

Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts

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Khiḍr is not widely known or extensively theorized, even though he frequently appears in Muslim literature and has been embraced by several Muslim civilizations. Building on the extensive research and analysis of the enigmatic prophet Khiḍr by Patrick Franke and Talat Halman, Irfan A. Omar's *Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts* contributes to correcting this oversight. By examining Khiḍr through a "wider frame of understanding", Omar hopes to demonstrate the important intersectional connections between the Khiḍr narrative and other savior-sage type stories. This covers both symbolic and legendary viewpoints in addition to textual and literary representations (22) and to "examine Khiḍr's diverse attributes as a celestial messenger entrusted with aiding the pious and truth-seekers, irrespective of time or location, status, or faith" (27). Omar's efforts have given us a rich, widely portrayed, painstakingly detailed, composite, and colorful picture of the Khiḍr tale throughout Islamic history and genres.

The enigmatic character Khiḍr is referenced in Sūrat al-Kahf while discussing Moses's interaction with an anonymous spiritual entity (18:

60–82). The sole reference to him in the Qur'an is "a servant of God," and early scholars of the Qur'an, known as *mufasssirūn*, believed that he was Khidr, also known as "The Green One." The goal of the *mufasssirūn* was to determine how this God-servant, who seemed in the narrative to receive information straight from God, should be interpreted in the context of Islamic prophetology, especially in relation to Moses. In addition to being the topic of early *tafsīr*, Khidr also became the focus of Sufi storytelling, debate, and imagination. From the beginning, Khidr came to represent intuition, equanimity, helping the poor, safeguarding travelers, greenery in the natural world, water, and the divine *rahmah*. Scholars, Sufis, poets, and laypeople have all assigned their own variants onto these themes in their interpretations of his aims, powers, and importance, albeit these have varied depending on the occasion. In enigmatic visits to Muslims, he is said to have brought protection and heavenly insights to everyone from Ibn al-ʿArabī to a fisherman in Punjab.

By examining the Khidr narrative across various Islamic genres and settings, Omar presents a synopsis of the legacy of the Qur'anic Khidr, highlighting the growing roles he played as his story merged with other legends and showcasing a range of symbolic representations derived from important attributes Khidr is purported to have. In order to show and analyze Khidr's solid foundation in the textual sources of Islam—the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, and Sufi literature—Omar assembles a wide variety of sources (p. 2). The Qur'anic and *ḥadīth* sources that "inspired the story of Khidr to try to communicate an allegorical story about Moses" are examined in the book's opening chapter (p. 15). According to the Qur'anic narrative, Moses searches for Khidr and discovers him at "the meeting place of the two oceans." The acts of Khidr in the narrative seem to be at odds with the "ethical norms subscribed to by Moses" (p. 15). According to Omar, Khidr symbolizes the "rupture that exists between esoteric and exoteric knowledge" and divine assistance for the weak via his deeds (p. 16). The interaction between Moses and Joshua reveals that divine knowledge "may be received in the form of 'law' or revelation or as mystical, intuitive knowledge" and truth that extends beyond what can be logically discerned.

It is said of Khidr that he is green or wears a white coat; *ḥadīth* describe him sitting over a wasteland that turns green and verdant. According to

Omar, Khidr seems to have satisfied the most fundamental necessity for understanding the dynamic relationship between the divine and human realms in the cultural dimension that separates orthodox and Sufi thinkers (19). The book's second chapter addresses the worries of early Qur'anic exegetical scholars and later Sufi thinkers on Khidr's status as a prophet and, subsequently, an initiating shaykh in absentia. Omar goes into further detail on how he came to be identified as both a prophet and a "friend of God" (*wali*), building on the symbolic meaning of Khidr being associated with fertility, regeneration, fish, water, and the safety of travelers. For mystics, Khidr comes to stand for immortality, which is further developed into a metaphorical "state of being" that the mystically oriented faithful pursue.

The significance of Khidr in Sufism is the subject of the third chapter of the book. Sufi emphasis on the master-disciple connection, the initiation principle, *ma'rifah*, and "divine insight," which he is said to possess, and reveal when he appears to the pious, are all reflected in the Khidr narrative. In Sufi metaphysical cosmology, he is acknowledged as one of four spiritual poles and stands for the "initiatric principle," which states that a Sufi shaykh is always present to their students/adepts regardless of time and place, even when they are not physically there. The Uwaisiyyah Sufi order from Central Asia even regards Khidr as its founder shaykh. He was always accessible and gave *khirqah* to some Sufis, exemplifying a "Khidrian trope" of the master-disciple bond (67).

Chapter Four discusses the presence in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East of popular religious traditions that incorporate Khidr legends, temples dedicated to Khidr, and devotional rituals (Omar does not reference Africa in this discussion). Here, Omar considers the story's themes and potential ties to other legendary and pre-Islamic stories. A variety of localized holy sites, each with its own narratives of Khidr's appearances, have been built by Khidr shrines, according to certain folkloric and cultural expressions of the story. Examples of composite forms depicting him as non-Islamic figures like St. George are presented to us, and we discover that Khidr is the Muslim equivalent of local Hindu-oriented vernacular devotion for Muslims in India. According to Omar, Khidr may be seen as a Muslim means of connecting concepts and narratives that are dispersed throughout time and geography. He turns into

a representation of the centuries-long cooperative transnational, trans-cultural, and interreligious legacy (118).

The last chapter of the book offers an engaging and poignant account of Muhammad Iqbal, an Indo-Pakistani poet of the 20th century, and his poetic exchanges with Khidr. Iqbal's profound "philosophy of action" influenced how he saw Khidr, whom he saw as a representation of movement, action, and rebirth. This symbolism in Iqbal's poetry, written in pre-partition colonial South Asia, eloquently portrayed his existential and theological idea of "self," which asserted that human agency is the journey to learn, act, and seek nearness to God, but not unification with Him. Here, Khidr's association with the oppressed, the traveler, and the seeker, as well as the story of Moses and Khidr in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, which mentions the meeting of two oceans of Shari'ah and structure on the one hand, and of *ma'rifah* and transcendence on the other, create a fertile ground for Iqbal's poetic imagination and leadership as a religious intellectual during a critically difficult period for Muslims in South Asia.

The Khidr story is a multifaceted and enduring religious and spiritual resource, and Omar's *Prophet al-Khidr* is a highly valuable addition to the literature on Khidr. The book may appear somewhat brief, yet it is also evident that the Khidr narrative resonates powerfully with significant themes and issues regarding knowledge and how the supernatural makes it available to people. The book also demonstrates how the Khidr narrative endures as it presents countless ways to understand topics at the heart of the Islamic religion, from the sublime to the banal. Overall, readers will gain a deep understanding of the significance and power of the Khidr story in the Islamic tradition as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the key themes in Islam that the Khidr narrative and symbology—as well as the questions surrounding them—can shed light on from Omar's readable and insightful study.

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