

12-2023

Review of Irfan A. Omar's Prophet Al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts

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Recommended Citation

Sijapati, M. A. (2023). Irfan A. Omar. Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts. *Islamic Studies*, 62(4), 533-536. <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i4.3056>.

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Review of Irfan A. Omar's Prophet Al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur'anic Text and Islamic Contexts

Abstract

Review of Irfan A. Omar's study of al-Khiḍr, the mysterious "green" figure in the Quran's Sūrat al-Kahf discussion of Moses' encounter with an unnamed spiritual guide. Omar's book traces the story's influence on the works of early Qur'ānic scholars (mufasssīrūn) and on the beliefs and practices in Muslim cultures, arguing that Khiḍr is understudied and under-theorized.

Keywords

Islam, Quran, Khidr, prophets, mysticism

Disciplines

Islamic Studies | Religion

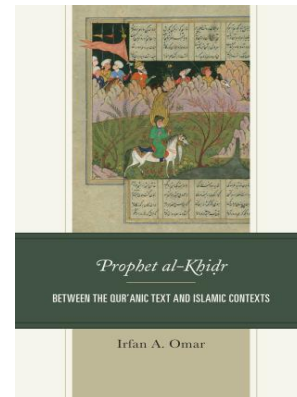
Book Reviews

Irfan A. Omar. *Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur’anic Text and Islamic Contexts*. London: Lexington Books, 2022. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-4985-9591-9. Price: \$US 95.

Book review doi: <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i4.3056>

Despite the frequent appearance of Khiḍr in Muslim literature and his story’s influence on some beliefs and practices in Muslim cultures, Khiḍr is understudied and under-theorized. *Prophet al-Khiḍr: Between the Qur’anic Text and Islamic Contexts* by Irfan A. Omar contributes to a growing correction to this, building as it does upon full-length studies of Khiḍr by Patrick Franke and Talat Halman, with a meticulously researched and broadly cast examination of the mysterious prophet. In *Prophet al-Khiḍr*, Omar aims to examine Khiḍr from a “wider frame of understanding,” one that “includes textual and literary representations as well as symbolic and legendary perspectives . . . to show key intersectional ties between the Khiḍr story and other savior-sage type legends” (p. 22) and to “explore Khiḍr’s various qualities as a divine emissary who is tasked with helping the faithful and seekers of truth and peace regardless of time or place, rank or religion.” (p. 27) What we have as a result of Omar’s efforts is a rich, broadly cast yet meticulously detailed, composite, and colourful portrait of the Khiḍr story across Islamic history and genres.

Khiḍr is the mysterious figure mentioned in Sūrat al-Kahf’s discussion of Moses’ encounter with an unnamed spiritual person (18: 60–82). He is referred to in the sūrah only as “a servant of God” and early Qur’ānic scholars (*mufassirūn*) deemed this figure to be Khiḍr, “The Green One.” The *mufassirūn* sought to ascertain how this servant of God, who in the story seemed to receive knowledge directly from God, should be understood within the prophetology of Islam, particularly vis-à-vis Moses. Khiḍr not only became the subject of early *tafsīr* but also of Sufi discourse and imagination, and folklore. From the outset, Khiḍr became symbolic of intuitive knowledge, the levelling of ranks, assistance to those in need, protection of travellers, verdancy in nature, water, and



the *rahmah* of God. But depending on the context, scholars, Sufis, poets, and laypersons have ascribed their own variations onto these themes in their understanding of his powers, intentions, and significance. In mysterious visitations to Muslims ranging from Ibn al-‘Arabī to a fisherman in Punjab, he is understood to bring divine insights and protection (through divine *rahmah*). Through detailed consideration of the Khidr story in varying Islamic genres and contexts, Omar is successful in providing an “overview of the legacy of the quranic Khidr; the expanding roles he assumed as his story became intertwined with other legends; and [in] showcas[ing] a variety of symbolic representations emanating from key characteristics Khidr is said to possess” (p. 3).

Omar marshals an array of sources to demonstrate and examine Khidr’s firm rooting in the textual sources of Islam, namely, the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, and Sufi literature (p. 2). The book’s first chapter examines the Qur’ānic and *ḥadīth* sources that “inspired the story of Khidr to try to communicate an allegorical story about Moses” (p. 15). The Qur’ānic story involves Moses seeking out Khidr and finding him at “the meeting place of the two oceans” (*majma‘ al-baḥrayn*). In the story, Khidr’s actions stand in apparent contrast to the “ethical norms subscribed to by Moses” (p. 15). Through his actions, Omar suggests, Khidr is symbolic of divine help for the vulnerable and the “rupture that exists between esoteric and exoteric knowledge” (p. 16). Divine knowledge, the Moses-Khidr encounter teaches, “may be received in the form of ‘law’ or revelation” (as it was for Moses) “or as mystical, intuitive knowledge” and truth beyond the bounds of the rationally discernible (as was given to Khidr) (p. 17). Khidr is described as green or with a white cloak, and *ḥadīth* tells of him “sitting over a barren land” and it becoming verdant and green. “Between the orthodox and Sufi scholars there is the cultural dimension where,” Omar holds, “Khidr seemed to have filled the deepest need for seeing the dynamic link between the divine and human spheres” (p. 19).

Following introductory discussions in chapter one, the book’s second chapter discusses the concerns of early Qur’ānic exegetical scholars and later Sufi thinkers surrounding Khidr’s status as a prophet and, later, an initiatory shaykh in absentia. Detailing the establishment of his dual identity as a prophet and a “friend of God” (*walī*), Omar expands upon the symbolic associations of Khidr with regeneration, fecundity, fish, water, and the protection of travellers. Khidr comes to represent immortality, and for mystics, this is expanded into a symbolic “state of being” (p. 47) sought by the mystically inclined faithful.

Khidr's significance in Sufism is the focus of the book's third chapter. The Khidr story resonates with Sufi emphases on the master-disciple relationship, the principle of initiation, *ma'rifah*, and "divine insight," which he is understood to possess and reveal when he appears to the devout. He is recognized as a spiritual pole (one of four) in Sufi metaphysical cosmology, and he represents the "initiatic principle" by which a Sufi shaykh, though absent in form, is ever present to their students/adepts across time and space (this also relates to beliefs in Khidr's immortality, which was a matter of significant complexity). The Central Asian Uwaisiyyah Sufi order even considers Khidr its founding shaykh. Eternally available, some Sufis received *khirqah* from him, illustrative of what Omar refers to as a "Khidrian trope" (p. 64) of the master-disciple relationship.

Khidr stories and Khidr-focused shrines and devotional practices appear throughout popular religion in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Omar does not include Africa in the folklore chapter). This is the subject of the book's fourth chapter. Omar examines how the story and its motifs may also have connections with pre-Islamic narratives and other legends. Select folkloric and cultural manifestations of the Khidr story reveal that Khidr shrines have created a range of localized sacred spaces, each with unique tales of Khidr's appearances. We get examples of visual representations in composite forms conflating him with non-Islamic figures such as St. George and learn that for Muslims in India, Khidr replaces local Hindu-oriented vernacular devotion. Khidr, Omar writes, can be "viewed as Muslim bridge between ideas and stories spread across time and space. He becomes a symbol of the collaborative transnational, transcultural, and interreligious legacy spanning centuries" (p. 118).

The book's final chapter is a compelling and moving treatment of the twentieth-century Indo-Pakistani poet Muhammad Iqbal's engagement with Khidr through poetry. Iqbal's powerful "philosophy of action" shaped his view of Khidr, whom he understood as a symbol of action, movement, and renewal. In Iqbal's time (pre-partition colonial South Asia), this symbology in his poetry poignantly expressed his theological and existential concept of "self" (Urdu, *khudī*), which claimed agency for the human as the journey to ever learn, act, and seek proximity to God but not unity with Him. Here, the two forms of knowledge evoked in the Khidr story with Moses in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and its mention of the meeting of two oceans—of *sharī'ah* and structure on the one hand, and of *ma'rifah* and transcendence on the other, of the *zāhir* and *bāṭin*—and Khidr's affiliation with the downtrodden, the traveller, and the seeker, provide fertile ground for Iqbal's poetic imagination and

leadership as a religious intellectual at a critically challenging time for Muslims in South Asia.

Omar's *Prophet al-Khiḍr* is a highly valuable addition to the literature on Khiḍr because of Omar's insightful and nuanced discussions, careful and thorough research, robust compilation of references and footnotes, and the synthetic overview, the book provides a multivalent and longstanding religio-spiritual resource that is the Khiḍr story. It is a somewhat short book: at 139 pages total, 30 pages are footnotes and 16 the works-cited and index. Nonetheless, it makes clear that the Khiḍr story is deeply resonant with important themes and questions surrounding knowledge and how the divine makes it accessible to humans. The book also makes clear that the Khiḍr story remains alive because it offers infinite possibilities for the interpretation of themes central to Islamic piety ranging from the lofty to the mundane. Overall, readers can take from Omar's highly engaging and nuanced study an increased appreciation for the power and influence of the Khiḍr story in Islamic tradition as well as a broader view of central themes in Islam that the Khiḍr narrative and symbology—and questions surrounding them—can illuminate.

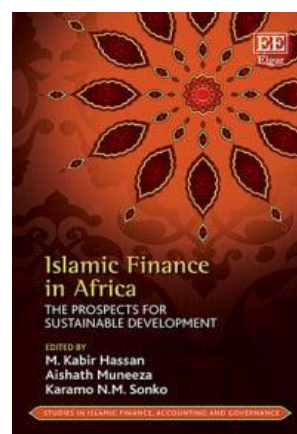
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M. Kabir Hassan, Aishath Muneeza, and Karamo N. M. Sonko, eds. *Islamic Finance in Africa: The Prospects for Sustainable Development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022. Pp. 358. Hardcover. ISBN: 978 1 80220 989 1. Price: Not listed.

Book review doi: <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i4.3057>

Discussions on Islamic economics and finance started to emerge in the Indian subcontinent during the 1940s when the struggle for independence from colonial powers was at its peak. Islamic finance started taking practical shape in the Middle East in the 1970s. In Southeast Asian countries, Islamic finance made great strides from the 1990s onwards. It is the African continent that always remained on the back burner despite the world's first Islamic Cooperative Bank (Mit Ghamr) getting established in Egypt in 1963 and the first Islamic



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