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**Al-Mahdi**

by

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Within Islamic Eschatology “The Signs of the Hour” denote a series of cataclysmic events, and the emergence of key figures, that presage the end of the world and the commencement of “The day of Resurrection.” (Yawm al-Qiyaama) “The hour” and “its signs” are mentioned in several chapters through out the Quran and belief in “the last day” is essential to Muslim integrity of faith. In spite of the Quran’s numerous references to the last day, it does not mention when this “overwhelming event” will occur, asserting that “Men ask you about the hour; say: The knowledge of it is only with Allah...” (Quran V.33 S.63) There are other beliefs that remain central to Islamic Eschatology about which the Quran provides no explicit detail. The idea of Al-Mahdi—“The rightly guided one” who will emerge at the end of days, is one such belief, or sign, whose details are found almost exclusively in the corpus of hadith literature, and the many narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Al-Mahdi is a mysterious figure whose personality remains pivotal to Sunni and Shi’a theology and politics. As mentioned previously, the term Mahdi is not mentioned anywhere in the Quran itself, yet there are numerous words within the holy book derived from the same Arabic root “ha-da”, denoting guidance in one form or another. (Hussein, p.12) The earliest usage of the term Al-Mahdi may have occurred as an “honorific title” used by the Prophet’s poet, Hasan ibn thabit, in a poem eulogizing Muhammad after his death. The poem states, “Sorrow for the Mahdi who is buried! O best of those who walked on Earth, be not far!” (Hussein p.13) However, it is within the hadith literature that we get a clear picture of Al-Mahdi, his ethnicity, physical characteristics, purpose, and mission.

In the hadith collection of Abu Dawud, there is a tradition narrated by Abu Sa’id al-Khudri which states that, “The Prophet (Peace be upon him) said: The Mahdi will be of my stock, and will have a broad forehead and a prominent nose. He will fill the earth with equity and justice, as it was filled with oppression and tyranny, and he will rule for seven years.” (Dimashqi p.51) There are other traditions narrated by Abu Sa’id Al Khudri that shed more light on the lineage of Al-Mahdi. In the Kifayat Al-Athar, a hadith collection often cited by the Shi’a, Abu Sa’id al-Khudri reports, “I heard the messenger of Allah (Peace Be Upon him) say, The Imams after me are twelve, nine of them are from the descendants of al-Husain, (Upon him be peace) and the Mahdi is from them.” (Gulpaigani p.105)

The later tradition is particularly interesting in that it demonstrates the continuity and overlap between narrators whose transmissions are often used in hadith literature compiled by both Sunni and Shi'a scholars. Conversely, this same tradition narrated by al-Khudri is significant for it demonstrates the critical point where Sunni and Shi'a narratives regarding Al-Mahdi diverge. For the Sunnis, Muhammad's foretelling of those leaders who would follow him after his death, on most accounts, are not associated with the offspring of his grandson Al-Husain. The hadith often quoted by Sunnis to substantiate this claim, is similarly cited by the Shi'a to prove the veracity of Al-Mahdi as the last in a line of "twelve Caliphs", or "Imams" who descend from the son in law of the Prophet, and father of Al-Husain--Ali ibn abi Talib.

Another hadith narrated by Jaabir ibn Samarah exemplifies this dichotomy for it states that, "The affair of this nation will continue to remain upright and it will continue to be victorious over its enemy until it goes through twelve Khaleefahs, all of whom are from Quraish." (Ibn Katheer p.30) This tradition is taken from "The Book of trials" of the famous Sunni theologian Ibn Katheer who further states after relating the hadith, "The twelve referred to in the Hadeeth are not the same twelve that the Raafidah (pejorative of Shi'a) falsely consider to be infallible Imams." (Ibid p.30) The position of Ibn Katheer is indicative of the opinion held by the vast majority of Sunnis regarding the "twelve Khaleefahs" mentioned in the above narration. This is particularly significant when we consider that both Sunnis and Shi'as consider the hadith related by Ibn Samarah "authentic" and that the Sunni traditionalist Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, narrates it with some forty chains of transmission going back to Ibn Samarah. (Husain p. 19)

However, amongst the "Twelver" or Imami Shi'a, Ibn Samarah's tradition is authenticated only when supplemented by other hadith that provide more detail. These traditions are often from different narrators who explicitly designate Al-Mahdi as one of the twelve Caliphs, sometimes by use of the term al-Qaim--the one who rises up. (Ibid p. 20) Additionally, many hadith narrated in Shi'a sources make reference to Al-Mahdi's occultation (retreat into the unseen), a belief that is paramount amongst "Twelvers and other Shi'a sects. Thus we have numerous traditions like those on the authority of Salmaan Al- Faarsi (the Persian companion of the Prophet) who states that, "The Prophet said, "There will be twelve Imams after me equal to the number of months in a year. From us is the mahdi of this nation, for him is the occultation of (Prophet) Musa, the brightness of (Prophet) Easa, the forbearance of (Prophet) Dawood and the patience of (Prophet) Ayyub." And in another tradition Salmaan narrates from the Prophet that, "There will be twelve Imams after me... "All of them will be from Quraish. There after, our Qaim (Al-Mahdi) will emerge who will cure the hearts of the believers..."(Gulpaigani p.43)

The aforementioned hadith, and the issues they raise regarding the varied interpretations of Al-Mahdi, are indicative of the competing theological perspectives that began to emerge following the death of the Prophet. The issue of succession and who the rightful inheritors of the Prophet should be, would profoundly impact the use of the term Al-Mahdi and its appropriation through

out Islamic history. For the Alids (descendents of the fourth Caliph Ali), or Shi'a Ali (Followers of Ali) as they would later be known, the series of events that unfolded after the Prophet's death provided the impetus for the emergence of a new identity among groups of Muslims who sought religious explanations, and political authority outside that of the status quo. In many instances the genesis of Al-Mahdi as a historical personality and the popular usage of the term under the myriad Islamic dynasties that emerged between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, parallels the historical develop of the Shi'a under these regimes.

The history of the Shi'a has its roots in the tragic events surrounding the death of the Prophet and the civil war that emerged between his companions following the assassination of the third Caliph Uthman bin Affan. Shi'a theology articulates that God revealed to Prophet Muhammad who his successor should be after his death, and that the Prophet chose his cousin and son in law, Ali ibn Abi Talib to be the first Caliph after him. (Egger p. 67) Additionally, the Twelver Shi'a believe that the Prophet also mentioned specifically, to various companions of his, that after the ascension of Ali and his twin sons Hasan and Husain to the office of Caliph, nine Imams from the progeny of Husain will emerge and that the last of them will be Al-Mahdi. This twelfth Imam was identified by the Ithna "Ashariyya as Muhammad ibn al-Aksari, the awaited Mahdi who will re-emerge after having been in "occultation" since 873AD. (Hussein p.1)

The use of the term Imam and Caliph for the Twelver Shi'a are synonymous with Al-Mahdi and those Imams who came before him. This belief has given birth to a kind of Twelver Mahdism that asserts that each of the Imam's are divinely guided and appointed by God. These Imams must then occupy the same office of the Prophet, even with regard to infallibility. (Gulpaigaini p. 311) In contradistinction to the Sunnis, Twelver Shi'a view the first three Caliphs; Abu Bakr as-Sadiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab and Uthman ibn Affan as usurpers of Islamic authority. (Egger p.67) They also believe, contrary to the Sunnis, that being a pious Muslim male from the tribe of Quraysh is not enough to qualify one as Caliph or Imam. Conflicting views regarding the issue of succession came to a head during the period of the third Caliph of Uthman ibn Affan whose reign is viewed by many Shi'a as the beginning of the tyranny of the Umayyads, a Muslim dynasty that ruled the Islamic empire from 661-750AD.

When Uthman became Caliph in 644AD he heightened the military presence at the amsar (garrison towns) and established them as permanent outposts in the Islamic hinterlands despite the fact that many of the military campaigns had come to an end. Uthman was also fond of placing Arabs from the elite tribes of Mecca in positions of authority over soldiers of "lesser status", but who had never the less, converted to Islam much earlier, and in many instances, had been in the field of battle much longer than the Arab elites. Many of those appointed to high government posts were from Uthman's own clan family and clan—the Bani Umayyah. (Hodgson p.212)

For his policies Uthman was accused of nepotism and for exasperating the soldiers of the amsar in overextended tours of duty. Frustration with Uthman's administration became so acute that voices of discontent began to spring up all

over the Caliphate, particularly in Iraq where Uthman's relatives had been appointed as governors. (Egger p.63) The Bani Umayya monopolization of government posts made Uthman extremely unpopular, not only at the garrison towns of Iraq and Egypt, but also with the Ansar of Medina—"helpers" of the Prophet. (Hodgson p.213) Soldiers of the ansar also began to complain of unfair fiscal policies in which the spoils of war were being sent to Medina as tribute instead of being disseminated among the soldiers, many of whom felt they had earned some portion of booty for their efforts in battle.

In 656AD soldiers from Kufa and Egypt revolted and marched on the city of Medina to protest Uthman's fiscal policies. (Egger p.64) The protest turned ugly when "a few hot-heads" decided to breach the wall to Uthman's home, eventually making their way into his private chamber and murdering him as he read the Qur'an (Egger p. 64) Ali ibn abi Talib was chosen as the fourth Caliph of the Muslim Umma (Nation) by a group consisting of prominent Medinan supporters, and, the insurgents who had killed Uthman. (Hodgson p. 214) The reign of Ali is often classified as the beginning of the Fitna, or "Great Trial" for the Muslim community. However, for the Shi'a, Ali's ascendance marks the beginning of the dispensation of Al-Mahdi and the genesis of a Prophetic narrative that has yet to be fulfilled.

Uthman's assassination set off tremendous upheaval between some of the most prominent companions of the Prophet, who stood on opposing sides following the death of Caliph. Some well known supporters of Uthman included Aisha, the Prophets wife, and two respected Muslims from the early community, Abdullah ibn Zubair and Talha ibn Ubaidallah. They, and members of the Bani Umayyah, demanded that the killers of Uthman be brought to justice, and since Ali was the new Caliph, the responsibility of seeing to it that justice be served lay squarely on his shoulders. On the other side of the conflict were Ali and his supporters, a group who had within their ranks the cabal who assassinated Uthman. The supporters of Uthman had begun to accuse Ali of neglecting to deal swiftly with the Uthman's killers. This increased tensions on both sides and placed the two factions on the precipice of war. In 656 AD in an area outside of Basra, Iraq an army lead by Aisha, Talha and Zubair and another lead by Ali, clashed at the Battle of the Camel in which Ali's forces routed the opposing side. (Egger p.65)

The governor of Damascus (Syria) and Companion of the Prophet, Muawiyyah bin Abu Sufyan made known his rejection of Ali's Caliphate, and joined the fray of those demanding justice on Uthman's behalf. (Hodgson p. 214) As a member of the Bani Umayya and cousin of Uthman, Muawiyya posed a direct challenge to Ali's authority by making public his desire to seek revenge on behalf of his kinsmen. Sensing that war was inevitable, Ali and his forces set out from Kufa, (Iraq) toward Damascus in 657AD but were halted by the armies of Muawiyya that had gathered along the Euphrates. The two armies engaged in a series of month long "skirmishes" known as the "Battle of Siffin" in which, according to some historical account, Muawiyyah's armies were forced to arbitrate once they saw that fighting had begun to intensify. (Ibid. 214)

However, Ali's arbitration was not without severe consequences. Many soldiers within Ali's army abdicated following his agreement to put down arms. The Khawarij (those who leave) as they came to be known, rebelled against Ali on the grounds that, as the legitimate Caliph, Ali had no right to make his authority a subject of arbitration. The defection of the Khawarij dealt a serious blow to Ali's base of support both militarily and ideologically. In addition to having to put down the revolt of the Kharijites at Narawhan (657AD), Ali had become viewed as indecisive by a good number of his supporters. Many of the Medinans and Kufans who had initially backed Ali, began to vacillate between neutrality and partisanship, with the pendulum of power often swinging more favorably toward Muawiyah. (Ibid p.216) Ali's tumultuous five year Caliphate was thus characterized by perpetual warfare, revolt and the dissolution of his supporters following a series of failed arbitrations. Ali could scarcely raise an army to push back the forces of Muawiyah that harassed him constantly over the course of his five-year reign. (Egger p.66) With only a few stalwart supporters his corner, Ali was assassinated by a Kharajite at Kufa in 661AD (Egger p.66)

The history of Ali's Caliphate is important to the development of Shi'a Mahdism for several reasons; (1) Ali was a member of the Ah'l Bayt (the family of the Prophet), and thus became the first of twelve legitimate Caliphs, or Imams, according to the Shi'a (2) During the Caliphate of Ali we see the emergence of an anti-Umayyad sentiment and the public de-legitimization of Caliphs not associated with the Alids, more specifically, the offspring of Ali and the Prophet's daughter Fatima (3) Ali emerges from his ordeal as a tragic hero, and as a symbol of piety and justice in the face of an Umayyad tyranny that both preceded and followed his Caliphate. The above-mentioned characterization of Ali's Caliphate would be deployed by successive generations of Alids who came after. These themes would later be incorporated into the broader narrative of Twelver Mahdism and Shi'a theology in general.

Another important historical precedent that would feed into Twelver Mahdism occurred during the brief Caliphate of al-Hasan the son of Ali. Al-Hasan was declared Caliph by a group of loyalist at Kufa following his father's assassination in 661AD. However, he acquiesced the Caliphate to Muawiyah pending the latter's threat of more bloodshed among an already beleaguered and divided Muslim Community. (Ibid p.67) This incident, for the Twelvers marks the beginning of the second Imamate, and the last time that someone other than al-Husayn, or his progeny, would occupy the office of Imam. Further, Al-Hasan's the policy of acquiescence in the absence of political power would become a distinguishing feature of the Ithna 'Ashariyya and their Mahdist beliefs.

Following the death of his older brother Hasan in 669AD, Husayn was elevated to the status of Sayyid, or chief among the Alids and had managed to amass a following among the supporters of Ali at Medina and Kufa. (Egger p.68) It was not Husayn's intention to contest Muawiyah for the office of Caliph. However, on his death bed Muawiyah had appointed his son Yazid, a man known for his public drinking and impiety. Yazid's appointment was utterly rejected by the Medinans and Kufans (Hodgson p. 219) and Husayn was beseeched by his supporters at Kufa to rise up against Yazid and take the

Caliphate back from the Umayyads. With promises of reinforcements from the Kufans, Husayn amassed a small band of armed family members and supporters and headed out to Kufa. Husayn's forces never made it to Kufa and were instead, cut off by Yazid's army at the vast desert plain of Karbala. What ensued was a brutal massacre where Husayn and most of his cadre were killed. (Egger p.68)

The tragic events that occurred at Karbala in 680AD, would give the previously nascent community of Alids a definitive character and ideological bent. The Alids, and by extension the Shi'a, gained in the martyrdom of Husayn an icon that embodied the themes of the "tragic" martyr and pious warrior that emerged during the Caliphate of Ali. The "Battle of Karbala" also solidified the Umayyads as the sworn enemies of Ah'l Bayt (The immediate family of the Prophet), and by extension, Al-Mahdi who many Shi'as believe will arise for the purpose of avenging Husayn's death. (Hussein p.25) The events at Karbala would also become permanent ideological and historical motifs for the entire Shi'a community from the seventh century forward.

For those expecting the awaited Mahdi, they need only look to the progeny of Husayn, whose martyrdom marked the beginning of the ascent of Husayni Alids, or "nine Imams" that would emerge exclusively from his progeny. From the ashes of the Karbala massacre emerged Husayn's only surviving heir, Ali Zain al-'abideen, the fourth Imam of Ah'l Bayt (Egger p.74) The Battle of Karbala marked the last time an Imam from the line of Husayn would rise in revolt against the prevailing authority. This movement toward quietism, which hearkened back to the policy al-Hasan, became standard among the "Husayni Alids" from the seventh century onward. (Hussein p. 12)

In his book *Tarikh al-Rasul wa-l Muluk* the scholar and historian Al-Tabari narrates that there was a letter sent to Husayn from Kufa in which the honorific title "Mahdi" was used to address him (Hussein p.160). Also, following his death, the phrase "Mahdi ibn Mahdi" was apparently used to denote Husayn and his father--Ali ibn abi Talib. (Ibid p.13) These traditions are particularly interesting in that do not adhere to the restrictions that Twelver Shi'as would later place on Al-Mahdi. Scholars differ regarding when the term Al-Mahdi was first used to describe an actual living person. However, what is certain is that, this would not be the last time the term Al-Madi would be used to describe someone other than the twelfth Imam.

During the reign of the Umayyads many would claim the title of Al-Mahdi, either appropriating it themselves, or, having it bestowed upon them by others. The first of these incidents occurred in 686AD during the revolt of Mukhtar al- Thaqafi at Kufa. Mukhtar was a staunch Alid supporter and who rebelled against Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr's attempt to capture the Caliphate that same year. (Hodgson p.265) Without ever having met him, Mukhtar claimed to be advancing the cause of Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyyah, a pious scholar and descendent of Ali who resided at Mecca. (Egger p. 70) Mukhtar believed that al-Hanifiyyah was the awaited Mahdi, even though he was not from the progeny of Ali and the Fatima. (Ibid p.70) Further, Mukhtar's revolt was significant to Shi'a Mahdism (if not Twelvers specifically), in that it centered on belief in a

“messianic” figure, al-Hanifiyyah, and belief in him as the Mahdi from an eschatological perspective. (Egger p.70)

Al-Mahdi was used as a title to denote two Umayyad Caliphs’ Sulayman ibn Abdul Malik (715-717AD) and his successor Umar ibn Abdul Azziz (717-720). Sulayman bestowed the epithet upon himself, while Abdul Azziz was perceived to be so by righteous Muslims of his day. (Ibid p.70) Between the two of them, their five- year reign represented a welcomed shift toward piety, in a Caliphate that had thus been characterized by sacrilege and impropriety. It must be mentioned to that while the title Mahdi was being used to describe individuals who were not from Ah’l Bayt, Muhammad al-Baqir, a Husayni Alid and fifth Imam according to the Twelver Shi’a, had begun to sow the seeds of a definitive Shi’a theology during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Egger p.74) From his headquarters in Medina, Al-Baqir (the son of Zain al-Abideen) had developed a reputation as a preeminent scholar attracting many followers from within and outside of Medina. (Ibid)

The Husayni Alid’s policy of peaceful mobilization around a spiritual leader, continued under Jafar as-Sadiq. As the son of Muhammad al-Baqir, as-Sadiq became a prodigious scholar and polymath whose influence gave rise to a distinct Shi’a “identity” and theology apart from other Muslims due...” to the “allegiance” that was given him as ‘Imam” (Ibid p.75) Further, Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar as-Sadiq had openly preached the doctrine of Imamate, that is, the belief that there must always be an “true Imam” from the descendents of Husayn who will be known by the appointment of his predecessor (Hodgson p.260) Thus, the doctrine of Imamate became the very standard by which the awaited Mahdi would be known. Through the guidance of Al-Baqir and As-Sadiq, the Shi’a were able to flourish under the Umayyad regime, while remaining loyal to a distinct set of ideas, and to their own Imam.

The idea that a religious authority existed outside that of the dominant power, did not sit well with the Abbasids who by 750AD, had managed to wrestle the Caliphate from the Ummayyads. (Egger p.85) The Abbasid Caliphate was distinct in that their leaders claimed descent from the Prophet’s uncle Abbas, and many of their Caliphs took on surnames that had eschatological overtones and Mahdist themes. (Hodgson p. 287-89) Many of the Abbasid Caliphs became notorious for their ferocity, the first of them being Abu’l Abbas “as-Saffah” --The Slaughterer, aptly named for the wanton brutality that he meted out against his enemies. (Hodgson p.284) As-Saffah was said to have adopted the title, as-Saffah to promote the idea that the Abbasids were divinely appointed by God and thus connected to the savior, Al Mahdi, who too would shed much blood in the cause of justice. (Egger p.86)

There was also Abu Jafar al-Mansur—“The Victorious”, brother of as-Saffah and the second Abbasid Caliph, whose twenty-year reign (754-775AD) included vehement persecution and intolerance toward the Shi’a. (Ibid p.86) During the reign of al-Mansur the Husayni Alids, particularly the sixth Imam, Jafar as-Sadiq, became the object of much suspicion and subsequent oppression due largely to his views regarding the Imamate. (Husseini p. 32) Despite the fact

that as-Sadiq preached openly against meddling in Abbasid affairs, he could not escape the iron fist of al-Mansur and was allegedly poisoned by the caliph in 765AD. (Egger p.77)

Al-Mansur also had to contend with a challenger that had arisen at Mecca in the person of Muhammad Nafs al-Zakiyyah, who, in addition to leading a revolt in the Hejaz, had proclaimed himself as the awaited Mahdi. (Hodgson p. 276) Mansur put an end to the claims of Nafs' al-Zakiyyah by swiftly quashing his revolt. And perhaps in an attempt to discourage any future claims to spiritual or temporal authority after him, Mansur chose his son Al-Mahdi as the third Abbasid Caliph in 775AD (Hodgson p. 289) Al-Mahdi Caliphate was marked by piety and a type of deference to Sunni ulema not seen in the previous Abbasid rulers. The policy of deference and tolerance was not enjoyed by the Imami Shi'a whose spiritual leader, Musa al-Kazim, was thrown in jail after having been perceived as a threat by the Caliph Al-Mahdi. (Hussein p.34)

The Imamate doctrine was crucial to the development of Twelver Shi'ism, and Mahdism, during the Abbasid Caliphate and would prove as equally indispensable under the Fatimids, for it delineated where, and toward whom, the Imami Shi'a should look for authority and guidance. As-Sadiq's concept of the Imamate was designed to insure that those who had accepted the Husayni Alids as the heirs of Islamic authority, would not be confused by the emergence of individuals who would usurp that right under the guise of Caliph, Imam or Mahdi.

However, this mechanism for preserving the Imamate was not without its complications. Before his death, Jafar as-Sadiq appointed his eldest son Ismail as successor. Ismail met an untimely death before his father, giving rise to a maelstrom of confusion among the followers of as-Sadiq. (Egger p.76) From this incident there emerged the first major split within the Shi'a community. There were those who insisted that the Imamate belonged to Ismail's son Muhammad after the death of as-Sadiq in 765AD. This branch gave rise to the Ismaili Shi'a, whose doctrine is believed by some historians to be the impetus for the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Ismailis are also sometimes referred to as Seveners for holding to the belief that Ismail was the seventh Imam. (Egger p.94) There was yet another group who believed that the Imamate belonged to as-Sadiq's other son, Musa al-Kazim. This faction became known as the Imami Shi'a or Twelvers.

The number twelve for the Imami Shi'a is in reference to the last Imam from the Husayni Alids, Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Askari al-Mahdi--the rightly guided one whose arrival was foretold by Prophet Muhammad. (Hussain p. 1) According to Twelver historiography, Muhammad al-Mahdi was the son of Hasan al-Askari, who 873AD smuggled his four-year-old son, Muhammad, from Samarra to Medina without the Abbasid Caliph Mamun knowing anything about it. (Ibid p.156) Following the death of the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim in 799AD, it had been the policy of the Abbasids to maintain the Husayni Alids under house arrest for the purpose curtailing their influence and keeping an eye on them. (Ibid p.155) Thus the Imams; al-Rida (8<sup>th</sup>), al-Jawad (9<sup>th</sup>), al-Hadi (10

and the Mahdi's father, al-Askari (11<sup>th</sup>) all endured house arrest until their death (Ibid p.155) Such oppressive conditions would, therefore, make it essential that the twelfth and last Imam be hidden and protected from Abbasid persecution.

Twelver theology maintains that Muhammad al Mahdi has been living in occultation (concealment) since 874AD, and his pending arrival is contingent upon the efficacy of the Muslim communities' preparation for his arrival. (Ibid p.157) The belief in occultation is not strange to Sunnis or Islamic Eschatology in general, for the Quran itself asserts that Jesus the Messiah, was not crucified and killed, but that his entire body was "raised up" by God while he was alive. (Damashqi p.142) Further, the return of Jesus is explicitly mentioned in the hadith literature as one of the "signs of the hour" and some narrations even mention that Al-Mahdi's arrival will foreshadow the return of Jesus who will restore peace to the world after slaying Ad-Dajjal--The anti-Christ (Ibid p. 151).



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