

Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts, by Irfan A. Omar. Lexington Books, 2022, Hb. 156pp., \$93.00, ISBN-13: 9781498595919.

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Al-Khiḍr (“The Green” or “The Verdant” One) is uniquely placed in the Qur’an as a figure who at once unites and divides; and 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 (Sura of the Cave) present the story of Khiḍr 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.

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 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, bookended by an Introduction and a Conclusion and divided into five chapters (The Origins and Meanings of the Khiḍr Story; Khiḍr in Muslim Sources and Traditions of Piety; Khiḍr in Sufism; Khiḍr in Folklore; and Khiḍr in Muḥammad Iqbāl’s Poetry), suggests that Khiḍr’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 Khiḍr narrative is viewed as a source of nourishment for theories that speak to the intersectionality between Islam and other religious traditions.

Keywords: Islam, sacred writings, philosophy, Sufism, mysticism

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-Khiḍr’s unique spiritual credentials, and emphasising throughout his 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-Khiḍr: 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 (*El-Khaḍir/El-Khiḍr: Le prophète-Sage dans la tradition musulmane* [Casablanca: La croisée des chemins, 2021], translated into French by Jean-Pierre Lafouge), is a different kind of book and brings to readers the wisdom of the past and the life lessons drawn from Khiḍr’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, Khiḍr 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.

With this book, Omar shows how Khiḍr’s story gets Islamized and becomes “Islamic,” masterfully infusing Khiḍr’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‘īah*, the “law,” or more appropriately the guidelines for the practice of faith, and the mystical path, *ṭarīqah*, and the realization of the two intersecting worlds of the *bāṭin* and the *ẓāhir* as part of everyday life.

This book will be of value to scholars of religion working in the field of Islamic Studies, especially to those dealing with sacred writings, philosophy, Sufism, and mysticism in general. It will also provide stimulating reading for all those who are looking for the spiritual connection and intellectual engagement to the life journey of Khiḍr and his transformative impacts across cultures, histories, and geographies that is the book’s objective.