

The Prolonged Lifespan of Imam Mahdi (aj)



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The duration of the longevity of Imam Mahdi's life has been an area of disagreement among several Sunni and Shi'i scholars. The findings of this research are based on the Qur'anic verses, Shi'a and Sunni hadith, biological and medical law, and historical documents. These findings reveal that it is possible to live an exceedingly long life, as the Prophet Noah, the Men of the Cave, and Prophet Khidr are among those who have done so.

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Abstract

The duration of the longevity of Imam Mahdi's life has been an area of disagreement among several Sunni and Shi'i scholars. The findings of this research are based on the Qur'anic verses, Shi'a and Sunni hadith, biological and medical law, and historical documents. These findings reveal that it is possible to live an exceedingly long life, as the Prophet Noah, the Men of the Cave, and Prophet Khidr are among those who have done so.

Longevity, with its conditions, is also possible according to biological and medical law, and history has witnessed those who were not prophets who have lived prolonged lives. Moreover, the longevity of Imam Mahdi is not considered unnatural and opposed to the Holy Qur'an and hadith.

Statement of the problem

Opponents have always attacked the belief in a hidden Imam – one of the strong opinions of the Shi'a Muslims.¹ Given reliable hadiths, besides belief in the previous eleven present Imams, the Shi'a believe in the presence and influence of the hidden Imam and consider it an obligation to answer to its misconceptions.

Among the important issues discussed by Shi'a and Sunni thinkers is the prolonged lifespan of Imam Mahdi. This issue – which has been discussed among the academics for a long time² – has left some so dumbfounded that they have essentially denied the existence of the true character of Imam al-Mahdi (a).³

This paper investigates the longevity of Imam Mahdi and to prove the truth of the Twelver-Imam Shi'a belief. By considering its different aspects and resorting to the Shi'a and Sunni hadith, we respond to those who question this issue.

Imam al-Mahdi (a) at a Glance

According to the Twelver-Imam Shi'a belief, Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Askari, or Imam Mahdi, is the twelfth and final successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Based on the Shi'a belief, he is now alive, although he is hidden and absent. He was born in secrecy on the 15th of Sha'aban in the year 255 A.H. in harsh and repressing conditions from a mother named Narjis Khatoon. In 260 A.H., with martyrdom of Imam Hasan al-Askari (a), he became the Shi'i Imam when he was only five years old. By the order of his noble father and in accordance with the promise of his predecessors, he continued his life undisclosed from that day forward.

The occultation of Imam Mahdi happened in two stages: the first stage is known as the Minor Occultation lasted 69 years, until 329 A.H. Afterwards, his major occultation (*Ghaybat al-Kubra*) began and continues till today. The possibility of Imam Mahdi's long life can be proven through the Holy Qur'an, hadith, the rules of nature, and history.

Longevity in the Qur'an

The Holy Quran – a text accepted by all Muslims – contains verses that can prove the Shia claim about the possibility of the prolonged lifespan of Imam al-Mahdi (a).

The Spider (Ankabut), verse 14

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ الطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ

Certainly We sent Noah to his people, and he remained with them for a thousand-less-fifty years. Then the flood overtook them while they were wrongdoers. (Ankabut, 14)

In this verse, Prophet Noah invited his people to Allah for 950 years. Scholars question his age when he was sent as a prophet and on how long he lived after the Flood. This disagreement is to such an extent that the great Sunni Scholar, Alusi, narrated numerous hadiths based on which the Prophet Noah lived for 1,700 years.⁴ Likewise, the late Shaykh Saduq, a prominent Shi'a thinker of the 4th century A.H., narrated from Imam Sadiq that the Prophet Noah lived for 2,500 years.⁵

Furthermore, Fakhr Razi, a renowned Sunni scholar, considered the medical opinion that human lifespan does not exceed 100 or 120 years in contradiction with the above-mentioned Qur'anic verse; he regarded the great longevity of man as possible only by divine providence.⁶

The Cave (al-Kahf)

Shi'i scholars have used this verse regarding the People of the Cave to prove the possibility of the longevity of Imam Mahdi's life:

وَلَبِثُوا فِي كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَاثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِينَ وَازْدَادُوا تِسْعًا

So they stayed in their Cave three hundred years, and [some] nine [more]. (Kahf, 25)

Along with other consistent Qur'anic verses, this one demonstrates that the People of the Cave lived for 309 years asleep in the cave. While sleeping, they turned from side to side by the power and will of Allah. Those who believe in the living of People of the Cave for 309 years without their eating anything does not find the longevity of Imam Mahdi surprising nor impossible. Is Allah not able to keep His vicegerent alive under better conditions if He can keep the People of the Cave alive without eating anything?

The Cow (al-Baqarah)

This verse tells the story of Prophet Ezra (*Uzayr*) whose life Allah took for one hundred years and then brought him back to life while his food and water remained intact:

وَكَاذِبٍ مَّرَّ عَلَى قَرْيَةٍ وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا قَالَ أَنَّى يُحْيِي هَذِهِ اللَّهُ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ؟ فَأَمَاتَهُ اللَّهُ مِائَةَ عَامٍ ثُمَّ بَعَثَهُ ؟ قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتَ ؟ قَالَ لَبِثْتُ يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ؟ قَالَ بَلْ لَبِثْتَ مِائَةَ عَامٍ فَانْظُرْ إِلَى طَعَامِكَ وَشَرَابِكَ لَمْ يَتَسَنَّهْ ؟ وَانْظُرْ إِلَى حِمَارِكَ وَلِنَجْعَلَ آيَةً لِلنَّاسِ ؟ وَانْظُرْ إِلَى الْعِظَامِ كَيْفَ نُنْشِزُهَا ثُمَّ نَكْسُوهَا لَحْمًا ؟ فَلَمَّا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُ قَالَ أَعْلَمُ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

He said: "Oh! How shall Allah bring it [ever] to life, after its death?" So, Allah caused him to die for a hundred years, and then raised him to life. He said: "How long have you tarried [thus]?" He said: [Perhaps] a day or part of a day." He said: "Nay, you have tarried thus a hundred years; but look at your food and your drink; they show no signs of age; and look at your donkey, and that We may make of you a sign unto the people; look further at the bones, how We bring them together and clothe them with flesh." When this was shown clearly to him, he said: "I know that Allah hath power over all things." (Baqarah, 259)

According to both Sunni and Shi'a hadith collections and Qur'anic commentaries, his meal was made up of figs, grapes, and milk, all of which are prone to rotting quickly.⁷ With firm belief in Allah, Muslims regard this phenomenon as possible and natural. Now the question arises: Can Allah, Who is able to keep these foods fresh and intact for one hundred years, not keep His vicegerent alive for His desired period of time?

Longevity in hadiths

According to narrations in the hadith collections, there existed people who lived a long life before Imam Mahdi. In addition to those referred to in the Qur'anic verses, at least two persons can be cited:

Prophet Jesus

Muslim Neishaburi, a well-known Sunni narrator, quotes the Prophet (s) as saying, “How will you be when Jesus, son of Mary, will descend to you and be your Imam?”⁸

Likewise, Nu'mani, a well-known Shia narrator, reports the Prophet (s) addressing Imam Ali (a) concerning the number of successors (*awsiya*), as saying: “They are as many as the months of year, and the Prophet Jesus Christ will pray behind the last one of them.”⁹

Based on these hadiths and verses, the Prophet Jesus will be alive until the uprising of Imam Mahdi which attests to his exceedingly long life.

The Holy Qur'an also rejects the idea that the Prophet Jesus was crucified and says that Allah raised him up to Himself:

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَبُوهُ وَلَكِنْ
شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِنْهُ ۚ مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا اتِّبَاعَ
الظَّنِّ ۚ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا

بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

That they said, ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who disagree on this are full of doubts, with no [certain] knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for surely they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. (Nisa, 157, 158)

The Prophet Khidr

As seen in hadiths, Prophet Khidr is among those who lived an exceedingly long life. Muslim Neishaburi narrated a hadith from the Holy Prophet, who said, “When Dajjal appears and encounters Khidr, he will decide to kill Khidr, but will not succeed.”

The longevity of Khidr has also been verified by Shi'a sources. For example, Sudair Sayrafi related that along with Mufaddal ibn Umar, Aban ibn Tghlab and Abu Basir, he went to Imam Sadiq and saw him sitting on the ground. While crying heavily he (a) said, “My Majesty, your long absence is breaking my being and the comfort of my conscience is taken from me.” Sadir said, “I asked, ‘May I be your ransom,

why are you in a state of crying?’ He said, ‘I looked in the book *Al-Jafr*¹⁰ until I reached the birth of Imam Mahdi (a) to whom God will grant a long life and in whose absence there will be disturbance in this world...because of that day, I was saddened and became tearful.’”

Then, he added, “Imam Mahdi will be born the same way the Prophet Moses was born, his occultation being similar to that of the Prophet Jesus, his stay among his people resembling Prophet Noah’s, and his long life like that of Prophet Khidr.”¹¹ Shi’i sources also refer to Prophet Khidr’s meeting Imam Ali.¹²

Thus, the length of the lifetime of Imam al-Mahdi (a) is not unheard of. And if God, due to good will, was able to give long life to a number of people, He can do the same concerning Imam al-Mahdi (a).

Longevity according to the rules of nature

So far, man with his inquiring nature has discovered endless facts about the universe, each of which is key to knowing his Creator. However, there are numerous facts and rules in the universe that mankind has not yet exposed. Nonetheless, taking these discoveries into account can assist inquirers of the longevity of Imam Mahdi.

Another reason for the significance of considering the rules of nature as related to this issue is that these rules are not specific to a particular religion; they go beyond religion and are accepted by different groups.

According to the evidence presented thus far from the Qur’an and hadith which confirm the possibility of man experiencing long life, the question as to whether longevity is a natural phenomenon or if the above-mentioned cases were realized by the infinite power of Allah is worth examining.

Biology experts believe that the main components of the human body have an infinite lifespan, and therefore, human life in itself can also be infinite.

Medical experts have also proven that man’s lifespan can extend for long period, and death at a young age occurs as a result of some medical conditions. Some physicians maintain that the natural principles of animals’ life can be applied to man given that because some animals have a natural lifespan of 900 to 7200 years, man can also be kept alive as long.¹³

Longevity is a natural phenomenon, and the reasons for a long or short life should be sought in time, place, nutrition, and other conditions. The lifespan of a living being during the time of war is different from that of an era of peace, and so is one’s lifespan breathing in polluted air as opposed to clean air.

Adhering to the natural laws stated above, Shi’a scholars consider the lifespan of Imam al-Mahdi (a) a natural phenomenon and matters such as the environment, proper nutrition, spiritual activities, and a healthy body are considered effective factors for a lengthy living.¹⁴

Longevity in History

Another reality taken into account in examining longevity and its feasibility is human experience throughout history. This discussion is significant because some prophets with a prolonged life have been noted, and the possibility of longevity has also been underlined by natural laws. As to whether biologists and medical experts consider this possible or not remains a question.

If longevity has occurred in the course of human history, albeit in very few cases, its repetition will be a natural, rational, and acceptable phenomenon. Historical accounts which contain valuable material have been the main source of our information since we did not live in the past, nor have we experienced longevity.

People who have lived long lives are available in many historical accounts: Shi'i scholars call them *long-lived people* (*mu'ammarnn*). Moreover, historians have introduced them to us, and recorded and spoke of their names, lineages and tribes, their place of living, the number of their offspring, their journeys and even their words and wills.

Historical accounts demonstrate that:

1. Luqman lived for 400 years
2. Riyan, father of the king of Egypt, lived for 1,700 years
3. The Prophet Adam lived for 930 or 1000 years
4. The son of the prophet Andreas lived for 969 years
5. Seth, son of Adam, lived for 912 or 940 years
6. Anush, son of Seth, lived for 750 or 960 years
7. Qeinan, son of Seth, lived for 920 years
8. Mahla'il lived for 800 or 960 years
9. Mahla'il's mother lived for 960 years
10. Shaddad, son of 'Amir, lived for 900 years
11. Jamshid lived for 850 years
12. 'Umar, son of 'Amir, lived for 800 years
13. Lamech lived for 777 or 790 years

14. The Prophet Hud lived for 760 years
15. The Prophet Solomon lived for 712 years
16. Egyptian king lived for 700 years
17. Fereidun lived for 500 years
18. Darid, son of Zaid, lived for 456 years
19. 'Amr, son of Hujjah Rumi, lived for 400 years
20. Zuhair, son of Abdullah Kananah, lived for 420 years
21. Pharaoh lived for 411 years
22. Rabi', son of Saba', lived for 380 years
23. Abdul-Masih Nasrani lived for 350 years
24. Aktham, son of Safar Asadi, lived for 330 years
25. The Prophet Jethro/Shu'aib lived for 240 years
26. Sirat, son of Sa'id, lived for 220 years
27. Safieddine Riyahi lived for 200 years...and so on.¹⁵

With careful investigation of the historical sources, many others with exceedingly long lives have existed.

Longevity and its Divisions

Given what was mentioned before, longevity can be divided into various types:

These five types are explained as follows:

1. *Prolonged life is impossible* – such as the lifespan of someone who is careless about his/her nutrition, environment, and other conditions and God's will has not actualized the longevity of such a person.
2. *Prolonged life is possible* – such as the lifespan of 80 to 120 years, which has been achieved by a countless number of people.
3. *Prolonged life as unnaturally possible that has not been actualized* – such as the lifespan of 500 to 1,000 years, the case of most human beings.
4. *Prolonged life as unnaturally possible that has been actualized in the past* – such as the age of

super-centenarians, which include both prophets and non-prophets.

5. *Prolonged life as unnaturally possible that has been actualized in the present* – such as Imam al-Mahdi's (a) age.

Thus, prolonged life is not of one kind and one ruling. Some kinds of it are not rationally impossible. Because they do not occur frequently, they seem impossible according to conventional standards. However, they are not rationally impossible.

Ahmad Amin's View

Ahmad Amin, one of the late Sunni thinkers, criticized the Shi'a belief in the existence of Imam al-Mahdi (a) and has come to believe that it is God's practice (*sunnah*) to limit the human lifespan and that such a practice pertains to prophets as well. To give an example, Prophet Muhammad lived for only 63 years, and the Shi'a Imams also had limited lifespans. Likewise, he maintains that throughout history, there were few people who lived more than one hundred years and certainly no one lives forever.¹⁶

Even though his doubts are based on his own attitude toward the issue of Imamah – which is clearly different from the Shi'a approach concerning this matter – bearing in mind the previous discussions, in response it can be said:

1. According to reason, a long lifespan is a possible matter.
2. God's power is infinite and is applied to matters that are possible. Therefore, God is able to lengthen the life of his servant, Imam al-Mahdi (a).
3. Based on the Qur'anic verses, Shi'a hadith collections, and Sunni sources, there were some prophets and prominent people with an exceptionally long life in this world. When it comes to Khidr, according to Ibn Hajar 'Asqalani, most scholars believe that Khidr is a long-lived person who is still alive.¹⁷
4. According to historical reports, many people, including non-prophets, existed who experienced a long lifespan.
5. Biologists and medical experts maintain that if proper conditions are provided for man and if he is protected from harmful factors, he can live a very long life. In other words, scientifically short lifetimes are not due to impossibility of longevity, but they happen due to lack of influential factors in the natural life. Hence, man can live a long life by having a good hygiene and other conditions.¹⁸

Conclusion

Considering what has been said, one can say that the prolonged lifespan of Imam al-Mahdi (a) is fully justified according to intellectual, Qur'anic, traditional, scientific, and historical accounts and does not go

against any human or non-human law.

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