Garcia-Arena, 2006, Chapter 5.

government, including President Ahmadinejad himself, and have apparently enjoyed a revival there.

There is no single understanding of the Mahdi and end times scenario that would be acceptable to all Muslims. Some, for instance, envisage ‘a gradual process of amelioration’ (Leaman, 2011: 5), seeing the Mahdi almost as a political activist who will work for social justice, and believe that Muslims should do what they can to bring about his coming. Others have seen him as more than human and as bringing a sudden and complete change to life on earth, and therefore say that they should simply wait for his return.¹⁸ Some say the Mahdi’s role could actually be performed by different people, but others disagree. Traditionally Sunnis saw Jesus’ role in defeating the Antichrist as more important than the Mahdi’s. Twelver Shi’ites in particular, however, regarded the Imam Mahdi as central, and for some of them the Sufyani has become more important than the Antichrist. For some the Mahdi’s coming will involve extraordinary violence and cruelty, while others see it as being more peaceful. Views also differ on how long the golden age that will follow the defeat of the Antichrist and of Yajuj and Majuj will last. For some this will last only a few years, for others it will be centuries. Some envisage Christians and Jews living peacefully and following their religions under a divine global government conducted by Imam Mahdi, whereas others believe that to survive non-Muslims will have to convert to Islam. Although Sunnis and Shi’ites disagree about the form the end will take, there is almost as much disagreement within Sunni and Shi’ite traditions as between them.

As regards the reasons for the appeal of the Mahdi and the events associated with his emergence, Mahdist movements have sometimes been vehicles through which discontents of various kinds could be expressed, including rapid change of various kinds. Sometimes however rather than encouraging resistance, their promise of ultimate restitution has helped people to endure injustice and suffering. Somewhat similarly the violent scenarios of much modern Islamic apocalyptic writing may be seen as fantasy compensation. However, insofar as they incorporate new elements and are mostly written by people without a background in the traditional religious sciences, they are the products of modernity. In some strands of modern Twelver Shi’ism and in some Sunni movements like the Haqqani-Naqshbandiyya, we also see an engagement with modernity and new ways of thinking about the Mahdi.

¹⁸ A diversity of views which has parallels in modern Judaism.

bibliography

- Aghaie, K. (2011) 'Messianism: Messianism in the Muslim Tradition'. *Encyclopedia of Religion second edition*, Lindsay Jones (ed.). Vol. 9. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 56795983. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 18 Apr. 2011.
- Ali, A. (2011) *Major Signs before the Day of Judgement*, <http://www.inter-islam.org/faith/Majorsigns.html>, accessed 11.4.2011.
- Amanat, A. (2009) *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, London/NY: I.B. Tauris.
- Anawati, G. (2012) 'Isa', *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; W. Heinrichs (ed.s), Brill, 2012. Brill Online. 07 January 2012.
http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0378>
- Arjomand S. (1998) 'Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classic Period', in B. McGinn, (ed.) *Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture Vol.2*, New York: Continuum, pp.238-283.
- Bowie, F. (1997) 'Equilibrium and the end of time: the roots of Millenarianism', in F. Bowie with C. Deacy, (ed.s) *The Coming Deliverer: Millennial Themes in World Religions*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Casanova, P. (1911) *Mohammed et la fin du monde*, Paris: P. Guethner.
- Chehabi, H. (2011) 'Schiitischer Messianismus und Mahdi-Glaube in der Neuzeit', *Iranian Studies*, 44:3, 442-443.
- Cockburn, P. (2008) *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq*, London: faber and faber.
- Cook, D. (2005), *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Damrel D. (2006) 'Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order in North America' in J. Malik and J. Hinnells, (ed.s) *Sufism in the West*, Abingdon/NY: Routledge.
- Falola, T. 1998) *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religion Politics and Secular Ideologies*, Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Filiu, J-P. (2011) *Apocalypse in Islam*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, first published as *Apocalypse dans l'Islam*, transl. M.B. DeBevoise, 2008.
- Frykholm, A. (2004) *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, Oxford/NY: Oxford University Press.
- Furnish, T. (2005) *Holiest Wars: Islamic Mahdis, their Jihads, and Osama bin Laden*, Westport Conn: Praeger.
- Furnish, T. (2011) 'Iran's New Mahdism Da'wah Video: Letting Slip the Jinns of Jihad?', <http://hmn.us/articles/138229.html>, accessed 7.1.12.
- Garcia-Arenal, M. (2006) *Messianism and Puritanical Reform Mahdis of the Muslim West*, Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Halm, H. (2004) *Shi'ism Second Edition*, transl. by J. Watson and M. Hill, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hegghammer, T. and Lacroix, S. (2007) 'Rejectionist Islam in Saudi Arabia: the Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 39. 103-122.
- Heine P. (2000) 'I am not the Mahdi, but ...' in A. Baumgarten (ed) *Apocalyptic Time*, Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill. 69-78.
- Hodgson, M. (1974) *The Venture of Islam Conscience and History In a World Civilization Vol.3 the Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, Chicago/London, Chicago University Press.

- Holt, P. (1958) *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: a study of its origins, development and overthrow*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hunwick, John (2012) 'Muhammad Ahmad', *Encyclopedia of Religion second edition*. Lindsay Jones (ed.). Vol. 9. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 6228-6229. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.
- Johnson N. (1978) 'Religious Paradigms of the Sudanese Mahdiyyah', *Ethnohistory*, Spring: 159-178.
- Lahaye T. and Jenkins J. (1995) *Left Behind a Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale.
- Lapidus, I. (2002) *A History of Islamic Societies Second Edition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Leaman, O. (2006) 'Eschatology', in O. Leaman (ed) *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, Abingdon/NY, Routledge.194-9
- Leaman, O. (2011) 'The Mahdi as a source of Doctrinal Differentiation in Islam', <http://www.mahdaviat-conference.com/prtht-nwd23nq.102.html>, accessed 11.12.11.
- Lovejoy P. and Hogendorn J. (1990) 'Revolutionary Mahdism and Resistance to Colonial Rule in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1905-6', *Journal of African History*, 31. 217-44.
- Madelung, W. (2011a) 'al-Mahdi', *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.Bosworth; E. van Donzel; W.Heinrichs (ed.s), Brill, 2012. Brill Online. 07 April 2011, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0378> 2011a.
- Madelung, W. (2001b) 'Shiism: Isma'iliyah. *Encyclopedia of Religion second edition*. Lindsay Jones (ed.), Vol. 12. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 8325-8337. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 18 April 2011.
- Sachedina, A (1981) *Islamic Messianism The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sachedina, A. (1995) 'Messianism', *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islam*, J. Esposito (ed.). Vol. 3, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Saritoprak, Z. (2003) 'The Legend of al-Dajjal (Antichrist): The Personification of Evil in the Islamic Tradition', *Muslim World*, 93:2, 291-308.
- Saritoprak, Z. (2011) 'The Mahdi Question according to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi' <http://www.nursistudies.com/teblig.php?tno=324> accessed 4.1.12.
- Umar M. (1999) 'Muslims' Eschatological Discourses on Colonialism in Northern Nigeria', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 67:1. 59-84.
- Waines D. (2003) *An Introduction to Islam Second Edition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yaluh, R. (2011) 'Mahdism in Contemporary Iran: Ahmadinejad and the occult Imam', *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies Research Papers*, www.dohainstitute.org, accessed 7.1.12.