

## MAHDI, 'ISA AND AL-DAJJAL IN ISLAMIC ESCHATOLOGY: CLASSICAL 'AQĪDAH DEBATES, HERMENEUTICS AND CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

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### Abstract

This article examines the doctrinal and hermeneutical debates surrounding three central eschatological figures in Islamic thought: al-Mahdi, the descent of Prophet 'Isa, and al-Dajjal. The main problem addressed is that these motifs are often treated either as isolated beliefs or as contemporary political symbols, while insufficient attention is given to the classical evidentiary standards through which Muslim theologians assessed them. To address this gap, the study analyzes how Sunni and Shi'i traditions construct the doctrinal status of these figures through the Qur'anic indications, Hadith transmission, claims of *ijma'*, and literal or figurative interpretation. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative historical-comparative approach based on textual analysis of selected *tafsīr* works, Hadith commentaries, creedal treatises and contemporary academic studies. The findings show that mainstream Sunni theology generally affirms the descent of 'Isa and the reality of al-Dajjal as major end-times realities, while the doctrinal status of al-Mahdi remains more contested due to differing evaluations of Hadith reports. In Twelver Shi'ism theology, Mahdism is closely

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linked to Imamate, occultation and authority. The article argues for a methodologically explicit and academically neutral approach to Islamic eschatology

**Keywords:** 'Aqidah (Islamic creed); al-Mahdi; Prophet 'Isa; al-Dajjal; Islamic eschatology.

### **Khulasah**

Artikel ini meneliti perdebatan doktrinal dan hermeneutik yang berkaitan dengan tiga tokoh eskatologi utama dalam pemikiran Islam, iaitu Mahdi, turunnnya Nabi 'Isa dan Dajjal. Permasalahan utama yang dibincangkan ialah bahawa motif ini sering diperlakukan sama ada sebagai kepercayaan yang terpisah-pisah atau sebagai simbol politik kontemporari, sedangkan perhatian yang mencukupi belum diberikan kepada piawai pembuktian klasik yang digunakan oleh para teologi Muslim dalam menilai kedudukannya. Bagi mengisi kelompangan tersebut, kajian ini menganalisis bagaimana tradisi Sunni dan Syiah membina status doktrinal tokoh-tokoh ini melalui petunjuk al-Qur'an, transmisi hadis, dakwaan ijmak, serta pendekatan tafsiran literal dan figuratif. Dari segi metodologi, artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbentuk sejarah-perbandingan berdasarkan analisis tekstual terhadap karya tafsir terpilih, syarah hadis, risalah akidah, dan kajian akademik kontemporari. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa teologi Sunni arus perdana secara umum mengesahkan turunnnya Nabi 'Isa dan realiti Dajjal sebagai tanda besar akhir zaman, manakala status doktrin Mahdi masih lagi diperdebatkan disebabkan perbezaan penilaian terhadap riwayat hadis. Dalam teologi Syiah Dua Belas Imam, Mahdisme berkait rapat dengan konsep Imamah, keghaiban, dan autoriti. Artikel ini menegaskan keperluan terhadap pendekatan metodologi yang jelas dan neutral secara akademik dalam kajian eskatologi Islam.

**Kata Kunci:** Akidah; Mahdi; Nabi 'Isa; Dajjal; eskatologi Islam.

## Introduction

Islamic eschatology assigns distinctive doctrinal weight to the major signs of the Hour, yet the Qur'an frequently alludes to them only in compressed or allusive terms. Consequently, later exegetical and Hadith traditions developed more explicit end-times scenarios, producing a dense interpretive field in which questions of textual warrant, epistemic status, and theological implication become unavoidable.

Despite a long history of scholarship on al-Mahdi, the return of Prophet 'Isa and al-Dajjal, contemporary research still often treats these motifs either as isolated doctrinal items or as historical curiosities, rather than as a connected interpretive problem. A further gap is that modern political and media deployments of apocalyptic language are frequently discussed without a clear account of the classical evidentiary constraints that traditionally governed such claims.<sup>1</sup>

This article addresses that gap by analyzing three interlocking figures: al-Mahdi, the eschatological return of Prophet 'Isa and al-Dajjal, as a single debate-space in which Sunni and Shi'i theologies negotiate the boundaries of the unseen (*ghayb*), the authority of transmitted reports, and the permissibility of figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*). The study also clarifies how, in modern contexts, these motifs can be mobilized as markers of legitimacy or as instruments of political persuasion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Fawwaz Muhammad Yusof & Mohd Yusof Ismail, "Sunni Hadith and Continuous Commentaries on the Eschatological Mahdi: A Literary Analysis," *Religions* 14 (2023), 499; Tim Jacoby, "The Islamic State's Use of the Qur'an in Its Magazines, Dabiq and Rumiyyah," *Discourse & Society* 35(3) (2023), 345-359; Ali Rod Khadem, "Islamic Apocalyptic Jurisprudence," *Islamic Law and Society* 31(3) (2024), 260-311.

<sup>2</sup> Amirhossein Teimouri, "The Mahdavi Society: The Rise of Millennialism in Iran as the Cultural Outcome of Social Movements (2000-2016)," *Middle East Critique* 31(2) (2022), 125-145; İbrahim

Main claim (working hypothesis): in mainstream Sunni *kalām*, the return of Prophet 'Isa and the reality of al-Dajjal are typically affirmed as end-times realities because they are anchored in widely transmitted reports and integrated into broader doctrinal commitments, whereas "al-Mahdī" is more often treated as a contested eschatological expectation whose doctrinal force varies with the epistemic status of its narrations. In Twelver Shi'ism, by contrast, Mahdism is structurally tied to the doctrine of the Imamate and the institutions of occultation and authority.<sup>3</sup> The article's contribution is threefold: (1) it systematizes the evidentiary registers (the Qur'an allusion, Hadith corpora, and claims of *ijma'*) invoked to justify each position; (2) it proposes an explicit set of criteria for distinguishing literalist and figurative (*ta'wīl*-based) readings in eschatological narration; and (3) it connects classical argument-forms to contemporary instrumentalization, showing where modern deployments loosen or bypass classical constraints.

### Research Questions

This study concerns the theological status and interpretive treatment of eschatological figures in Islamic thought, particularly the types of evidentiary claims used to establish their doctrinal authority. It examines whether such figures are grounded primarily through Qur'anic indication, Hadith transmission, or *ijmā'*, and how these forms of evidence are mobilized within classical theological and exegetical discourse. At the same time,

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Karatas, "The Role of Apocalyptic Prophecies in ISIS Terrorism," *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies* 39(1) (2021), 193-214; David Cook, "The Apocalyptic Rhetoric of Boko Haram," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 10 (2) (2020), 184-195.

<sup>3</sup> Omid Ghaemmaghami, *Encounters with the Hidden Imam in Early and Pre-Modern Twelver Shi'i Islam* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 276; Edmund Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam: Forging Twelver Shi'ism, 850-950 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), iii.

the study investigates the conditions under which classical theologians and exegetes permit *ta'wīl* in the interpretation of apocalyptic narrations, as well as the circumstances in which a literal reading is regarded as doctrinally safer. In light of contemporary developments, the study further explores how apocalyptic motifs are deployed within political and media contexts, and how such deployments may reframe, simplify, or bypass the interpretive constraints established in the classical tradition. By doing so, the study seeks to clarify the implications of these contemporary appropriations for theological discourse and the responsible interpretation of eschatological themes.

### **Methodology**

The study employs a qualitative historical comparative design grounded in textual analysis, theological hermeneutics and historiography. It combines, firstly, close reading of scriptural and post-scriptural materials that frame end-times narration. Secondly, *kalām*-oriented evaluation of epistemic status, especially the role of Hadith transmission, corroboration, and claims of *ijma'*. And thirdly, contextual analysis of selected modern deployments of apocalyptic motifs in political and media discourse.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis relies on a balanced selection of primary works representing the two main schools of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, namely the Ash'arite and Maturidite traditions, as well as authoritative Twelver Shi'ism sources. The Maturidite tradition is examined through Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*, Abu al-Mu'in al-Nasafi's *Tabṣīrat al-Adillah*, and Nur al-Din al-Sabuni's *al-Bidāyah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*. The Ash'arite tradition is represented by Abu al-Hasan al-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Karataş, "The Role of Apocalyptic Prophecies in ISIS Terrorism," 193.

Ash'ari's *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* and *al-Ibānah*, al-Baqillani's *al-Tamhīd*, al-Juwayni's *al-Irshād*, al-Ghazali's *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*, and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. Twelver Shi'ism perspectives are analyzed through al-Kulayni's *al-Kāfī*, al-Saduq's *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah*, al-Numani's *Kitāb al-Ghaybah*, al-Tusi's *Kitāb al-Ghaybah*, al-Mufid's *Awā'il al-Maqālāt* and *al-Irshād*, and al-Tabrisi's *Majma' al-Bayān*.

Within this framework, hermeneutics is applied not as a speculative interpretive method, but as a structured analytical tool to examine how distinct theological traditions conceptualize scriptural and transmitted evidence. It is used to distinguish between literal and figurative readings, to assess the relationship between the Qur'an indications and Hadith reports, and to clarify how each tradition justifies its position on al-Mahdi, the descent of Prophet 'Isa and al-Dajjal. This approach is justified because the subject involves contested matters of *ghayb* (the unseen), in which theological conclusions depend not only on the existence of textual evidence, but also on how that evidence is interpreted, authenticated, and integrated into broader doctrinal frameworks.<sup>5</sup>

Operational framework for identifying literalist and figurative (*ta'wīl*-based) interpretations. The classification of interpretations as either "literalist" or "figurative" is determined according to these cumulative criteria. The interpretive framework can be assessed through several criteria. First, the textual indicator examines whether the argument treats the reported event as an external historical occurrence, that is *khabar* (news) about a future event, or as a metaphorical signification of moral-social processes. Second, the linguistic or semantic constraint considers whether the interpretation remains anchored in the *prima facie* (*ẓahir*) meaning or requires a

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<sup>5</sup> Omid Ghaemmaghami, *Encounters with the Hidden Imam*, 276.

transfer of meaning (*majaz/ta'wīl*), justified by explicit linguistic or contextual cues.

Third, the epistemic status of reports evaluates whether the interpretation depends on narrations treated as strongly corroborated. For example, whether widely transmitted in meaning, or on isolated or contested reports, and how this distinction affects doctrinal weight. Fourth, doctrinal entailment examines whether the interpretation is presented as necessary to maintain a broader creedal principle, such as divine transcendence, prophethood, or the structure of the Imamate, or is treated as an admissible but non-binding reading.

Fifth, interpretive necessity considers whether *ta'wīl* is invoked only when a literal reading would create theological or textual contradiction, or whether it is adopted as a preferred explanatory framework without strict necessity. Finally, consistency across genres assesses whether *tafsīr*, Hadith commentary, and creedal treatises converge on the same interpretive posture, or whether the position remains genre-specific and therefore carries weaker doctrinal authority.

Analytically, the article proceeds in three steps: Firstly, mapping the major doctrinal positions on the three figures and cataloging their evidentiary registers. Secondly, evaluating the interpretive moves used to sustain each position against the criteria above. And thirdly, situating selected contemporary deployments within this framework to show how classical constraints are maintained, relaxed, or bypassed.

### **Descent of Prophet 'Isa from Heaven**

Many Muslim theologians<sup>6</sup> maintain that Jesus was not crucified by the Israelites. Within this doctrinal framework, God protected him from his opponents and

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<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad Zahid al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 24.

raised him to heaven in bodily form. This position is typically grounded in the Qur'anic passages and prophetic reports and underwrites a major strand of Islamic eschatology: the conviction that Jesus remains alive in heaven and will descend near the end of time, shortly before the Day of Judgment, when he will defeat the Dajjal.

Alongside this prevailing view, a minority trajectory is attributed to figures such as Ibn Hazm, al-Qadi 'Iyad, and Sa'd. It's echoed in modern reformist readings associated with Mahmud Shaltut, Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and al-Mar'i, who argue that Prophet 'Isa, like other prophets, underwent death and was buried. In this interpretation, he was indeed saved from crucifixion, yet God caused him to die peacefully and then elevated his rank and honor. Consequently, proponents of this approach do not treat a future bodily return of Jesus as an expected end-times sign. Scholars advocating this position maintain that a lack of belief in the return of Jesus, as one of the indicators of the end times, does not conflict with the tenets of faith, and that an individual who harbors doubts about this matter does not necessarily abandon the religion.<sup>7</sup>

Upon systematic examination of the evidence supporting both perspectives, the arguments derived from the verses of the Qur'an are as follows: Those asserting that 'Isa will descend from heaven reference the Qur'an says, meaning:

When Allah will say, 'O Isa! I will surely raise you up to eternity. I will raise you to My rank and I will save you from the disbelievers and I will declare you innocent'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> M. F. Wajdi, *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Qarn al-'Ishrīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1980), 10: 481-482.

<sup>8</sup> Surah Ali-'Imran 3:55.

In the verse “إِنِّي مُتَوَفِّيكَ وَرَافِعُكَ إِلَيَّ...” (*I will raise you to My rank*), the phrase “وَرَأْفِعُكَ إِلَيَّ” denotes a physical elevation, that is, a raising of the body. The presence of the term “إِلَيَّ” precludes the interpretation of this phrase as a mere figurative elevation of status.

Furthermore, in Surah al-Nisa', the Qur'an states, meaning:

And they said about the Messenger of Allah, 'Isa, the son of Mary, 'We killed him.' But they could not kill him, nor could they crucify him. It appeared to them that way (in reality, it was someone else who was killed). Indeed, those who dispute concerning Jesus are not without doubts about this issue. They possess no authentic knowledge concerning this matter but base their assertions solely on conjecture. Indeed, they could not kill him. But Allah raised him to His rank.<sup>9</sup>

If we do not understand the words in the verse: “...and they could not kill him, but Allah raised him to His rank...” as meaning that he raised him with his body, then there is a contradiction between the word before the preposition “بِ” and the word after it. Therefore, the preposition “بِ” prevents the meaning of “raising his rank” and means raising him physically, that is, raising him with his body.<sup>10</sup>

According to those who maintain<sup>11</sup> the perspective that 'Isa did not descend from the heavens, al-Alusi asserts, the expression “...إِنِّي مُتَوَفِّيكَ...” within the verse fundamentally signifies “(Allah) I shall take you whilst

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<sup>9</sup> Surah al-Nisa' 4: 157–158.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 26.

you are in your bed, i.e., your earthly existence is concluded, and I shall not permit your adversaries to slay you."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the phrase "I shall deliver you from those who disbelieve and declare you innocent" that follows, which denotes "I shall elevate your standing," does not imply the physical carrying of your being.

Furthermore, in the statement "وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ" found in verses 157-158 of Surah al-Nisa,' the conjunction "بَلْ" in the phrase "وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْنَا" establishes a contrast between the preceding and succeeding statements. This indicates a contradiction between Allah safeguarding Prophet 'Isa from their attempts to kill him and elevating his status by taking his life without their awareness of their machinations and the deception that led them to believe, "We have slain him," which means, in truth, it was another who was killed.<sup>13</sup>

The Qur'an articulates: "And he is a sign for the One who will rise to the occasion. Thus, do not harbor doubts regarding it."<sup>14</sup> Certain scholars, such as Mahmud al-Alusi, al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir, posit that the noun in the phrase "إِنَّهُ" (And he) in this verse refers to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or the Qur'an; however, a majority of scholars contend that it refers to the Prophet 'Isa, as the preceding verses have mentioned him. Should we consider the majority opinion of scholars as a foundation, there are three distinct perspectives among them.

In Islamic eschatological thought, the return of the Prophet 'Isa is regarded as one of the signs of the end times. His birth without a father is also understood as a sign indicating the coming of the Day of Judgment.

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<sup>12</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Surah al-Zukhruf 43:61.

Furthermore, the miracles associated with the Prophet 'Isa, such as raising the dead, are viewed as signs pointing to the resurrection on the Day of Judgment.

The second view is that scholars and commentators, including Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Al-Zamakhshari hold differing views on the verse's meaning, indicating that it is not a clear proof of the descent of the Prophet 'Isa at the end of time. In this regard, the second view of the verse is stronger. This is because the Meccan people did not believe in resurrection after death, and the continuation of the verse, "So do not be in doubt about it," indicates that the second meaning is correct for those who doubt the Day of Judgment.

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi,<sup>15</sup> in his exegesis on the verse from the Holy Qur'an: "'Isa, the son of Mary, was solely a messenger of God and His word which He conferred upon Mary, and a spirit from Him. Therefore, have faith in God and His messengers, and do not assert, 'There are three Gods'....,"<sup>16</sup> articulated: "The People of the Book admonished that the assertions which claim God possesses a 'spousal partner and a son' or that 'Allah, Christ, and Mary constitute three Gods' are erroneous, and that they ought not to transgress the boundaries of their faith. 'Isa, the son of Mary, was indeed a messenger of God, and his creation (Surah Ali-'Imran, 3:59) transpired instantaneously upon God's decree of 'Be!' which was contingent upon His omnipotent will. The appellation '*Rūh*' was ascribed because He invigorated lifeless hearts through His prophethood and resurrected corporeal forms through His miracle of blowing 'Hub'.

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<sup>15</sup> Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), 424.

<sup>16</sup> Surah al-Nisa' 4:171.

Alternatively, it is posited that the term 'Rūh' also signifies the messenger and commander of Allah.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, Allah Almighty possesses the prerogative to create any entity as He deems fit through His attribute of omnipotence. The fact that the genesis of humanity was executed through varied modalities is regarded as an indication of the veracity of the Day of Judgment. For instance, while Adam was fashioned from dust, devoid of the involvement of a male and female, Eve was formed from Adam's rib. If the Prophet 'Isa (PBUH) was born without a paternal figure, then the remainder of humanity was created from a drop of water, facilitated by a male and female. This heterogeneity in creation is acknowledged as one of the evident signs substantiating the impending Day of Judgment.

### **Evidence from Hadith**

According to the perspective of those who assert that the Prophet 'Isa will descend from the heavens, in the treatise "*Iqāmat al-Burhān fī Nuzūl 'Īsā fī Ākhir al-Zamān*," al-Idrisi references sixty-two Hadiths with varying texts, transmitted by twenty-eight companions and three natural entities. All of these narrations delineate the descent of Isa from the heavens.<sup>18</sup> Let us therefore present a selection of Hadith as illustrative examples:

By Him in whose hands my soul is, surely ('Isa,) the son of Mary will soon descend amongst you and will judge mankind justly (as a Just Ruler); he will break the Cross and kill the pigs and there will be no *Jizyah* (i.e. taxation taken from non-

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*, 424; B. Topaloğlu, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'an li Abī Manşūr al-Māturīdī* (Istanbul: Dār al-Mīzān, 2005), 4: 118-120.

<sup>18</sup> Abū al-Faḍl, 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, *Iqāmat al-Burhān fī Nuzūl 'Īsā fī Ākhir al-Zamān* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Azhariyyah li al-Turāth, 2006), 64-69.

Muslims). Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it.<sup>19</sup>

This Hadith describes the main actions of the Prophet 'Isa after his return to earth.

And regarding his meeting with the Mahdi, it is said in a Hadith:

By Him in whose hand is my soul, the son of Mary, 'Isa, will soon descend among you as a just judge. He will break the cross, kill the swine, and abolish the *jizyah*. Wealth will become so abundant that no one will accept it.<sup>20</sup>

This Hadith is transmitted in both al-Bukhari and Muslim, with Abu Hurayrah serving as the narrator in both versions. The core content of the two reports is essentially the same: 'Isa ibn Maryam will descend near the end of time, rule as a just judge, break the cross, kill the swine, abolish the *jizyah*, and wealth will become abundant. Accordingly, from the perspective of Sunni Hadith methodology, these reports possess a particularly strong evidentiary status, since they are recorded in the two most authoritative canonical collections, namely *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

Some eminent scholars in Islamic theology, such as Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani and al-Qurtubi, assert that the prayer conducted under the auspices of the Mahdi is the morning prayer, whereas others, drawing upon a variety of narrations, interpret this prayer as the *khawf* prayer, that is, the prayer executed in a state of conflict during the period in which the Prophet 'Isa was engaged in combat

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<sup>19</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb Aḥādīth al-Anbiyā', Bāb Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam, no. 3448, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), 4:168.

<sup>20</sup> Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Īmān, Bāb Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam, no. 155a, (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 1: 136.

against the Dajjal. It is noted that the occasion to eliminate the Dajjal presented itself when he obstinately refused to prostrate. Thus, the Prophet 'Isa executed him at that precise moment. Scholars, acknowledging that it is permissible to terminate the prayer under justifiable circumstances, deduce that the act of slaying the Dajjal constitutes such an excusable circumstance that cannot be postponed.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the perspective held by those who assert that the Prophet Jesus will not descend from the heavens, it is posited that the Hadith which signify his descent, although they may be authentic, are classified as *āḥād* (single-chain) Hadith. *Āḥād* Hadith do not serve to establish matters of faith (belief), and an individual who does not accept this classification does not consequently become a disbeliever.<sup>22</sup>

The emergence of the Antichrist is perceived in a metaphorical context as the proliferation of corruption and malevolence upon the earth, while the descent of the Prophet 'Isa from the heavens symbolizes the augmentation of benevolence and virtuous actions.<sup>23</sup> In essence, other Hadith concerning the Prophet 'Isa are interpreted metaphorically. The observation that from the inception of Islam to the present day, Christians also abstain from certain prohibitions outlined by *Shari'ah*, coupled with the heightened significance of the most esteemed prayer for Muslims, and the diminished value of wealth, which compels many individuals to compromise their honor in pursuit of it, indicates that the True Religion will be closely recognized by both the Muslim and Christian communities.

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Idrīsī, *Iqāmat al-Burhān fi Nuzūl 'Isā*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Muḥammad Zahid al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 31.

Furthermore, the favorable characteristics of its essence suggest that the Christian world will align itself with Islamic virtues for a designated duration, approximately forty years, and will willingly sacrifice their lives, akin to Muslims. Additionally, the fact that the Prophet 'Isa did not assume the role of *Imām* and that the Mahdi has emerged signifies that only Islam will be acknowledged as the authentic religion until the Day of Judgment.

### **Evidence from *Ijma'***

In accordance with those who assert that Jesus shall descend from the heavens, it is imperative to amalgamate numerous authentic Hadith that signify 'Isa's descent from the heavens within the framework of this discourse. No individual may contest the semantic *mutawātir* (mass-transmitted) evidential force of such Hadith, nor can it be claimed that the *muhaddith* (scholars of Hadith) have expressed any uncertainty regarding the status of the Hadith pertaining to the Mahdi, 'Isa, and the Dajjal as being at the level of *mutawātir*. However, certain *mutakallim* (scholars of Islamic theology), whilst acknowledging the veracity of all signs pertaining to the Last Day, express skepticism concerning the classification of some of these Hadith as *mutawātir*, thereby revealing their lack of comprehensive understanding of Hadith.<sup>24</sup>

In regard to those who maintain that 'Isa shall not descend from the heavens, it is posited that jurisprudential rulings must exist for *ijma'* to be regarded as valid evidence. Concerning the sensory signs of the Last Day and the matters of the hereafter that pertain to future events, scholars, such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and al-Shatibi, articulate that given that scholars do not possess knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*) matters, they are

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 70-73.

incapable of achieving *ijma'* on such issues. Matters of the unseen are exclusively known through Allah's revelation. The rulings are fundamentally based on the reports provided. In contexts concerning future occurrences, wherein the avenue for *ijtihād* is not accessible, there exists no consensus within the *Ummah* of Muhammad (PBUH). However, should a specific *Naş* (verse, *mutawātir* Hadith) be presented, the necessity for *ijtihād* becomes moot. In the absence of *Naş*, the path to *ijtihād* remains closed. Thus, in matters pertaining to the unseen, *aḥadīth* are deemed insufficient as evidence, and the *ijma'* of scholars predicated on *aḥadīth* is not recognized in matters of '*aqīdah*.<sup>25</sup>

We have previously indicated that there are two distinct, well-substantiated perspectives among scholars regarding the issues surrounding whether the Prophet Jesus ascended to heaven in corporeal form and continues to exist there, and whether he shall descend to earth alongside the Mahdi as the Hour approaches to vanquish the Dajjal. It is also important to acknowledge that the scholars who articulated these divergent viewpoints did not refute one another or label one another as disbelievers.

At this point, it is also necessary to note an additional question that appears in the literature: if 'Isa does not physically descend from heaven, how should the Hadith reports that describe his descent be understood? Proponents of non-literal readings typically argue that such reports should be interpreted as describing the revival of 'Isa's message, the spread of his moral teachings, or the emergence of a 'Isa-like reformer, rather than a bodily return. Critics respond that this move requires a clear methodological justification and must be evaluated in light of the standards applied to reports about the unseen (*ghayb*) in classical '*aqīdah*.

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<sup>25</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *al-'Aqīdah wa 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 32.

Proponents of the non-literal trajectory argue against the physical descent of 'Isa based on three interconnected theological premises. First, they maintain that a physical return contradicts the finality of prophethood (*khatm al-nubuwwah*) sealed by the Prophet Muhammad. Second, this perspective interprets 'Isa's ascension (*raf'*) metaphorically as an elevation of spiritual status rather than a bodily relocation, asserting that he underwent a natural death like other prophets. Finally, because eschatological signs belong to the realm of the unseen (*ghayb*), these scholars enforce strict epistemic criteria, arguing that such creedal doctrines require unequivocally mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*) reports, thereby rendering isolated (*āḥād*) narrations methodologically insufficient to establish binding articles of faith.

### **Eschatological Narratives of Dajjal in Islamic Tradition**

One of the indicators of the eschatological period is the emergence of the Dajjal. Islamic scholars, for example, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi, articulate divergent perspectives on this matter: one faction adheres to a literal interpretation of the Dajjal's characteristics as delineated in the Hadith, whereas another contends that these Hadith should be interpreted metaphorically. We shall now explore certain Hadith that pertain to this subject.

One Hadith regarding the signs of the Last Day asserts: "The Last Day will not come until approximately thirty false Dajjals manifest, each claiming to be a messenger of Allah."<sup>26</sup> In Sunni Hadith literature, reports concerning false claimants to prophethood are often discussed in connection with the broader theme of end-

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Nawāwī, *al-Minhāj fī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn Ḥajjaj* (Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkar al-Dawliyyah), 1689.

times trials. However, the present article focuses specifically on al-Dajjal as treated in Sunni and Twelver Shi'ism theological and Hadith-based sources. The widespread acceptance of a Hadith-based portrayal of the Dajjal is further taken to indicate that audiences with limited or unsystematic religious literacy may be particularly vulnerable to such ideological pressures.

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, in his exegesis of the Qur'anic verse: "Muhammad is not the father of any male among you. He is the Messenger of Allah and the Last of the Prophets. Allah is Knowing of all things,"<sup>27</sup> articulated that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is not a father to anyone in terms of lineage. However, he surpasses their fathers in compassion and mercy for the sake of his *ummah*, contemplating the Hereafter. The verse unequivocally asserts that he is the Messenger of Allah and the final prophet. Thereafter, any individual who claims prophethood shall not have their assertions accepted. It shall not be questioned, what evidence do you possess of your prophethood? and he is a deceiver, a deceiver, and a deceiver".<sup>28</sup>

The "Apostate War," which transpired during the caliphate of Abu Bakr, is extensively recognized in historical discourse. During this conflict, certain factions pursuing political agendas revolted by partially repudiating the tenets of Islam: some among them rejected the obligation of *zakāt*, asserting, "We pray but do not pay *zakāt*," while another faction proclaimed themselves as "prophets" and disseminated erroneous prophetic ideologies. These factions, aimed at undermining the faith of the Muslim community, which had long been fragmented and not united under the banner of Islam, and at dismantling its cohesion, posed a substantial threat to societal tranquility. Mitigating this

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<sup>27</sup> Surah al-Ahzab 33:40.

<sup>28</sup> Topaloğlu, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'an*, 11: 361.

political schism at that juncture was one of the paramount responsibilities that could not be deferred.<sup>29</sup>

The Hadith articulate numerous characteristics pertaining to the Dajjal. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have implored Allah for protection from the tribulations associated with the Dajjal. In accordance with the Hadith, it is foretold that the Dajjal shall emerge from Syria, Yemen, Khorasan, and the East, and will be of Jewish descent from Isfahan, being released from his confinement within the church. It is further indicated that he will possess the stature of a mule, will be blind in his right eye, will exhibit deformities in his legs, will traverse a distance equivalent to forty days in a singular stride, will roam all places save for Mecca and Medina, will bear the inscription "*kāfir*" upon his forehead, will proclaim "I am your God," will resurrect the deceased, and will perform extraordinary feats such as invoking rainfall. It is observed that those who adhere to and follow the Dajjal are frequently individuals who yield to their carnal desires, such as usurers and adulterers. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi are among the scholars who interpret these Hadith literally, informed by these delineations, caution Muslims to remain vigilant against the tribulations posed by the Dajjal.

Scholars such as Muhammad 'Abduh and Mahmud Shaltut say that we should understand the messages we receive in a metaphorical sense and make the following assumptions about the Hadith: First, the temptation of the Antichrist is an ideology of depriving people of religion.<sup>30</sup> Second, every prophet's warning to his ummah against the Dajjal is a warning against opposing Allah and against

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<sup>29</sup> S. Okanuly, *The Creed of Our Forefathers: Key Contemporary Issues in Maturidi Theology* (Almaty: Atamura, 2019), 146.

<sup>30</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 8:196.

an ideology that leads to disbelief.<sup>31</sup> Third, the fact that the word “*kāfir*” is written between his eyes means that his goal is to turn people away from religion.<sup>32</sup> Fourth, the inability of the Dajjal to enter Mecca and Medina – the inability of (irreligious ideology) to change the Qur’an and Sunnah.<sup>33</sup> Fifth, the fact that the Dajjal will emerge from Syria, Yemen, Khorasan, the East, etc., indicates that irreligion will spread widely throughout the world.<sup>34</sup> Sixth, the statement that it will be from the Jews is based on the fact that the Jews often opposed the prophets in the Qur’an, and refers to those who followed that path. Seventh, the fact that he is blind in the right eye, has crooked legs, and rides a donkey means that the truth is hidden from people and that falsehood is presented as truth and culture. It means his path is not straight but crooked, leading to error.<sup>35</sup> Eighth, the signs such as shouting “I am your god,” bringing the dead back to life, saying “rain” and having it rain, and one step covering a forty-day journey are said to be related to technological achievements. Of course, Islam is not against the development of science and technology. However, the fact that a materialistic view based on technology has influenced many people to forget and oppose Allah supports the concept of the Dajjal. Ninth, the fact that those who follow him are usurers and adulterers is a sign of their disregard for human rights and equality in this life, and their failure to observe the laws of *Shari‘ah*. The data show that other characteristics of the Antichrist are based on this assumption.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), 123.

<sup>32</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 8: 198.

<sup>33</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 8: 201.

<sup>34</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 8:189.

<sup>35</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 8:199.

<sup>36</sup> David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 145–170.

Al-Sha'rani has delineated more than forty indicators of the eschatological period, derived from Abu Nu'aym's accounts.<sup>37</sup> Amongst these indicators are the abandonment of religious beliefs, the repudiation of faith, the subjugation to personal desires, the reclassification of the prohibited as permissible, the violation of human rights, the prevalence of poverty, and the predominance of individuals who assess the essence of existence through a materialistic lens, among others. These constitute the indicators of the terminal period. It is plausible to assert that such indicators of the end times further substantiate the aforementioned postulations concerning the "Dajjal".

### **Eschatological Authority and the Concept of Mahdi**

The doctrine of Mahdi occupies different positions within Sunni and Twelver Shi'ism theological traditions. In Sunni thought, belief in Mahdi is generally discussed in terms of transmitted reports and their degree of authentication, rather than as a foundational creedal principle. In Twelver Shi'ism theology, by contrast, Mahdi is identified with the final *Imām*, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-'Askari, who is reported to have been born in Samarra in 255 AH, and is inseparable from the doctrines of Imamate, occultation, and eschatological authority.<sup>38</sup>

Shi'ite venerate him as "al-Mahdi" or "the Master of the Age" and, upon the mention of his name, commonly invoke the supplication "*'Ajjala Allahu*

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<sup>37</sup> Al-Sha'rani, *Death, the Day of Judgment, the Hereafter, and the Signs of the End Times*, trans. Khalil Gunaydin (Istanbul: Badr, 2011), 449-456.

<sup>38</sup> Yerzhan, K.S., & Makhmet, M., *Comparative Religious History* (n.p.: Nur-Mubarak, 2020), 119; Yitshak Ginzburg, *Awakening the Spark within: Five Dynamics of Leadership that Can Change the World* (Brooklyn, New York: Linda Pinsky Publications, 2001), 18; "Islam in Iran VII. The Concept of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Accessed 30 December 2025. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/islam-in-iran-vii-the-concept-of-mahdi-in-twelver-shiism/>

*Farajahu*," which means, "may God hasten his reappearance."<sup>39</sup>

Diverse perspectives persist among Islamic scholars on the Mahdi's advent at the end of time to rejuvenate Islamic values. Given that the belief in the Mahdi's coming is not considered a fundamental tenet of faith, individuals who assert that he shall not arrive are not regarded as adherents. Nevertheless, a multitude of scholars have acknowledged the Mahdi's coming, grounded in the existence of authentic Hadith pertaining to him. One such Hadith articulates: "The Mahdi will come from my family."<sup>40</sup>

This Hadith, along with other Hadith, asserts that the name of the Mahdi is identical to that of the Prophet Muhammad, and that his father's name is 'Abdullah, thereby establishing that the Prophet Muhammad's name is congruent with that of his father. It is appropriate to interpret the term "Mahdi" in a metaphorical context as a reference to the *ummah* that has embraced the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. This is due to the historical context in which, during the era of the four righteous caliphs, the Mahdi was identified with the Prophet Muhammad himself, while during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, the leaders embodied the role of the Mahdi. If we regard the concept of the Mahdi, the savior of the end times, as a commendable designation for the *ummah*, it follows that influential politicians, economists, and spiritual leaders will arise from within the *ummah* and will possess the fortitude to confront a secular society at the communal level. In essence, it is judicious to evaluate them based on the cohesiveness of the *ummah* in articulating a commendable representation of the faith.

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<sup>39</sup> Ihsān Ilāhī Zāhīr, *al-Shī'ah wa al-Tashayyu'* (Lahore: Idārat Tarjumān al-Sunnah, 1995), 251.

<sup>40</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān al-Khurasānī, *al-Ihsān fī Taqrīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988), 1818.

Simultaneously, it would be illogical to bestow unlimited authority upon a single individual.

In Sunni doctrinal discourse, political and religious leadership is generally treated as a public trust rather than an inherited entitlement, and normative accounts emphasize the communal responsibility (*ummah*) in safeguarding justice and moral order. Within Twelver Shi'ism theology, by contrast, imamate is articulated as a divinely designated institution, and historical narratives may be read as a critique of early caliphal authority. Any comparative analysis must therefore distinguish between doctrinal claims about legitimate authority and later polemical narratives, and it should avoid evaluative language in favor of analytically describing the competing theological premises.

Leadership constitutes a profound obligation and a sacred trust. Consequently, leadership cannot be regarded as an inherited entitlement. Any individual deemed deserving of the role may be selected through the consent of the majority.

Tafsir scholar Elmaly Hamdi, while elucidating the verse in the Qur'an, meaning: "Indeed, those who despise you (as having no children) are themselves childless and deprived of goodness,"<sup>41</sup> substantiated his interpretation with the following Qur'anic verses: "The most honorable of you in the sight of Allah are the righteous,"<sup>42</sup> "Indeed, Allah commands you to return the trusts to their rightful owners",<sup>43</sup> among others, which signify that positions of authority and elevated status should rightfully be conferred upon those who merit them. The absence of the implementation of justice will inevitably lead to *fitnah* (discord) within the *ummah*.

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<sup>41</sup> Surah al-Kawthar 108:3.

<sup>42</sup> Surah al-Hujurat 49:13.

<sup>43</sup> Surah al-Nisa' 4:58.

Furthermore, the fact that women are not assigned the roles of prophethood and leadership, along with the lineage of the Messenger of Allah being exclusively derived from female descendants, carries significant implications. The wisdom inherent in the lineage of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) being non-paternal also signifies that he is the final prophet and that his leadership shall not be perpetuated through inheritance.<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, counterfactual claims about succession should be treated as theological reasoning within particular traditions rather than as historical demonstration. For example, arguments that lineage would have determined leadership had the Prophet had a surviving son. For analytical purposes, the relevant question is how each tradition constructs authority from its textual proofs and doctrinal axioms, and how those constructions shape eschatological expectations.

The revised analysis shows that the strength of each position depends on the specific eschatological issue under discussion. In the case of the descent of Prophet 'Isa and the reality of Dajjal, the Sunni position is stronger within the framework of Hadith-based eschatology, since these doctrines are supported by a broader set of authenticated reports and are widely affirmed in Sunni commentary and theological literature. In the case of Mahdi, however, the comparison requires greater nuance. Sunni sources contain numerous reports concerning Mahdi, yet the doctrine does not function as a foundational creedal principle in the same way that it does in Twelver Shi'ism. In *Imām* Shi'ite theology, Mahdi is inseparable from the doctrine of Imamate, occultation, and legitimate religious authority. Therefore, the article concludes that Sunni arguments are stronger regarding

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<sup>44</sup> Elmalili Hamdi Muhammad Yazir, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (Istanbul: Umit 9, 2000), 539.

'Isa and Dajjal, while Shi'ite Mahdism is more internally systematic within its own doctrine of Imamate.

### **Conclusion**

This article has mapped the principal doctrinal positions concerning Mahdi, the descent of 'Isa, and Dajjal within Islamic eschatological thought, specifying the evidentiary hierarchies from the Qur'an indication, Hadith transmission, and claims of *ijma'*, and the hermeneutical moves through which these positions are stabilized. In doing so, it clarifies why a broad Sunni mainstream tends to affirm 'Isa's descent and the reality of Dajjal, while treating Mahdi narrations as more epistemically contested and *ta'wīl* in apocalyptic reports as method-dependent rather than unrestricted.

These findings also suggest that many contemporary invocations of eschatological motifs, especially in political and media settings, may bypass classical evidentiary constraints, which heightens the need for methodologically explicit and academically neutral engagement with sources. A limitation of the present study is that it relies on a selected, representative Sunni corpus and primarily secondary academic literature for Twelver Shi'ism Mahdism; it does not attempt exhaustive isnad-level authentication across all relevant Hadith collections. Future research should therefore extend the analysis through case-based studies of contemporary movements and media discourses, alongside a more systematic integration of recent peer-reviewed scholarship on Muslim apocalypticism and Mahdism.

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