



## RESENSI BUKU

Omar, Irfan A. *Prophet al-Khidr: Between the Quranic Text and Islamic Contexts*. Lanham: Lexington Press, 2022. xii+ 141. ISBN 978-1-4985-9591-9.

This book is a well-rounded analysis of the elusive persona of Khidr and includes examination of beliefs and symbolism associated with him. The author has collated and critically examined the scattered references to this prophetic figure in diverse Islamic writings and the legends associated with him in popular piety and folk traditions in five chapters. Khidr is regarded as a prophet-saint by most scholars on account of his appearance in the Qur'ān (without being named as such) and his role as a spiritual guide in Sufi texts and praxis. The initial two chapters comprise detailed references to Khidr in the Qur'ān, its commentaries, sayings and stories of Prophet Muhammad. Chapter II indicates that Khidr's representations are invariably symbolic as he epitomizes higher truths which can be communicated only metaphorically and figuratively. Discussions of the meanings and metaphors associated with Khidr are quite engaging as the author contends that Khidr's association with fish symbolizes his hidden knowledge and water the vastness of that knowledge. He offers insights into how the prophet-saint came to be regarded as the "Green One" on account of his having drunk the "water of life" resulting in his embodiment of regenerative qualities.

In the ensuing chapter, Omar delves on the role of Khidr in Sufism as an "otherworldly spiritual guide" for novices and accomplished Sufis and aids them in attaining divine union. He critically examines the ubiquitous presence and veneration of Khidr as a prophet-saint in Islamic cultures across the globe and in varied religious contexts in chapter four. This study of Khidr from an all-inclusive perspective is not solely useful for scholars of Islamic theology and mysticism but also for those who study inter-faith dialogue and promote peaceful co-existence of humanity.

Taking a cue from Shahab Ahmed's book (*What is Islam?*) that there are diverse understandings of Islam, Omar avoids privileging a monolithic view of the faith.<sup>1</sup> He pays particular attention to references to Khidr in mystical traditions, popular piety, and in outward and traditional aspects of religion to demonstrate how he connects Muslims through their differences. The author elaborates that Khidr is a figure who inspires border-crossing which also places him at the "intersection between Islam and other religious traditions" (pp. 3-4). The work is a marked departure from the scholarship of Western Orientalists, who were more concerned with tracing the origins of the Qur'ānic Khidr to pre-Islamic legends. Consequently, they emphasized excessively on supposed origins while ignoring the inter-religious connections and the social value that Khidr's veneration generated. The book concentrates on Khidr's links with other religions like Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, which have rendered him as a medium for bringing people and traditions closer, acting as a bridge between them. Consequently, Khidr is seen to navigate different geographical spaces and is revered in various religious traditions and cultures.

Additionally, chapter four studies how Khidr's story intersects with stories from non-Islamic faiths leading to cross-border exchanges at various stages of development resulting in metamorphosis and an amalgamated view of Khidr as a "shared saint" (p. 22). Consequently, the book along with providing an overview of the Qur'ānic Khidr, includes a discussion of the "expanding role" that he has acquired as his story became intertwined with non-Islamic beliefs and practices. The author suggests that since the nature of beliefs, praxis, and legends associated with this prophet-saint are to be found in varied cultural spaces, he should be studied through an interdisciplinary lens. Omar's analysis of the reverence of Khidr as a "shared saint" indicates how he is associated and equated with Elijah (Ilyas) and St. George. The simultaneous cult of Elijah and Khidr in Palestine, Turkey, and other countries in the region has led to both the saints sharing many shrines and attributes. For instance, Elijah has acquired Khidr's characteristic as the "Green One" and the latter has come to be regarded as the "Muslim version of Elijah." The shrines common to these saints are visited by the people from various communities. Similarly, Khidr's link with

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<sup>1</sup> Sahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

St. George is manifest when he appears as a horseman in some legends.

Another interesting aspect explored in chapter four is the sacralization of places stemming from devotion to Khidr. Omar argues that despite being immortal Khidr has hundreds of shrines dedicated to him in various parts of the world. However, since Khidr is an eternal wayfarer, his shrines are memorials, where he is said to have just appeared. Or some of the sacred spaces associated with him are tombs of people whose souls Khidr is believed to have passed through. Consequently, in several parts of Turkey, there are stations/*maqāms* of Khidr. There are *maqāms* of Khidr in Sophia and Ali Pasha Mosque, in Istanbul. Omar concludes that the cult of sharing saints, forms of worship and festivals associated with Khidr has led to peaceful co-existence and neighborly relations in parts of the Middle East and Turkey (pp. 86-90).

This chapter also highlights the varied nature of veneration of this prophet-saint in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. In India, Khidr was regarded as a kind of guardian angel by fishermen and sailors. The seafarers considered him as a “substitute” for the Hindu god of water and expected him to protect them from the dangers of sea travel as a patron saint. The fishermen in Punjab invoked his name each time they sent a boat into the sea (pp. 90-91). The author suggests that the legend of Khidr arrived in Java (Southeast Asia) with the Sufis and overtime the stories of Khidr were included in Javanese literary texts referring to him as Hilir or Kilir. One of the prominent saints of Java, Sunan Kalijaga with a Hindu past, is said to have been initiated by Khidr. To my mind the author in his eagerness to establish the significance of Khidr as a “shared saint” has packed too much information in a monograph. A detailed region-wise study of the ubiquitous presence of Khidr in varied cultures would serve the cause of peace even better in a world fractured by religious strife.

A significant departure in the book is chapter five, which analyses the usage of metaphors associated with Khidr in Muhammad Iqbal’s poetry. Most modern writings on Khidr study how Arabic and Persian poets like Rumi, Hafiz, and Ibn Arabi utilized the metaphor of Khidr to express their vision of spirituality and divinity. Omar has analyzed the ways in which the twentieth century poet, Iqbal deployed Khidr’s symbolism, especially in his work titled, *Khizr-i-rāh* (The Guide), which is meant to awaken Muslims to be leaders in the world. In the author’s observation Iqbal considered Khidr as “an immortal

guide and as a guide to immortality” (p. 104). Consequently, the poet exhorted Muslims that Khidr should be sought more as a “guide for action” than for spiritual resignation. Omar’s deep insight into the spiritual dimensions of Iqbal’s work has enabled him to show how the poet has used Khidr to tap the “unlimited potential of people to execute the divine will.” Omar demonstrates the poet’s usage of Khidr’s symbolism as the “Green One” to question stagnation and blind obedience to tradition and to convey the message of “regenerative life-giving action” (p. 105). Iqbal’s use of Khidr and his deployment of the metaphor of immortality associated with him is meant to enhance the message of optimism and inspire Muslims to reform.

The recognition in Omar’s work that Khidr is a larger-than-life figure, who cannot be contained within one tradition, makes the book relevant not just for students of Islam but also for those studying other religions and cultures.

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