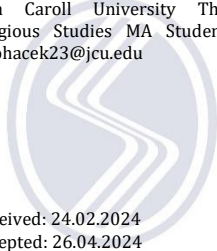


An Expansive View of the Influence of Khidr's Divine Knowledge for Humanity

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1. Introduction

In the Qur'an, verses 18:60-82, the story of Moses and a mysterious man with special divine knowledge, known as Khidr, relays insight into ways of knowing and acting in order to glorify God. This story recalls Moses meeting Khidr who is supposed to accompany Moses on a journey and teach Moses, who thinks he has come to know everything about this world. On this venture, Khidr confuses Moses with his strange actions of sabotaging their boat, killing a child, and restoring a crumbling wall without pay. Khidr tells Moses they must part because Moses did not trust Khidr's actions but reveals the reasons behind those actions. Khidr explains that he damaged the boat so that a king would not seize it, and the boat's poor owners could keep it. He murdered the child in order to save the parents from the pain and stress of having a wicked child. Finally, Khidr restored the wall in order for some orphans to find the treasure beneath the rubble that others would have found first. In his book, Dr. Irfan Omar, professor of Islamic Studies at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, explores an array of perspectives regarding this story including the theological, historical, cross-cultural, mythical, and allegorical. He argues that the various symbolic understandings of Khidr make his legacy trans-historical, as several cultures have appropriated the characteristics of Khidr, creating a version of him in their own communities that emanates God's love and mercy. Additionally, Omar makes an argument for the limitations of the human condition through his depictions of two types of divine knowledge, originating from Law and Godself.

2. General Remarks

2.1. The "Immortality" and "Greenery" of Khidr

First, Omar presents how the symbols of Khidr have permeated throughout history and several cultures which have allowed for the manifestation of a Khidr-like character inside and outside of Islam. Khidr symbolizes immortality in the Moses story because he appears to be an "eternal wanderer" arriving when people are in need of a fresh perspective in their faith lives (Omar, 2022: 82). This sense of immortality is not literal, however. No figure in Islam can live forever, so this theme of immortality is figurative. Instead, Khidr represents the wisdom that is associated with living an extremely long life. As Khidr "wanders" through space and time, he leaves a trans-historical legacy that both shows the mercy

and love of God in the Islamic faith and how this mercy has reached other communities. Another symbol that emerges from Khidr includes the color green, as he is often depicted wearing this color. Khidr represents life and vitality with his repository of divine knowledge. When Khidr imparts his reasons for his mysterious actions, he shares the “freshness of knowledge” with Moses, who is lacking in his own understanding of the power of continual learning (Omar, 2022: 43). Khidr’s abundance of knowledge indicates the need to keep reaching for God, and the attainment of more knowledge about God reflects a sense of vitality, bringing out God’s goodness and mercy.

These images of immortality and greenery have spread to other religious communities, displaying how Khidr has “served as a bridge between religions, cultures, and communities for many centuries” (Omar, 2022: 20). Omar demonstrates the significance of this trans-historical legacy by showing how God’s mercy and love has followed the Khidr-figure from Islam to other communities. For instance, the figure of Khidr resonates with Baal of Canaanite religion, the storm god, as both figures reflect the liveliness of nature which draws out the notion of divine knowledge. Along this chain of legendary figures, St. George from the Christian tradition also resounds with Khidr, as both figures are commonly depicted as horsemen (Omar, 2022: 87). The illustration of horsemen threads back to Khidr’s immortality as a “eternal wanderer.” The rise of Khidr across cultures exhibits the lasting legacy of how his divine knowledge allows for the reflection of God’s love and mercy. Not only is God’s love alive in Islam, but it is also touching the lives of other communities as seen through Khidr.

2.2. Types of divine knowledge relating to the human experience

Considering this divine knowledge, another theme that Omar demonstrates through Khidr is the limitations of humanity related to their access of divine knowledge. In the story from the Qur’an, Moses and Khidr represent two types of knowledge. Moses signifies exoteric knowledge, or the Law. Then, Khidr symbolizes esoteric knowledge, or divine instruction (Omar, 2022: 17). The passage in the Qur’an does not share how Khidr gained his divine knowledge, so the reader is left to assume that he could have gained it directly from God or from his worldly experiences. The two kinds of knowledge reveal both the limitations of the human condition and humanity’s potential for something more. On the one hand, Khidr’s arrival in response to Moses’ confidence that he has learned everything there is to know about this life indicates the limitations of the human experience. By Khidr emerging into Moses’ life, Moses comes to understand that he deceived himself since his own knowledge of the Law is actually still insufficient.

Even though Omar acknowledges humanity’s limitations, his presentation of the two kinds of knowledge also uplifts the potential of the human condition. Moses’s claim that he knows enough in this world also reveals the joy that he in fact does not. Adding to the Law, Khidr’s divine instruction provides Moses with a renewed desire for understanding. When Moses does not comprehend why Khidr is making questionable decisions on their journey, this displays how Moses still has more to learn about life and God. The most striking and extreme example of the mystery surrounding Khidr’s divine instruction is when he does “things that seemingly defy law” like killing the child (Omar, 2022: 88). Moses undergoes a process of confusion and clarity after Khidr acts strangely from the divine instruction and then enlightens Moses at the end of the story with a justification of his actions. The use of Khidr’s divine knowledge demonstrates how even when a believer thinks he or she knows the Law fully, that believer should still strive to learn more in order to draw nearer to God.

3. Critiques and a New Perspective

3.1. Elijah’s resonance with Khidr

This book portrays these two themes of trans-cultural and trans-religious understanding and human limitation effectively and eloquently, but the book does not include a religious comparison of Khidr to Elijah in Judaism. Since Elijah is an elevated prophet in Judaism who resonates with Khidr’s wisdom, it

was expected that Elijah would also be mentioned in this book. Elijah relates to Khidr such as being a wanderer, referring to Elijah's way of reaching people through his prophecies. Elijah also mirrors the messenger and mentor roles that Khidr holds, since Elijah was a spiritual mentor to Elisha as Khidr was to Moses. Finally, as prophet, Elijah holds divine instruction that he shares with Israel, just as Khidr shares his esoteric, divine knowledge with Moses. Including Elijah in the comparisons with St. George and Baal would have made the argument more well-rounded since Omar reflects on several religious traditions.

3.2. A new light on sufism

When considering Khidr's application to Sufism, Omar suggests that Khidr refreshes typical understandings of Sufi practice. While Sufism does uplift the notion of self-annihilation and ridding oneself of earthly desires, Omar adds a new touch to this view. While Khidr is very confident in his divine knowledge, he does not keep it to himself. He shares it with Moses, and, in a way, others, if we return to the theme of his trans-historical influence. With this acknowledgement, Omar brings to light a new lens for Sufism that promotes engaging in the world and sharing that knowledge. Khidr does not remain in isolation with his divine instruction but instead seeks to enlighten Moses and others so that they too can gain this greater understanding of God (Omar, 2022: 57). By interacting with the world in this way, Khidr reveals how the self can be annihilated by striving to know God through worldly experience rather than only asceticism, adding an enlightened perspective to the commonplace view of an inward lifestyle in Sufism. By bringing together the symbols of Khidr and the implications of his divine instruction, Omar presents Khidr as a figure to refresh Sufi thinking for encouraging greater nearness toward God. Omar has crafted an illuminating read that brings a lively perspective to the field through Khidr's influence on believers in an inward sense and across the world in an outward sense.

4. Conclusion

Overall, Omar's illustration of Khidr draws out theological, cross-cultural, mythical, and allegorical interpretations that present how Khidr is a trans-historical and trans-cultural figure. Through the imagery and metaphors of vitality that surround Khidr, Omar demonstrates how Khidr's legacy has spread across cultures and religious traditions. As other communities have developed a figure with similar, transcendent characteristics to Khidr, this exhibits how Khidr's influence evokes God's love within and outside of Islam. Additionally, through the presentation of the two types of knowledge that are present in creation, exoteric (Law) and esoteric (divine instruction), Omar illuminates the human condition. Humans may possess limitations when attempting to understand God, but this obstruction does not have to be a disadvantage for humans. Instead, they can continue to seek beyond the Law towards a deeper understanding of God, through esoteric knowledge like Khidr. Despite not comparing Khidr to Elijah, Omar shares an enlightening perspective on Khidr, binding together imagery of life, the mystery of divine knowledge, and even a renewed view on Sufism. The knowledge that humanity gains in this life can imitate the strive to know God like Khidr, revealing the significance of gaining worldly experience in this life in addition to the beauty of asceticism in Sufism. Omar's portrayal of Khidr offers a hopeful view of humanity for readers, as they can reach for God just as Khidr shows Moses.

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