

El-Khaḍīr/El-Khiḍr: Le Prophète-Sage dans la Tradition Musulmane by Irfan Omar, translated by Jean-Pierre Lafouge (Casablanca: Éditions La Croisée des Chemins, 2021), 220 pp., ISBN 9789920769860, €18.00.

In November 1654, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Muḥīn al-Dīn Chishtī in the city of Ajmer, as was a common practice for the members of his dynasty. The journey is captured in a painting from his royal chronicle, *The Pādshāhnāmāh*. As the emperor crosses a stream on the outskirts of the city, he encounters a mysterious figure standing on the surface of the water, clad in an emerald robe and turban, and offering a globe to the emperor. Although unnamed in the painting, this figure has been identified as *al-Khiḍr* (also rendered as *al-Khaḍīr* and *Kbizr*), literally “the Green One”, the traditional name given to Mūsá’s (Moses’) mysterious guide mentioned in the Qur’ān (Q18:60-82 ff.) and the subject of Irfan Omar’s welcome study of this important figure in Islam.

Omar, Associate Professor of Theology at Marquette University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA), approaches his subject with a thorough study of classical sources – Qur’ān, *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and extra-canonical sources such as *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, as well as contemporary scholarship, Muslim and non-Muslim – East and West. In the first chapter, he introduces the reader to the three principal areas covered in greater detail in subsequent chapters, beginning with the Qur’ānic verse regarding al-Khiḍr that serves as a spiritual lesson on divine mysteries and the limitations of human knowledge and understanding. The understanding and significance of al-Khiḍr is, however, not confined to the Qur’ānic verses but was expanded, not only by *ḥadīth* and other Islamic sources (later detailed in Chapter 2) but also by legends that were woven into them from the folklore freely shared across religions

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and cultures in the Mediterranean world, Middle East, and South Asia (detailed in Chapter 4).

The third area of investigation introduced in the book's opening chapter (and later treated in detail in Chapter 3) concerns the interpretation and significance of al-Khiḍr in the mystical traditions of Islam. Among the many different Sufi *ṭarīqabs*, al-Khiḍr is especially a prominent figure who guides seekers lacking an earthly teacher on the spiritual path and who represents the utmost depth of mystic insight accessible to humanity. Thus, as Omar explains well: "The supreme symbolism of the Moses-Khiḍr story is that divine knowledge may be received in the form of 'law' or revelation (as Moses did) or as mystical, intuitive knowledge (as was given to Khiḍr). These two forms of knowledge are complementary, and neither is above the other" (p. 29) – a significant point in today's polarized Islamic societies where law and mysticism are often viewed as diametrically opposed to one another.

From the outset, Omar is keen to show, however, that Khiḍr's story –in its fullest expression– is not purely Islamic, but "that it intersects with stories from other traditions, including the Jewish and Christian traditions", and bears elements in common with the Mesopotamian story of Gilgamesh and the widely translated *Alexander Romance*. Thus, this study will be of interest to students and scholars of ancient Near Eastern religions as well as Islam.

While Omar addresses the classical issue of al-Khiḍr's status of saint (*walī*) and/or prophet (*nabī*), he skillfully turns the discussion to al-Khiḍr as an embodiment of Divine Mercy (*rah̄mab*):

Khiḍr is a symbol of God's mercy because he is a recipient of God's knowledge; here mercy and knowledge are, in a certain sense, synonymous. God's mercy and His knowledge are meant for all servants of God, in essence for all members of God's creation. Khiḍr here becomes integral to how divine mercy (*rah̄mab*) reaches a worshipper (especially those in need) and a seeker of *qurb* (divine proximity). (p. 65)

Turning to the symbolic elements that appear in the textual sources for al-Khiḍr, the author addresses the significance of such things as green, fish, travel, water, and immortality. Omar surveys the Islamic sources well for the meaning of these elements, but his discussion might have benefitted from some additional comparative study. The

color green, for example, was similarly significant in other religious texts and artwork (ancient Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), as well as in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as are some of the other symbols associated with al-Khiḍr. Including some artistic images – especially Persian and Mughal paintings– would have greatly enhanced the textual materials.

Even without such images, it is particularly Omar’s clear exposition of the mystical and mythic representations of al-Khiḍr in Chapter Three that students and scholars of Sufism and Islamic Art will find most helpful. He begins the chapter with a succinct introduction to Sufism before elucidating al-Khiḍr’s significance for the spiritual seeker, describing him as “the initiator of those who seek the esoteric realities and those who strive on the path to someday becoming worthy of being a ‘friend’ of God ... indispensable to those who accept his discipleship and he is always ‘present’ for the disciple, without being physically there.” (pp. 89-90). This discussion is especially useful for those interpreting artistic representations of al-Khiḍr from the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal periods.

The cross-cultural and cross-confessional aspects of al-Khiḍr are addressed in Chapter Four. Here we see a fuller development of what Omar had underscored in Chapter One – i.e., that due to the timeless and universal significance of al-Khiḍr’s story as conveyed by the whole of Islamic tradition (including scriptural, hermeneutical, literary, artistic, and folkloric elements), he is often equated with similar figures such as Elijah from the Jewish tradition and the Christian St. George with whom he shares attributes and meaning. Al-Khiḍr thus becomes an archetypal figure who cuts across cultural and religious boundaries, especially in the religiously diverse contexts of the Middle East and South Asia. For Muslim purists –medieval and modern– this may be considered objectionable *bid‘ah* (“innovation”). However, for others, it serves as an essential reminder of our common spiritual yearnings despite the diversity of expressions and the common folkloric well from which various cultures drew inspiration and understanding. Indeed, as with Sufi figures such as Mu‘in al-Dīn Chishtī, whose shrine in Ajmer, India, continues to attract devotees of all traditions, al-Khiḍr might likewise be seen as a symbol of interreligious unity in a world tragically scarred by sectarian conflict. As a well-published scholar of

interfaith studies, one can see why Omar was drawn to al-Khiḍr for the subject of his latest work.

Omar completes his book with a chapter on the significance of al-Khiḍr in the poetry of Muḥammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the poet-philosopher of the Indian subcontinent. Like the generations before him, Iqbal understood al-Khiḍr as a guide, as expressed in the title of his poem “Khizr-i Rāh” (“The Guide”); but within the context of the British Raj, Iqbal believed that al-Khiḍr should be a *guide to action* rather than to the sort of spiritual resignation found among many Sufis of his day whom he considered passive disciples of their *shaykhs*.

In this volume, Irfan Omar has given us a serious, thorough, and highly readable study of the multi-faceted figure of al-Khiḍr –as one would expect from an internationally recognized scholar– a work that is at the same time inspiring and relevant in a world so greatly in need of some guidance. As he himself concludes, al-Khiḍr’s story is: “a powerful testament to the connection and vital link between religion and service to others, faith and action, and between piety, spirituality, and the concern for the marginalized.”

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