

Tribulation Period in the Islamic Canon

Extracted from

Tahlile Tarikhi Neshanehaye Zuhur by Mustafa Sadeqi

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Introduction

In Islamic Ahādīth, the term “Akhir al-Zamān”, the End Times, is used for two periods of time; after the demise of the holy Prophet of Islam till the Resurrection Day and also after the start time of the Major Occultation till the Resurrection Day and both of them include the reappearance of Imam al-Mahdī (a.). Therefore, the End Times in Islamic Terminology does not merely refer to the sufferings of mankind rather includes both evil and good events that would happen in the future. Therefore, the dark depiction of the tribulation period by Judaism and Christianity is portrayed

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by Islamic canon in a colorful painting which includes both darkness and disappointing areas as well as whiteness and hopes.

The tribulation period started with Imam al-Mahdī's Major Occultation as he sent a letter to 'Alī ibn Muhammad Samarī, his last deputy in the Minor Occultation, and informed him of the end of the Minor Occultation and the start of the Major Occultation (Al-Tusi, 2002, p. 394). There are two ideas regarding hiddenness of Imam al-Mahdī (a) in his Major Occultation:

1. No one can see him. According to this idea Imam is hidden from the eyes of all people and those who held this idea resort to the following Ahādīth as evidence for their idea:

In a Hadīth reported from Imam al-Riḍā, it is said that: "His body is not visible to the people" (al-Kuleyni, 1369, pp. Vol. 1, p. 336)

In the book *Kamāl al-Dīn*, Imam al-Sādiq (a.) is quoted as saying that "... (the body of) the fifth of the seventh son [i.e. Imam al-Mahdī (a.)] will be absent from you..." (al-Saduq, *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah*, 1990, p. 370)

2. No one can recognize him. There is a report from the second deputy of Imam al-Mahdī (a.) that confirms Imam's life among other people in a sense that people can see him but do not recognize him. (al-Saduq, *Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah*, 1990, p. 440)

Islamic Collections of Ahādīth with regard to Tribulation Period

Most important sources of this discussion are the ones related to Imam al-Mahdī (a.) and his Occultation; including the three old books of Shia which are *al-Ghaybah* written by Nu'mānī (d. 360 AH), *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-ni'mah* written by Shaykh al-Sadūq (d. 381 AH) and *al-Ghaybah* written by Shaykh al-Tūsī (d. 460 AH). Almost, the common core of all narrations about Reappearance and its signs are from these three books, especially that each of these books have dedicated a chapter to the signs of Reappearance. Nu'mānī's book has dedicated a greater share to this issue,



since it has two chapters dedicated to it, in one of which, it has discussed about all the signs and has narrated 68 Hadīths, and in the other chapter, it has discussed about narrations related to “Sufyānī”.

After the mentioned three books, sources about the lives of the Infallibles (a) can be considered in which, they speak about the life of Imam al-Mahdī (a) and the signs of his Reappearance as well; such as al-Irshād written by Shaykh Mufīd (d. 413 AH), ‘*A’lām al-wurā bi ‘A’lām al-Hudā* written by Tabarsī (d. 548 AH) – which quotes most of its content from *al-Irshād – Kashf al-ghummah* written by Arbūlī (d. 692 AH) and *Fusūl al-Muhimmah* written by Ibn Sabbāgh³ (d. 855 AH) which have quoted the signs from previously-mentioned books. Kulayni in *Rawḍa al-kāfī*, Himyarī in *Qurb al-asnād* and exegetes such as ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm and ‘Ayyāshi have mentioned some signs under commentary of some verses. Allāmah Majlisī has compiled the content of these books in *Bihār al-Anwār*. (Majlesi, 1983, pp. vol. 52, pp. 181-278)

Of all Sunni sources, the oldest and most important book which has mentioned the signs of Reappearance is al-Fitan written by Na’im b. Hammād (d. 228 AH). After him, the authors of al-Sihāh al-Sittah have mentioned some related Hadīths under the similar title of “al-Fitan wa al-Malāhim” and have mentioned the signs of Reappearance; however, perhaps the biggest contribution to this issue has been made by Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 AH) in al-Musnad. The difference between Sunni and Shia sources in this regard is that: the first one is that they have mixed the narrations about the signs of Reappearance with the signs of Apocalypse. Thus, they have written books such as ‘*Ashrāt al-Sā’ah* and ‘*Alāmāt al-qiyāmah*.⁴ The second difference is that they have written books titled as “al-Fitan” and “al-malāhim” or having both in the title where they have

3. Ibn Sabbagh is Maliki from Sunnis; but he has written his book following the style of Shia historians about the Twelfth Imam (a).

4. E.g. ‘*Alamat Yawm al-Qiyama* by Muhammad al-Qurtubi; ‘*Alamat al-Qiyamat al-Kubra* by ‘Abd Allah Hajjaj; ‘*Ashrat al-sa’a fi Musnad Ahmad* and ‘*Zawa’id al-Sahihayn* by Khalid al-Ghamidi; ‘*Ashrat al-sa’a al-sughra wa al-kubra* by Husayn al-Shaykh and ‘*al-Mahdi wa fiqh ashrat al-sa’a* by Muhammad Ahmad Isma’il.



compiled such Hadīths. These books are about the Prophet's (s) divinations about the glad and sad events of the future of Muslims.

With the above-mentioned reasons given and also due to the features of each of these books and their structural differences, we need to briefly review the first four mentioned books.

A) Nu'mānī's al-Ghaybah

Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Ja'far al-Nu'mānī known as Ibn Abi Zaynab (Ibn Zaynab) and also as al-Kātib was among the transmitters of Hadīths during the age of Minor Occultation. There is no information about the date of his birth, but the date of his demise has been mentioned around 360 AH.

Al-Nu'mānī has compiled the Hadīths in his book from Hadīth collections especially the books about Occultation which were written previously.

Al-Nu'mānī's *al-Ghayba* has 26 Bābs (chapters) and the number of Hadīths in each chapter is different. In a relatively long introduction, the author has mentioned that his intention for writing the book has been deviance of some Shia groups due to Occultation of Imam al-Mahdī (a) and has mentioned that one of the reasons for that deviance had been the weakness of their faith and ignorance about Hadīths regarding the issue of the Occultation. Thus, he collected and compiled related Hadīths. Main topics of the chapters in this book are: necessity of keeping the secrets of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), Imamate and succession, Shia and Sunni Hadīths about Twelfth Imam (a), Shia problems at the Age of Occultation, the sin of those who claimed Imamate, necessity of the existence of the Proof on earth, Hadīths from Imams (a) about the Occultation of the twelfth Imam (a), problems of Shia at the Age of Occultation and Imams' order (a) for [the Shia] to have patience and to wait for salvation, introducing Imam al-Mahdī (a) and his conduct, signs of his Reappearance, prohibition of mentioning the name of Imam al-Mahdī (a), his companions, his age and duration of his government, rejecting imamate of Ismā'īl, son of Imam al-



Sādiq (a) and some other minor issues. Throughout the book, the author tries to mention Hadīths and rarely adds a comment or explanation of his own. He has not repeated Hadīths in different [related] chapters.

The chapter on the signs of the Reappearance in this book contains 86 Hadīths, 68 of which are mentioned in chapter 14 with the title of “Ma ja’a fi al-‘alamat allati takun-u qabl al-Qa’im wa yadull-u ‘ala an zuhurih yakun-u ba’da-ha kama qalat al-A’immah”⁵ and 18 Hadīths are in the chapter 18 with the title of “Ma ja’a fi dhikr al-Sufyani wa ann-a amruh-u min al-mahtum wa ann-ahu qabl-a qiyam al-Qa’im”⁶. Elsewhere in the book, there are Hadīths about the signs of Reappearance, but they are not many.

B) Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni’ma⁷

This book has been written by the great Shia scholar, Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. ‘Alī b. Husayn b. Musa b. Babiwayh al-Qummī known as Shaykh Sadūq, whose exact time of birth is not known; however, according to some evidences, it can be estimated that his birth has been in the early years of the 4th century AH. Najāshī has recorded Shaykh Sadūq’s demise in 381 AH and has mentioned his many works including three treatises regarding the Occultation and the book *‘Alāmāt Ākhir al-Zamān*.

In *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’ma*, Shaykh Sadūq has mentioned his debates and rejection of doubts about Imam al-Mahdī (a) and also the occultation of several Prophets (s) in order to clarify that others in the past have had occultation. He also mentions the Hadīths from Imams (a) where

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5. “hadiths about the signs before the Reappearance of the Upriser (a) referring to what Imams (a) have mentioned suggests that Reappearance takes place after those signs.”
 6. [“hadiths about Sufyani and that it is an assured issue to happen and that it will be before the Reappearance”]
 7. Sometimes, it has been mentioned as “Ikmal al-din wa itmam al-ni’ma” which is not correct, because the author has referred to it in his other books as “Kamal al-din wa tamam al-ni’ma”.



they have foreseen the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam (a). He has discussed about the signs in an independent chapter and after mentioning 29 Hadīths, he says, "I have mentioned some Hadīths about the signs of the Upriser (a) and his conduct in the book *al-Sirr al-maktūm*." (al-Saduq, Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Ni'mah, 1990, p. p. 684) But, this book is not available now. In other chapters of this book, there are no Hadīths about the signs. Ibn Babiwayh (Sadūq's father) has also mentioned some Hadīths about the signs of Reappearance in his book, *al-Imama wa al-Tabsarah min al-hayrah*, all of which have been mentioned in *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'ma* as well.

C) Shaykh al-Tūsī's al-Ghayba

Grandeur of Shaykh al-Tā'ifāh, Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Hasan al-Tūsī (385 - 460 AH) and his position do not need a lot of explanation. His book al-Ghayba is a collection of Hadīths about the Upriser (a) from the Ahl al-Bayt (a) with the emphasis on rejection of sects taking ones other than Imam al-Mahdī (a) as the Promised Mahdi (a).

The chain of narration for many of the Hadīths in this book reach to Faql b. Shādhān. He was among trustworthy fiqh scholars, great companions of Imams (a) and the author of books on topics related to Imam al-Mahdī (a) including *Ithbāt al-Raj'ah*, *Kitāb al-Qā'im* (a) and *Kitāb al-malāhim*. (al-Najāshī, 1996, pp. vol.2, pp. 168 & 16)⁸ He has also quoted Hadīths about the signs of Reappearance, his teacher Shaykh Mufīd has narrated in *al-Irshād*, but he has not cited anything from Nu'mānī's *al-Ghaybah*, even with the messages in the Hadīths in both books (*Nu'mānī's al-Ghayba* and al-Tūsī's *al-Ghaybah*) are similar in some cases.

In this book, Shaykh al-Tūsī's more important goal than compiling Hadīths has been to bring arguments against deviant Shia sects and bring proofs from historical reports such as the death of those who claimed to be the

8. A summary of *Ithbat al-Raj'a* has been mentioned in the journal *Turathuna* (issue no. 15) and comparing it with *al-Ghayba* shows that it has been among his references.



Mahdi (a). The part on the signs of Reappearance contains 59 Hadīths, some of which are not from the Infallible (a) and some of them are either from Sunni sources or narrated by Sunni transmitters of Hadīths. This approach is absent in Nu'mānī's *al-Ghaybah* and *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'ma* at least in the chapter regarding the signs.

D) Al-Fitan

This is among Sunni sources and we aim to review Hadīths about the signs and to analyze them historically based on Shia sources, but since Hadīths in al-Fitan can be frequently found in Shia sources, it is necessary to count it among main sources of the present study; especially, because it is the oldest source where Hadīths about the signs can be found. The author of this book is Na'im b. Hammād Khazā'ī Marwzī who was among Sunni transmitters of Hadīths from Merv.

He was originally following Jahmiyya⁹, but later became a serious dissident of them. (al-Shahrestani, 1992, pp. vol.1, p. 86) Sunni scholars have different opinions about his personality: some considered him reliable and some criticized him. Ahmad b. Hanbal, Yahya b. Mu'in and Ibn Haban considered him reliable but Nasa'i considered him weak [and unreliable]. (al-Zahabi, 1981, pp. vol.10, pp. 597 & 609) About him, Ibn 'Adi said that, "he is weak and he forged Hadīths to support Sunnis." He then mentions some of Na'im's rejected Hadīths. (al-Jurjani, 1997, pp. vol. 8, p. 251) Dhahabī wrote that, "His words should not be referred to because in al-Fitan, he has mentioned weird and unacceptable issues." (al-Zahabi, 1981, p. 609) Ibn Hajar 'Asqalānī said, "Na'im has been truthful but has had many mistakes." (al-'Asqalani, 1960, pp. vol.2, p. 250)

From among Shia scholars, Sayyid Ibn Tāwūs who has quoted one third of his book *al-Malāhim* from Ibn Hammād has given some supportive

9. Jahmiyya were a group of Jabriyya who followed Jahm b. Safwan. Their beliefs were similar to those of Mu'tazilites. Jahm made an uprising in Khurasan and was killed by an agent of Umayyads.



comments for him and has not mentioned any criticisms about him. (Tawus, 1995, p. pp. 62 & 63) It is evident that Sayyid's selection and supportive comments were because of his quotations from al-Fitan, not as a Shia scholar's approval for Ibn Hammād.

Like other books written about al-Malāhim and al-Fitan [epics and trials], it does not specifically discuss about Imam al-Mahdī (a), but it discussed the issues of the future of the Islamic world until the Apocalypse and a part of it is about Imam al-Mahdī (a) and the signs of his Reappearance.

Ibn Hammad has allocated a considerable part of his book to divinations of the Companions and to Hadīths from the Prophet (s) about Umayyads, Abbasids, Sufyānī, Mahdi (a) and his signs, al-Dajjāl, the Coming of Jesus (s) and some of the signs of the Apocalypse.

Some of the chapters of al-Fitan are: the names of the instances of turmoil after the Prophet (s), the number of the caliphs after him, names of Rashidin caliphs, signs of the end of Umayyad rule, the uprising of Abbasids, the end of the rule of Abbasids, chapters about Sufyānī, his name, lineage, battles and plunge in Beyda', black banners, chapters about Mahdi (a), his name and lineage, conduct and signs of his Uprising, chapters about Al-Dajjāl, Coming of Jesus (s), conquest of Constantinople [Istanbul] and other places, earthquakes and plunges, the signs of Apocalypse and uprisings of Habesha and Turks.

Some points are to be noted about al-Fitan:

1. Ibn Hammād has quoted most of Hadīths from the Companions and the Followers and as expected, the chain of their transmission do not reach to the Prophet (s); for example, of all 170 Hadīths in chapters 29 to 44 of the book which are about the Mahdi (a) and Sufyānī, only 25 Hadīths reach one of the Infallible (a) and other chains of transmitters end to people such as Ka'b al-Ahbār, Muhammad b. Hanafiyyah, Zahri, Artah, others. Such chains of transmitters are not only considered worthless by Shia but also Sunnis do not consider them as proofs, because technically said,



they are considered Mawqūf, meaning that their chains of transmitters end to a Companion.

2. In addition to the many Hadīths, Ibn Hammād has quoted from Imam ‘Alī (a) as one of the Companions of the Prophet (s), a considerable number of Hadīths are transmitted by Jabir Ju’fī from Imam al-Bāqir (a).
3. Repetition is frequently occurred in al-Fitan and some Hadīths have been mentioned in different chapters with the same chain of transmitters, so that it can be said with some certainty that one fourth of the book has been repeated.
4. As it was mentioned previously, this book and other books written about al-Malahim and al-Fitan do not have a direct connection with the Reappearance and many of the Hadīths mentioned are divinations about future happenings to Muslims and there is no mention of the Mahdi (a) in them. However, a considerable number of these Hadīths have been mentioned in Shia sources as the signs of the Reappearance of Imam al-Mahdī (a).

Conclusion

According to the Islamic canon, the End-Times is composed of two phases, the prior is the time of decadence of morality and the growth of injustice and oppression and the interweave of Good and Evil to the extent that they are not distinguishable to many people and the then the time of Justice and brotherhood will follow it and it is the time of the fulfillment of God’s promise to all prophets and other people about performing Justice and creating the global Divine government. In many Ahādith from the holy Prophet of Islam and Imams, it is said that Imam al-Mahdī (a.) will reappear at the End Times.¹⁰

10. The Prophet of Islam said that “Al-Mahdi is from my household and will reappear at the End Times.



The former period, although being dominated by miseries and injustice, is the time of hope in the bright future and is a part of the history of the development of the mankind. (Tune'i, 1389, p. 35 & 36)

