

A Comprehensive Scholarly Analysis of the Promised Mahdi in Bihar al-Anwar Volumes 51-53

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The study of eschatology within the Islamic tradition, particularly the Shia perspective, finds its most exhaustive and definitive documentation in the monumental work **Bihar al-Anwar** (Oceans of Lights) by **Allamah Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi**. Comprising 110 volumes in its modern edition, this encyclopedic corpus serves as a cornerstone for theology, jurisprudence, and history. Among these, Volumes 51, 52, and 53 (corresponding to Volume 13 of the older lithographic editions) are specifically dedicated to the figure of the **Promised Mahdi**, the twelfth Imam. This article provides a high-level technical breakdown and scholarly analysis of these volumes, examining the methodology of Allamah Majlisi, the thematic structure of the narrations, and the theological implications of the occultation (Ghaibat) and reappearance (Zuhur).

1. The Bibliographic Context of Allamah Majlisi's Work

Allamah Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1110 AH / 1699 AD) compiled Bihar al-Anwar during the Safavid era, a period marked by a significant effort to consolidate Shia tradition. Majlisi's primary objective was the preservation of the **Hadith**(traditions) from the Four Books (al-Kutub al-Arba'ah) and many other secondary sources that were at risk of being lost to history. His approach was not merely to collect, but to categorize, providing an expansive intellectual framework for the religious sciences.

Volumes 51 through 53 represent the most thorough collection of traditions regarding the life, occultation, and eventual return of the 12th Imam, **Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi**. To understand these volumes, one must recognize that they function as a specialized monograph within the larger encyclopedia, drawing from earlier essential works such as *Kitab al-Ghaiba* by Sheikh al-Tusi, *Kitab al-Ghaiba* by al-Nu'mani, and *Kamal al-Din* by Sheikh al-Saduq.

2. Structural Decomposition: Volumes 51, 52, and 53

The transition from the old 25-volume edition to the modern 110-volume edition can sometimes confuse researchers. In the original format, the entire discourse on the Mahdi was contained in Volume 13. However, in the contemporary expanded edition, this material is distributed across three distinct volumes, each focusing on a specific phase of the Imam's existence and the global shifts surrounding his mission.

Volume 51: Birth, Lineage, and the Minor Occultation

Volume 51 focuses on the ontological and historical foundations of the 12th Imam. Key thematic areas include:

- The Birth of the Imam: Detailed accounts of the secret birth in Samarra, the role of Hakima Khatun (the aunt of Imam Hasan al-Askari), and the miraculous circumstances surrounding his infancy.
- Lineage and Titles: An analysis of the Imam's ancestry, linking him both to the Prophet Muhammad and, through his mother Narjis Khatun, to Byzantine royalty, symbolizing a bridge between East and West.
- The Minor Occultation (Ghaibat al-Sughra): Documentation of the era of the Four Deputies (Sufara), who served as intermediaries between the hidden Imam and the community for approximately 69 years.

Volume 52: Signs of the Reappearance and the Period of Trial

This volume is perhaps the most scrutinized by modern readers as it deals with the **Malahim wa al-Fitan** (tribulations and signs). It includes:

- General Signs: Broad social and moral shifts, including the prevalence of injustice, the abandonment of prayer, and the rise of material greed.
- Specific (Certain) Signs: Technical triggers such as the rising of the Sufyani, the Yamani, the celestial cry (Saih), and the murder of the Pure Soul (Nafs al-Zakiyyah).
- The State of the Believers: The psychological and spiritual challenges faced by the Shi'a during the Major Occultation (Ghaibat al-Kubra).

Volume 53: The Reappearance, Governance, and the Return (Raj'a)

The final volume of this trilogy addresses the teleological conclusion of history:

- The Day of Reappearance: Narrations regarding the Imam's emergence in Mecca between the Rukn and the Maqam.
- The Global Governance: How the Imam will establish a world government based on justice and intellect (Aql), detailing the technological and agricultural advancements predicted for that era.
- The Doctrine of Raj'a: The Shia-specific belief in the return of a select group of the righteous and the wicked after the Mahdi's appearance.

3. Technical Analysis of Hadith Transmission (Isnad)

A critical component of Allamah Majlisi's work is his reliance on specific source chains. For instance, he frequently cites **Ghaibat Tusi** and **Ghaibat Nu'mani**. One prominent narration included in Volume 52 is from **Abu Basir**, who heard from **Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq** regarding the nature of the Imam's supporters. The technical structure of these chains follows a rigorous path of transmission (Isnad):

Example Chain: Fazl & rarr; Uthman bin Isa & rarr; Darast & rarr; Ammar bin Marwan & rarr; Abu Basir & rarr; Imam al-Sadiq.

Majlisi evaluates these chains based on the reliability (Wathaqa) of the narrators. While he intended to be exhaustive (gathering all known reports), he often provides commentary (Mir'at al-Uqul methodology) to distinguish between strong (Sahih), reliable (Muwaththaq), and weak (Da'if) traditions.

4. Comparison Matrix: Editions and Content Distribution

The following table illustrates the organizational differences between the classic and modern editions of Bihar al-Anwar regarding the Mahdi.

Topic Category	Old Edition (Vol. 13)	Modern Edition (Vol. 51-53)	Primary Sources Cited
Biography & Minor Occultation	Part 1	Volume 51	Kamal al-Din, Al-Irshad
Signs of Reappearance	Part 2	Volume 52	Ghaibat Nu'mani, Al-Kafi
Governance & Raj'a	Part 3	Volume 53	Mukhtasar al-Basa'ir
Longevity (Mu'ammarin)	Chapter 14	Volume 51, Ch. 14	Historical Chronicles

5. The Concept of Longevity (Mu'ammarin) in Volume 51

One of the most intellectually rigorous sections of Volume 51 is **Chapter 14**, which addresses the "Hadeeth of People of Longevity." Adversaries of the Mahdi doctrine often cited the biological impossibility of a human living for over a millennium as a primary objection. Majlisi counters this using a two-pronged technical approach:

Theological Argument

He posits that if God has the power to sustain life, the duration is a matter of Divine Will rather than biological necessity. He draws parallels with **Prophet Nuh (Noah)**, who preached for 950 years according to the Quran, and **Prophet Isa (Jesus)** and **Khidr**, both of whom are believed to be alive.

Empirical/Historical Argument

Majlisi provides a list of "Mu'ammarin"—historical figures known in the Arab and Persian traditions for living exceptionally long lives. By establishing a precedent in human history, he removes the "impossibility" of the Mahdi's longevity from the realm of the supernatural to the realm of the rare-but-possible. This chapter acts as a polemic defense against the rationalist critics (Mu'tazilites and others) of his time.

6. Practical Implications and Field Guide for Researchers

For scholars and students of Islamic theology, navigating Bihar al-Anwar requires a systematic methodology. The following steps are recommended for a technical study of Volumes 51-53:

1. Cross-Referencing Sources: Always identify the primary source Majlisi is quoting. If he quotes *Ghaibat Tusi*, the researcher should refer back to the original *Tusi* text to check for variations in the *Matn* (text).
2. Contextualizing Miracles: Understand that Majlisi's goal was encyclopedic. He includes traditions that emphasize the miraculous to provide a complete picture of the devotional landscape of his time.
3. Linguistic Analysis: Pay close attention to terms like "al-Qaim" (The One who Rises), "al-Hujjah" (The Proof), and "al-Muntadhar" (The Awaited). Each title carries specific jurisdictional and ontological weight.
4. Evaluating the Raj'a: Volume 53's discussion on the Return is complex. It should be studied in conjunction with the Quranic verses that Majlisi uses as evidence (e.g., Surah an-Naml, 27:83).

7. Troubleshooting Common Misconceptions

When dealing with eschatological texts, researchers often encounter "failure modes" in interpretation. Below are common errors and their scholarly solutions:

- Error: Treating all narrations in Bihar al-Anwar as Sahih (Authentic).

Solution: Recognize that Allamah Majlisi explicitly stated his goal was preservation. He left the final authentication to the Mujtahids and researchers who followed him.

- Error: Misinterpreting symbolic signs as literal physical triggers.

Solution: Apply Ta'wil (esoteric interpretation) where the literal meaning contradicts fundamental theology or established history.

- Error: Confusing the Old Edition volumes with the New Edition.

Solution: Use a concordance table to ensure citations are accurate to the version being referenced.

8. The Significance of the Mahdi in Global Jurisprudence

The technical discourse in these volumes extends beyond mere storytelling into the realm of **Practical Jurisprudence (Fiqh)**. The absence of the Imam (Occultation) necessitated the development of *Ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning). Volumes 51-53 provide the justification for the authority of the *Fuqaha* (jurists) as the general representatives of the Imam during his absence. This has profound implications for modern political philosophy in the Middle East, particularly the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

Furthermore, the wealth described in Volume 52—where the Imam says, "Come to the riches for which you forsook your relatives"—is interpreted by scholars not just as material gold, but as the unveiling of the hidden treasures of knowledge and the leveling of social hierarchies. This creates a blueprint for an egalitarian society that serves as a recurring theme in Shia social justice movements.

Synthesis of Eschatological Themes

The Promised Mahdi, as portrayed in Bihar al-Anwar Volumes 51, 52, and 53, is a figure of both historical reality and future hope. Allamah Majlisi's compilation does not simply record past traditions; it constructs a technical and theological framework that has sustained the Shia community's identity for centuries. By documenting the birth, the trials of the occultation, and the mechanics of the eventual reappearance, these volumes offer a comprehensive view of a world moving toward an ultimate state of equilibrium.

For the modern academic, these texts provide a window into the 17th-century preservation of much older oral and written traditions. They offer a rigorous defense of the Imam's longevity, a detailed roadmap of the signs preceding the end of history, and a vision of a global government characterized by the perfection of the human intellect. In the broader scope of Islamic studies, Bihar al-Anwar remains the primary data point for any serious investigation into the occultation and the messianic expectations of the Islamic world. The enduring relevance of these volumes lies in their ability to bridge the gap between the unseen (Ghaib) and the witnessed (Shahada), providing a structured, documented, and deeply researched narrative of the human journey toward justice.

Tags: [#Bihar al Anwar](#) [#Promised Mahdi](#) [#Allamah Majlisi](#) [#Shia Hadith](#) [#Eschatology](#)

