

BOOK REVIEW:

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Book name: Prophet al-Khidr:
Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts,
by Irfan A. Omar
Publisher : Lexington Books, (2022)
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In this book, the Qur'anic verses 18:60–82 in Sūrat al-Kahf presents the story of Khidr and Moses as a lesson on the modalities of being and of knowing. Traditionally, the story is seen from a variety of vantage points that include historical, textual, literary, and allegorical, each of which is framed differently depending on the religio-cultural context. This book, in addition to examining the theological sources, traces the story's mythical, mystical, and popular interpretations engendered by the Qur'anic story. The author argues that the story's major contribution is its ability to communicate the importance of cultivating humility – a fundamental goal for any person of faith. Despite his importance in the Qur'an, Moses is not the main hero in this story; instead, he is used to point to an even higher truth pertaining to the spiritual dimensions of faith. This book suggests that Khidr's Qur'anic story symbolizes these truths by providing a perspective on the tension between materiality and spirituality, the zāhir (exoteric) and the bāṭin (esoteric), and human and divine forms of knowledge. Additionally, in this work, the Khidr narrative is viewed as a source of nourishment for theories that speak to the intersectionality between Islam and other religious traditions.


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Al-Khiḍr (“The Green” or “The Verdant” One) is identified with the guide and mentor of Moses described in Sūrat al-Kahf (The Cave) (Qur’an 18:60–82) as “Our exceptional servant to whom We gave compassion from Ourselves and inner knowledge from Our presence.” Exegetes interpret this as “God-given knowledge” (‘ilm laduni), which complements Moses’s knowledge of Shar‘īah. Moses traveled to Majma’ al-Baḥrayn (the junction of two seas) together with a young man (according to Islamic sources, Moses’s nephew and successor, Joshua, the son of Nun). When Moses asked his companion to bring the fish they had taken with them to eat, Joshua told him that the fish had come back to life and entered the sea. Moses took this to be a sign of the person he was looking for and, so, they returned to the place where the fish had come back to life, meeting a person who was endowed with divine mercy and knowledge. This person was al-Khiḍr, who was asked by Moses to permit him to accompany him, but al-Khiḍr told him: “you will not be able to have patience with me!” Moses insisted on the company and so they moved on together with the condition that Moses asked no questions about whatever actions he saw until the truth was revealed. They boarded a ship and al-Khiḍr started to scuttle the ship. Moses objected to him, and al-Khiḍr reproached him for breaking his promise not to ask any questions. They moved on and saw a teenage boy on the way, and al-Khiḍr abruptly killed the boy. Moses objected to al-Khiḍr again, and al-Khiḍr reproached him for the second time. They then entered a village whose residents refused to give them food, but al-Khiḍr started to reconstruct a wall in that village that was on the point of falling down. Again, Moses objected to him, and this time al-Khiḍr told him that this was a parting between them, explaining the true meaning (ta’wil) of the events: The ferrymen were poor people whom al-Khiḍr wanted to prevent from having their boat seized by an approaching king; the child would have corrupted the faith of his believing parents and would be replaced; and the wall concealed an inheritance belonging to two orphan sons of a righteous man, a “treasure which is a mercy from your Lord,” signifying the deep meaning, learned through patience, that behind apparent injustice lies mercy.

In addition to examining the theological sources, this book, which is here under review, traces the story’s mythical, mystical, and popular interpretations engendered by the Qur’anic story. The author, Irfan A. Omar, argues that the story’s major contribution is its ability to communicate the importance of cultivating humility – a fundamental goal for any person of faith. Despite his importance in the Qur’an, Moses is not



the main hero in this story; instead, he is used to point to an even higher truth pertaining to the spiritual dimensions of faith. This volume, is bookended by an Introduction and a Conclusion and divided into five chapters (The Origins and Meanings of the Khidr Story; Khidr in Muslim Sources and Traditions of Piety; Khidr in Sufism; Khidr in Folklore; and Khidr in Muḥammad Iqbāl’s Poetry), suggests that Khidr’s Qur’anic story symbolizes these truths by providing a perspective on the tension between materiality and spirituality, the *ẓāhir* (exoteric, apparent) and the *bāṭin* (esoteric, hidden), and human and divine forms of knowledge. Additionally, in this work, the Khidr narrative is viewed as a source of nourishment for theories that speak to the intersectionality between Islam and other religious traditions.

Al-Khidr is uniquely placed in the Qur’an as a figure who at once unites and divides; is a healer of souls and yet hard to pin down. His memorials are found in every corner of the globe, but he is also seen as “immortal” – someone who has not “tasted” death. He is available to help any sincere seeker, but he also “instructs” prophets of the highest rank. He attests to the idea of unity of knowability yet differentiates (or symbolizes the difference) between forms of knowledge (esoteric and exoteric). He is not above divine law, yet he performs acts that seemingly defy the law. The Qur’anic verses 18:60–82 present the story of Khidr and Moses as a lesson on the modalities of being and of knowing. Traditionally, the story is seen from a variety of vantage points that include historical, textual, literary, and allegorical, each of which is framed differently depending on the religious and cultural context.

As John Renard asserts on the back cover, Irfan A. Omar offers a fresh and insightful narrative of a timeless, ubiquitous, protean, and always engaging figure in Islamic literature and lore, drawing on a wide range of sources, from exegesis of the Qur’an’s Sura of the Cave to mystical texts elaborating on Al-Khidr’s unique spiritual credentials, and emphasizing throughout Al-Khidr’s role as an interreligious cross-cultural symbol of mediation and liberation from stereotypes - an “initiator” who continually surprises with manifestations of his stature and versatility as a paradigmatic sage and mentor.

Prophet Al-Khidr: Between the Qur’anic Text and Islamic Contexts, even though following a similar thematic order of presentation as the author’s previous work in French as *El-Khaḍir/El-Khidr: Le prophète-Sage dans la tradition musulmane* (Casablanca: La croisée des chemins, 2021, translated into French by Jean-Pierre Lafouge), is a different book and brings to readers the wisdom of the past and the life lessons drawn from Khidr’s story for making meaning in the contemporary world, a story which appeals to Muslims across geographical and temporal boundaries, and which is produced and reproduced through Qur’anic and prophetic interpretations, literature, poems, and Sufi manuals spanning through

several centuries. In this book, Khidr becomes alive through his relationship as a Sufi master to Moses as his disciple and various mystical interpretations, reaching a legendary status on accounts of his spiritual roles, popular folk tales, and scriptural narratives.

Irfan A. Omar is an associate professor of theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee where he teaches courses in Islamic and interfaith studies as well as a course on religion and nonviolence, and has published several book chapters, journal articles, and book reviews, and has edited and co-edited several books, including *Peacemaking and the Challenge of Violence in World Religions* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), and *The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (Marquette University Press, 2012). With this book, Omar shows how Khidr's story gets Islamized and becomes "Islamic", masterfully infusing Khidr's story with the complexity of an intricate relationship between a Sufi master and a disciple, a mode of knowing through intuition and revelation, the tension between shar'iah, the "law", or more appropriately the guidelines for the practice of faith, and the mystical path, tariqah, and the realization of the two intersecting worlds of the batin and the zahir as part of everyday life. Readers looking for spiritual connection and intellectual engagement to the life journey of Khidr and his transformative impacts across cultures, histories, and geographies, will benefit from this book.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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