

A PERVERSE PARODY:  
ISLAMIC ESCHATOLOGY

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## A PERVERSE PARODY: ISLAMIC ESCHATOLOGY

### *Introduction*

Christians are not the only people looking for a savior's return. Muslims also expect the return of an *imam* (teacher) called the *Mahdi*. Unlike the peace and joy that stem from Christian hope and expectation, however, Islamic eschatology breeds a very different kind of application. Islamic eschatology does not teach peaceful waiting for a promised savior; it fuels political passion to hasten the Mahdi's violent return.

### *Key Texts*

The Qur'an offers no substantial information to the student of Islamic eschatology. While it does address issues of *personal* judgment and afterlife, it is silent regarding worldwide apocalyptic events. The Islamic view of the apocalypse is based on an additional set of scriptures called the hadiths. The word *hadith* means "narrative" and the hadiths are an authoritative set of writings, second only to the Qur'an. They contain more stories of Muhammed's life, background information to Qur'an chapters, and additional ethical

injunctions.<sup>1</sup> Where the Qur'an is vague and general, the hadiths supply details and interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

There are six collections of hadiths that carry widespread authority in Islam: *al-Bukhari*, *Muslim*, *al-Tirmidhi*, *Abu Daud al-Sijistani*, *al-Nasai*, and *al-Qazwini*.<sup>3</sup> The hadiths inform devout Muslims about the end times. Each hadith contains two parts. The *isnad* contains the "genealogy" of the hadith's transmission; the *matn* is the actual text of the hadith itself.<sup>4</sup>

As might be expected, the Sunni-Shi'ite division entails controversy regarding which hadiths are authoritative. The beliefs described hereafter (Mahdism) are dominant in Shi'ite Islam.

### *Key Players*

Islamic eschatology is not defined primarily by events; events are important, but the key players are foundational. There are three major characters in the Islamic version of the apocalypse. They are *al-Mahdi*, *al-Dajjal*, and *'Isa ibn Maryam*.

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<sup>1</sup> John. L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>2</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pakistan: The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1983), 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Esposito, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Richardson, *The Islamic Antichrist* (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2009), 15-16.

## Al-Mahdi

The *Mahdi* is the main character in Islamic eschatology, though the Qur'an never mentions him.<sup>5</sup> His main title means "the Guided One,"<sup>6</sup> but he is given various other titles in the hadiths: Twelfth Imam, Lost Imam, Lord of Command, Lord of the Age, He Who Will Arise, Authoritative Source, The Awaited Imam, and The Remnant of God.<sup>7</sup> Muslims have in mind a detailed description of his physical appearance as well: "a young man of medium stature, with a handsome face; long, beautiful, black hair that flows onto his shoulders; and a shining face."<sup>8</sup> He will also have a broad forehead and high nose, and he will stutter.<sup>9</sup>

Muslims believe that the Mahdi is currently in *occultation*, that is, he is hidden away while he awaits his return. According to Twelver Shi'ites, the Mahdi went into a "Lesser Occultation," from which he sent messages to believers, from 874-941; the "Greater Occultation" began in 941 when the Mahdi

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<sup>5</sup> Riffat Hassan, "Messianism and Islam," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 1, 1985): 278.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Hitchcock, *The Apocalypse of Ahmadinejad* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2007), 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Gene Gurganus, *Islam and the End Times* (Greenville, SC: Truth Publishers, 2010), 18.

stopped sending messages, and it continues till the present.<sup>10</sup> The Mahdi's return will be preceded by the approach of an army carrying black banners and coming from the east.<sup>11</sup> He will lead this army, devastating Jewish forces until he captures Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

### Al-Dajjal

The Mahdi does not reign without opposition. An opponent called the *Dajjal*, or "the Deceiver," arises and opposes him. The Dajjal thus plays the role of "antichrist" in Islamic eschatology. The Qur'an does not mention the Dajjal explicitly, though some Islam scholars believe that Qur'anic references to the human rebellion actually refer to the Dajjal's wickedness.<sup>13</sup> Like any good "bad guy" in Islamic tradition, the Dajjal will be Jewish.<sup>14</sup>

As with hadith tradition about the Mahdi, there is a detailed description of the Dajjal's physical features. In contrast to the handsomeness of the Mahdi, the Dajjal is blind in one eye, lacks eyebrows, has curly hair, walks with a limp,

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<sup>10</sup> Hitchcock, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Richardson, 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Gurganus, 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> Zeki Saritoprak, "The Legend of al-Dajjal (Antichrist): The Personification of Evil in the Islamic Tradition," *Muslim World* 93, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 292.

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, 75.

and has the word “infidel” printed across his forehead.<sup>15</sup> One might ask how a man who looks like that could mount an insurrection against the world’s “savior,” but the hadiths maintain that the label is visible only to true believers.

The Dajjal comes ready to deceive: he performs a host of false miracles. He will appear to show dead ancestors, ride a magic donkey, produce rain and grass at will, and heal the sick.<sup>16</sup> The Dajjal will not be content to let people draw their own conclusions about the source of his miraculous powers. According to Islamic scholars, he will claim to be a God – specifically, Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> He will attempt to deceive the world, but he will be unable to enter three cities of refuge: Mecca, Medina, and Damascus.<sup>18</sup> Such a dangerous adversary will not go unpunished, according to the hadiths.

#### ‘Isa Ibn Maryam

The Dajjal’s rise in power will be brought to an end by a man called ‘Isa, or Jesus.<sup>19</sup> He will descend from heaven and kill the Dajjal.<sup>20</sup> The Christian who

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for Muslims, the hadiths do not agree on which eye is blind. Gurganus; 98; Richardson, 72; Saritoprak, 291.

<sup>16</sup> Richardson, 71-73; Saritoprak, 294.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>19</sup> Hitchcock, 53.

studies Islamic eschatology will wonder immediately why Jesus is placed into this position of victor. Why not Muhammed or another purely Muslim prophet? Poston suggests three reasons.<sup>21</sup> First, Jesus is unique among the prophets because he was raised straight to Allah's presence without dying.<sup>22</sup> Second, the Qur'an predicts Jesus' return as a precursor of the final judgment (Sura 43:61). Third, Jesus' ministry was brief and "incomplete;" therefore, his return will allow him to complete his ministry to Allah.

After defeating the Dajjal, 'Isa will rule for either seven or forty years as a caliph under the Mahdi.<sup>23</sup> During this time, he will submit himself to the Mahdi in worship<sup>24</sup> and institute Shariah (Islamic law).<sup>25</sup> He will affront both Christianity and Judaism by breaking crosses and killing pigs.<sup>26</sup> Evidencing the inevitable inconsistency of false religion, Islamic eschatology sees 'Isa slaughtering Jews, even though he is a Jew. Because the Jews are the army of the

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<sup>20</sup> Larry Poston, "The Second Coming of 'Isa: An Exploration of Islamic Premillennialism," *Muslim World* 100, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an, Sura 4:157-158. This is part of the Islamic belief that Jesus did not die for sins; Allah (for lack of a better term) faked Jesus' crucifixion.

<sup>23</sup> Poston, 108.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Gurganus, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Hadith *Abu Daud* 37:4310, cited in Richardson, 56.



Dajjal, 'Isa destroys them. According to some Muslim scholars, this is perfectly reasonable; after all, the Jews "killed" Jesus at his first coming.<sup>27</sup>

After all this, 'Isa marries and raises a Muslim family.<sup>28</sup> Far from being the exclusive Son of God that the Scriptures portray him to be, the Muslim Jesus is just another good Muslim prophet who serves Allah and leads people to Islam.

### Christian Eschatology

The apocalyptic drama has been cast with a three-member acting troupe in Islamic eschatology. The two protagonists and one antagonist make up a mirrored contrast to Christian eschatology's single protagonist and his two antagonists.<sup>29</sup> In Islamic eschatology, a military-political leader arises and is assisted by a powerful evangelist-prophet. Together, they defeat a miracle-working opponent who claims to be divine. The Bible presents a miracle-working Savior who is divine. He defeats a military-political-religious opponent who is assisted by a powerful evangelist-prophet. Setting aside the Islamic attempt to claim Jesus as their own prophet, it is evident that Islam's evil enemy is Christianity's Jesus, and that Christ's opponents (the Antichrist and his False

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<sup>27</sup> Richardson, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Tirmidhi, quoted in "Jesus A.S. in Islam," <http://www.islam.tc/prophecies/jesus.html> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> The phrase "Christian eschatology" will be used for the futurist view of the book of Revelation, specifically the premillennial / pretribulational view.

Prophet) are Islam's eschatological heroes. With reference to their main characters, Christian and Islamic eschatology fit together precisely: they predict the same people from different perspectives.

This superficial similarity, however, does not legitimize Islamic tradition at all. As previously noted, Islamic prophecy contains multiple internal contradictions. The hadiths lack agreement on small details like the Dajjal's blind eye and the duration of every temporal prediction.<sup>30</sup> There are also theological errors, like the contrast between 'Isa's alleged translation to Allah and his justification to kill Jews because they "killed" him. Furthermore, many Islamic eschatological beliefs disagree with the biblical texts, most notably the durations of times of "tribulation"<sup>31</sup> and the identification of 'Isa / Jesus.

### *Key Signs*

The interaction between the three main actors in Islamic eschatology has been described in brief above. They do not, however, act in isolation from their contemporary historical setting. Islamic eschatology has predicted multiple signs that precede and transpire concurrently with the apocalyptic actors and events. These signs are divided into two categories: major signs and minor signs.

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<sup>30</sup> These contradictions include the length of the Mahdi's reign, the length of the Dajjal's reign, and the length of 'Isa's post-Dajjal ministry.

<sup>31</sup> Poston, 108.

They are not chronologically distinct; they only differ in importance. For some Muslims, only the major signs are truly unarguable.<sup>32</sup>

### Major Signs

Because of the variety among interpreters (both Islamic and “infidel”), it is difficult to pin down the major signs precisely. Hitchcock lists five: appearance of a pro-Islam warrior named Yamani, Dajjal’s cohort called Sofyani, Gabriel’s annunciation of Mahdi’s leadership, Sofyani’s defeat, death of a pure holy man called Muhamman bin Hassan.<sup>33</sup> One Islamic website lists five other signs: a time of tribulation, both solar and lunar eclipses in the same Ramadan, Islamic civil war at Mina, the discovery of gold in the Euphrates, and the appearance of the Sufyani (Sofyani).<sup>34</sup> Another Islamic website presents a much longer list of major signs, including the appearance of the three main actors, peace, drought, Yajooj and Majooj (Gog and Magog), fog, a beast, and fire in Yemen.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Richardson, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Hitchcock, 52.

<sup>34</sup> “Imaam Mahdi and the signs that will precede him,” <http://www.inter-islam.org/faith/mahdi1.htm> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> “Major Signs,” <http://www.islam.tc/prophecies/qiyaam1.html> (accessed November 15, 2010).

disunity of Islamic eschatological event predictions stands sharp contrast to the unity of Christian eschatology as the Scripture presents it.<sup>36</sup>

### Minor Signs

The minor signs are more general than the major signs; consequently, various lists of minor signs show greater agreement with one another. These signs include evidences of moral decline: deceitfulness, immorality, bloodshed, rebellion, greed, disobedience, homosexuality, and drunkenness. A number of less iniquitous signs are listed as well: prevalence of musical instruments, construction of beautiful pulpits, and reduced travel times.<sup>37</sup>

At first glance, the moral decline predicted in this tradition reminds the Bible student of similar lists in I Tim. 4 and II Tim. 3. Again, this surface similarity does not give credibility to Islam. First, the New Testament predates the hadiths by at least six hundred years.<sup>38</sup> Second, these moral issues are sins that would alarm any remotely religious person. Islamic eschatology breaks no new ground when it paints its apocalypse on a canvas of moral decline.

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<sup>36</sup> Again, "Christian eschatology" refers to the premillennial / pretribulational understanding of the end times. While that interpretation does face challenges and hermeneutical difficulties, it does not run aground on any internal or textual contradictions.

<sup>37</sup> "Minor Signs," <http://www.islam.tc/prophecies/qiyaam2.html> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Esposito, 101.

## *Modern Results*

### War in Iraq

Iraq is a ninety-seven percent Muslim country. The majority (sixty-five per cent) of those Muslims are Shi'ite.<sup>39</sup> As a strong feature in Shi'ite Islam, Mahdism played a part in the ongoing Iraq War. Hitchcock observes that the Mahdi was born in Iraq, is occulted in an Iraq cave, and will settle in an Iraq town (Kufa) when he returns.<sup>40</sup> In the Mahdist viewpoint, American occupation of Iraq is a barrier to the Mahdi's return. American troops have seen this firsthand as they've battled extremist who tapped US radio channels to proclaim the Mahdi's imminent return.<sup>41</sup> Islamic eschatology has certainly impacted the Iraq War.

### Danger in Iran

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may well be today's most dangerous believer of Islamic eschatology. His Mahdism is well-known and documented.<sup>42</sup> His eschatology has driven him to make some very startling public statements.

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<sup>39</sup> CIA, "The World Factbook," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Hitchcock, 54.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Joel C. Rosenberg, *Inside the Revolution* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2009), 153-170.

“Islam is ready to rule the world.”<sup>43</sup> “Our revolution’s main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam [Mahdi].”<sup>44</sup>

Ahmadinejad’s express purpose for Iran is to hasten the Mahdi’s return. He can accomplish this through multiple means. First, the Mahdi’s return can be facilitated by removing “unworthy regimes and rulers.”<sup>45</sup> This includes the “satanically inspired” United States President and the nation of Israel.<sup>46</sup> Second, *taajil* is a means of hastening the Mahdi’s return by creating chaos.<sup>47</sup> Creating chaos becomes a greater and greater danger as Iran moves closer to obtaining nuclear weapons. The combination of Mahdist theology and nuclear capabilities would make Ahmadinejad a nearly uncontrollable fire hazard.

### *Conclusion*

Islamic eschatology is not merely about religious doctrine; it has the power to fuel the most frightening kind of politics. Shi’ites expect the return of the Mahdi, the rebellion of the Dajjal, and the victory and rule of ‘Isa. They do not sit idly, however, watching the sky and waiting for signs. Iraq and Iran have

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<sup>43</sup> Hitchcock, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg 182.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 160, 169.

<sup>47</sup> Hitchcock, 48.

proven that they are willing to make threats and fight wars for the sake of hastening the Mahdi's return. The Middle East (and the world at large) may soon stand in danger of atomic attempts to facilitate the end. In contrast to this violent eschatology, the Gospel of Christ shines brightly through Christians who live "lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (II Pet. 3.11-12).

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