

1 The Sage of Inner Knowledge

Al-Khidr in Qur'an, Hadith, and Tafsir¹

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Al-Khidr: Saint and senex – An immortality symbol

In Muslim cultures al-Khidr is a widely known legendary immortal *senex* figure,² a wise old man, and a teacher of Moses. In this chapter, I will specifically explore how the Qur'an presents, and the Prophet Muhammad explained, al-Khidr and how the polymath classical encyclopaedic Qur'an commentator al-Tabari commented on the Qur'anic narrative and will touch briefly on how those explanations have contributed to al-Khidr's general hagiographic image, especially among Sufis.

Al-Khidr in Muslim culture

Shared in Qur'an, hadith, literature, poetry, and folklore and among Sufis, al-Khidr is understood as the immortal sage and green man who was the companion (*sahib*) and teacher of Moses. In Muslim tradition, al-Khidr is like Elijah: an immortal helper who comes to help believers in times of danger and distress, and a teacher who transmits esoteric inner knowledge.³ Al-Khidr is a figure that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have related to Enoch, Elijah, and Jesus, as well as St. George.⁴ Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and Reza Shah Kazemi have revived and expanded on al-Shahrastani's (1086–1153) description of al-Khidr as the Buddha to help develop an Islamic understanding of Buddhism (Yusuf 2010). According to al-Shahrastani, both al-Khidr and the Buddha are figures of enlightenment, eternity, and multiple appearances (Lawrence 1976: 43, 113–114). In these comparative contexts, al-Khidr provides spiritual affinities among diverse traditions and exemplifies the pluralism of Muslim culture.

According to the Qur'an (18.60–82) and numerous hadith, al-Khidr is the exceptional “servant from among God's servants” to whom God has imparted a special “mercy” (*rahma*) and “inner knowledge” (*'ilm al-ladunni*) (18.65). He transmits a “deeper meaning” (*ta'wil*) (18.78, 82) which can only be learned by practising patience (*sabr*). According to a number of authentic hadith, it was at God's command that Moses sought out, found, and asked al-Khidr for permission to “follow” him (18.66, 70). After al-Khidr made Moses promise not to question what he would see until al-Khidr permitted (18.70), they set out together on a journey of testing and training. The story of their journey raises questions about destiny and death.

The Prophet Muhammad even cited al-Khidr's killing of a child as evidence to support his principle that no child was to be slain in battle.

“Die before you die”: Death and immortality – A phenomenological reading

As the story raises questions of destiny and death, so it raises questions of death and immortality. Al-Khidr is usually portrayed in art and Sufi narratives as an old man with a white beard, in a green cloak, sometimes with his fish, even with Alexander the Great mounted on a horse in the distance behind him. He is the old wise man, the *senex*: a sage and a saint, in this case an immortal. By introducing an immortal figure and 12 motifs of death and immortality, readers of the Qur'an are called to reflect with each motif on their questions and feelings about death and hopes for immortality. Among Sufis fond of the hadith, “Die before you die,” the story of Moses' journey with al-Khidr offers an opportunity to practise this at least as an act of inner reflection upon one's own death, a classic spiritual practice in many traditions. In two of Moses' three tests, he objects to the dangers that al-Khidr's acts inflict on their victims. For instance, he challenges al-Khidr's right to inflict death in the case of the child. And he learns, as we witness with him, that all three events involve questions of death, survival, and immortality. As we discussed in the last chapter, the story presents the reader with 12 motifs of death, survival, and immortality, symbols and actions that involve death, overcoming death in this world, or immortality.⁵

- 1 Al-Khidr is an immortal.⁶
- 2 Moses and his companion (*fata'*) Joshua experience hunger from their journey. (18.62)
- 3 Their fish, their day's one meal, slips away and swims off [at the water of eternal life]. (18.63)
- 4 Al-Khidr damages the boat and Moses complains of the danger that they might drown. (18.71)
- 5 Al-Khidr kills a child. (18.74)
- 6 The two travellers are refused hospitality, food and drink. (18.77)
- 7 Al-Khidr builds a wall, which I argue is an immortality symbol manifested in architecture or masonry. (18.77)
- 8 Al-Khidr discloses the threat of war. (18.79)
- 9 Progeny: another child will replace the child al-Khidr killed. (18.81)
- 10 Under the wall a deceased saintly father (18.82)
- 11 has left for his two orphaned sons (18.82)
- 12 their inheritance, a buried treasure. (18.82)

This reading of the story of al-Khidr and Moses emphasising motifs of death and immortality clarifies the theodicy of the tale by elucidating the ultimate theodic challenge, the problem of death.

Al-Khidr in Islamic genres and contexts

The story of al-Khidr is narrated in Sura al-Kahf, a chapter of the Qur'an that is broadcast from mosques on Friday mornings leading up to the Friday congregational prayers (Massignon 1997: 91). Sura al-Kahf includes the stories of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, Alexander the Great (*Dhu'l-Qarnayn* 18:83–96), and the story of al-Khidr, the *rajul* (man), and *sahib* (companion) presented at the literal physical centre of the text of the Qur'an⁷ and discussed at length in the hadith. The primary genres and contexts for the story of al-Khidr are the Quran, the hadith, narratives of the prophets (*qisas al-anbiya'*), the Alexander Romance, folklore, and Qur'an commentary (*tafsir*).

Al-Khidr and the master-disciple relationship in Sufism

Sufis often appeal to this story as an analogy for the relationship of the spiritual master and student. As a story of a journey in which Moses, in his own words, “follows” al-Khidr (18:66, 70), Sufis have given this story great value as a tool for describing and validating the master-disciple relationship (*irada*).⁸ To many Sufis, the story of al-Khidr and Moses serves as a synecdoche of the master-disciple relationship and therefore needs to be studied to understand a prominent model of the process of spiritual guidance among Muslims. Understanding how this story shapes and legitimates the master-disciple relationship and models that relationship gives us keys to understanding what many consider as the heart of Sufism. Hadith accounts and Sufi *tafsir* both inform and reflect the conduct of the master-disciple relationship in Sufism. While al-Khidr is taken as a model of the spiritual master, the student in the story, Moses, appears to fail at his three tests. If anything, Moses serves as a counter-example of the perfect disciple in the sense that ‘Ali is proverbially reported to have said, “I learned refinement (*adab*) from those who did not have it.”

Al-Khidr and the Alexander Romance

Moses' guide al-Khidr is an immortal who, as narrated in the popular Persian *Iskandarnama* (Alexander Romance) literature, one day witnessed his cooked fish swim away after it had touched a body of water, the legendary *Ab Hayyat*, the water of eternal life. He became immortal when he drank some of the water. The Qur'an and hadith continue the Alexander Romance motif of the revived fish. In the Qur'anic narration, the fish “tunneled away miraculously (tunnel: *sarab*),” (18:61) or as the hadith relates, God shaped the water into an arch and the fish swam away.

The broad outline of the Alexander Romance⁹ is very briefly summarised with allusions to the story's events in Qur'an 18:83–96. This style of narration suggests

that the audience of the Qur'an was at least familiar with the story. As narrated in the popular Alexander Romance, al-Khidr drank from the water of eternal life and became an immortal. This is a common understanding as reflected in hadith, Islamic folklore, literature, and poetry. For many Muslims, al-Khidr is a popular folk hero and an immortal saint whose story charms and intrigues with its reflections on destiny and death, immortality and justice, and mercy and meaning.

Al-Khidr, theodicy, and predestination

Muslim scholars have often thought about how the story engages questions of destiny or predestination (*qadar*). Some Western scholars who have written on the story discuss the story as a theodicy tale, one that alludes to the mysteries of God's justice. Muslims instead have addressed the story's theme of theodicy under the rubric of "destiny" or "predestination" (*qadar*). The story addresses the question of justice at the heart of theodicy by considering the *qadar* of each of the events that troubled Moses. With Moses, we vicariously experience his outrage at al-Khidr's acts which appear to be unjust. Ultimately for the Sufi commentators, al-Khidr's clear discernment (*firasa*) of *qadar* in a person's life as a force of destiny and pre-determination is a unique precocity of al-Khidr. The Prophet Muhammad alludes to this when he says that one may not slay a child in battle,¹⁰ unless one has the knowledge al-Khidr had when he killed the boy, implying that one probably does not possess that inner knowledge. But as Sufis appeal to the story of al-Khidr to legitimate Sufism, they are able, thereby, to subtly imply that a Shaykh might also share the knowledge of *qadar*. Ibn al 'Arabi felt that the three acts committed by al-Khidr each reflected moments in Moses' life: the boat echoes baby Moses; the slaying of the child mirrors Moses' slaying of the Egyptian; and Khidr gratuitously building the wall mirrors Moses helping the daughters of Jethro/Shu'ayb at the well (Ibn 'Arabi 1975: 103–118). This interpretation suggests al-Khidr's unique discernment (*firasa*) – or the Shaykh's – about what is in a person's heart and in their destiny. That Moses, possessor of exoteric Torah, failed to accurately assess al-Khidr's actions may be taken to mean allegorically that the Shaykh's innate enculturation (like al-Khidr's knowledge) may surpass the boundaries set in non-esoteric readings of scripture (like Moses' approach). In his history of the world, at-Tabari summarises the relationship of Moses and al-Khidr by paraphrasing al-Khidr's words to Moses:

In other words, You [Moses] know only what is obvious about justice, but you have not yet encompassed the esoteric knowledge that I know.¹¹

The story itself has many dimensions. It introduces an enigmatic person who guides Moses on a journey. The hadith record a lively and, at times, contested discussion of the identities of the characters in the narrative. At an existential level, the story can evoke strong emotion. It features 12 motifs of death and immortality. It raises questions of the definition of justice and mercy. A tension in the tale arises because, on the one hand, the narrator is clear that al-Khidr has received

God's mercy (*rahma* 18.65) as a gift, and, on the other hand, al-Khidr's actions seem unjust and cruel. Al-Khidr is said to be wise, but the actions do not seem to Moses – and maybe to many readers – to be wise. Moses' concepts of justice clash with al-Khidr's decisions to damage property, kill a child, and reward unkind and indifferent people with his service of free labour. Al-Khidr damages a boat belonging to people who have been just and kind and rebuilds a damaged wall of people who have been unjust and unkind. And the one qualification Moses needs, namely to practise patience (*sabr*), and the one vow Moses fails to keep is to refrain from speaking out before al-Khidr has given an indication that he may do so. One suspects that the question of timing is directly related to the teacher's discernment of the pedagogical process and the training of his student. Perhaps al-Khidr is, in words Rumi used in another context, to refer to the Shaykh, cooking the chickpea to give it flavour.¹²

A hidden treasure: The value of studying al-Khidr

The story of al-Khidr and Moses appears in the exact middle of the text of the Qur'an.¹³ The scriptural account is supplemented in the hadith, thematically organised collections of Muhammad's words and deeds. As primary sources, both Qur'an and hadith inform Quranic commentary (*tafsir*). Hagiographic literature and Sufi discourses (*malfuz*) presuppose the value of all three: Qur'an, hadith, and *tafsir*. The *locus classicus* of the narrative of al-Khidr and Moses appears in the Qur'an in Sura al-Kahf, the Chapter of the Cave (18.60–82). It is a text alluding to knowledge outside of texts, gained through companionship (*suhba*) with a mentor.

The protagonist of this narrative is diversely understood. Is al-Khidr a Prophet (*Nabi*), a Saint (*Wali*), or even both? As a guide to Moses, al-Khidr informs and complements the Qur'an's concept of prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and contributes to the general concept of sainthood (*wilaya/walaya*). A study of the figure of al-Khidr promises to shed light on sainthood in both its inner aspect as intimacy with God (*walaya*) and its outer manifestation as a spiritual authority (*wilaya*).¹⁴ An understanding of the story of al-Khidr and Moses promises to contribute to an understanding of the sources of authority for the roles of teachers and guides. Furthermore, al-Khidr's special stature is evidenced by a unique fact of the Qur'an: among the narratives of Moses – the single most frequently cited Prophet in the Qur'an – one finds only two figures who seem to surpass Moses: Muhammad and al-Khidr.¹⁵ Moses serves as a forerunner to Muhammad and a student of al-Khidr. Finally, al-Khidr appears very early in the sequence of hadith collected by Bukhari. Bukhari, one of the earliest, and perhaps most illustrious collectors of hadith among Sunni Muslims, not only uses the story of al-Khidr and Moses as a quoted verse but also retells, interprets, and applies it as a moral precedent and guideline for the proper attitude towards acquiring knowledge.¹⁶ In fact, the story of al-Khidr is the first Quranic narrative to which Bukhari devotes such a full treatment.

What Bukhari initiates, others follow and develop. The role of al-Khidr informs relationships between teacher (*ustadh*) and student (*talib*)¹⁷ and between spiritual guide (*murshid*) and disciple (*murid*). Across a wide range of Islamic discourses

and cultures, al-Khidr stands as a model for relationships of spiritual guidance, esoteric explanations of spiritual realities, and the continuous expectation of intervening compassion and deliverance from distress, danger, and death.

In particular, the relationship between Moses and al-Khidr is presented within a quest for knowledge that characterises Sufism; it establishes a relationship of *paideia* shared between the guide and the disciple (Brown 1983).¹⁸ This journey or quest then comes to be institutionalised in the Sufi Orders (*tariqa/turuq*); it authorises, even as it impels, a seeker (*murid*) to pursue the spiritual journey under the auspices, guidance, and training (*tarbiyya*) of a *shaykh* (master), *murshid* or *pir* (spiritual guide). The authors of the Sufi *tafsirs* have framed the significance of the narrative of al-Khidr and Moses in the Qur'an and hadith in terms of the training (*tarbiyya*) of the soul (*nafs*) through the practice of proper conduct (*adab*) and association (*suhba*) with the master. The Sufi exegetes accent the way companionship (*suhba*) and right conduct (*adab*) between master and disciple facilitate the training of the soul and help to develop the states of knowledge and experience necessary for the disciple.

Tracing the steps: The narrative of al-Khidr and Moses in Qur'an and hadith

The Prophet Moses seeks out, finds, and follows an “[exceptional] servant from among [God’s] servants,” with the intention of learning the *rushd* (guidance or spiritual maturity) which this special servant has learned. The servant is not named in the text of the Qur'an itself. It is the hadith collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim which first record the name al-Khadir.¹⁹ The hadith report that when the Prophet Muhammad was asked for the name of the companion of Moses (*Sahib Musa*), he answered, “Al-Khadir,” the Green One.

We will examine how the two prominent hadith collectors Bukhari and Muslim apply this narrative. I have divided the combined narrative from the Khidr hadith in Bukhari and Muslim into the following four stages:

- 1 Moses' quest for the meeting of the two seas (*majma' al-bahrain*) (18:60–64)
- 2 The meeting with al-Khidr and their agreement (18:65–70)
- 3 The journey of companionship (18:71–77)
- 4 Al-Khidr's explanations and al-Khidr and Moses' separation (18:78–82)

Al-Khidr in hadith

How does al-Khidr figure in the canonical collections of sound hadith (*sahih*)? The two “sound” collections of Bukhari and Muslim offer similar and, in some cases, identical elaborations of the narrative. Their transmissions of the narrative of al-Khidr and Moses reflect contiguous material which has been transmitted in tandem since the second century A.H./eighth century C.E.

The hadith provide a larger frame for this narrative with additional background, commentary, and legal implications. Bukhari includes accounts about al-Khidr in

three chapters within his “Book of Knowledge,”²⁰ one in his “Book of Wages,”²¹ and another in his “Book of Stipulations (*shurut*).”²² In addition to accounts supplied as legal precedents, he offers three accounts in the “Book of Accounts of the Prophets”²³ and three in the “Book of Qur’an Commentary.”²⁴

It is worth noting that al-Khidr appears relatively early in Bukhari’s editorial sequence. Bukhari discusses al-Khidr in his 74th and 78th entries among 652 entries spanning nine volumes. In these initial entries, which he includes in the “Book of Knowledge,” Bukhari takes the narrative as a precedent for seeking knowledge with diligence and humility. Indeed, in the hadith collection of Bukhari, the first Qur’anic figure whose story is narrated and explicated is the companion of Moses, al-Khidr. In fact, these hadiths are Bukhari’s first retellings of any Qur’anic narrative.

In the three hadith accounts collected in the “Book of Knowledge,” Bukhari emphasises two themes: persevering in the search for knowledge and recognizing that all knowledge belongs to God. The title of chapter (*bab*) 17, the text of which exclusively comprises a narrative from Ibn ‘Abbas, reads:

What has been said about the journey of Moses (*dhahab Moses*) to the sea and the Statement of God: “[Moses said (to al-Khidr)], ‘May I follow you that I may learn of the guidance (*rushd*) which you have learned (18.66).’”

The text of chapter 20 of Bukhari’s “Book of Knowledge” follows the wording of chapter 17 very closely. But Bukhari’s title statement here draws a parallel between Moses’s journey to find al-Khidr and the journey (*rihla*) to collect hadith reports. The title reads:

Going in search of knowledge (*khuruj fi talab al-’ilm*) and Jabir ibn ‘Abdallah journeyed (*rahala*) for a month to get a single hadith from ‘Abdallah ibn Unais.

The theme of journeying for knowledge is culled from the narrative, but the hadith does not suggest the possibility that such journeying might entail the companionship with, and training under, a teacher. This perspective appears in Sufi *tafsirs* where the journey between Moses and al-Khidr is interpreted as a symbol of a particular type of learning, training (*ta’dib*) which complements and surpasses instruction (*ta’lim*). The analogy encourages Sufis to arduously travel in search of knowledge as Moses strove to achieve knowledge from al-Khidr. Bukhari’s title to chapter 45 of the “Book of Knowledge” focuses on the need not to credit oneself with the achievement of knowledge:

When a learned scholar (*’alim*) is asked “Who is the most learned (*a’lam*)”, then he should attribute (*yakilu*) the knowledge to God.²⁵

This point of attributing knowledge to Allah is raised in four of Bukhari’s narrations: “So Allah admonished him (Moses) for he did not ascribe (*yuraddu*) all knowledge to Allah.”²⁶

In another legal application derived from the story of al-Khidr, Muslim also transmits hadith in which the Prophet refers to the example of al-Khidr's slaying of the youth in order to reinforce his point that during battle, children of the enemy may not be killed. Yazid ibn Hurmuz narrates that Ibn 'Abbas answered the queries of Najda b. 'Amir al-Haruri by saying:

The Messenger of God (S.) used not to kill the children, so you should not kill them unless you could know what Khadir had known about the child he killed.²⁷

To support his identifications of al-Khidr and Moses, Ibn 'Abbas cites testimony from Ubay ibn Ka'b, one of Muhammad's companions (*sahaba*) otherwise famous for his transmission of commentary based on Jewish sources (*tafsir isra'iliyyat*). In addition, Ibn 'Abbas supplies this frame narrative for the Qur'anic narrative:

Yes, I heard God's Messenger saying, "While Moses was sitting in the company of some Israelites, a man came and asked him, 'Do you know anyone who is more learned than you?' Moses replied, 'No.' So God sent divine inspiration (*wahy*) to Moses, 'Yes, our slave Khadir.'" Moses asked how to meet him. So the fish was made for him as a sign and he was told that when the fish was lost, he should return and there he would meet him. So Moses went looking for the sign of the fish in the sea. Moses' servant said to Moses, "Did you see when we came to the rock, I forgot the fish and it was only Satan who made me forget to tell you about it." Moses said, "That was what we were seeking after." Both of them returned, following their footsteps and found Khadir. And their other events are what Allah narrates in His Book.²⁸

Bukhari next narrates another transmission from Ubay ibn Ka'b providing additional descriptive details, motifs, and symbols. The fish has been explicitly given as a sign of the place Moses is to reach.²⁹ In the conversation between Moses and al-Khidr, Moses identifies himself as the Moses of the Children of Israel.³⁰ Al-Khidr alludes to, but does not identify, two complementary types of knowledge with which he and Moses have each been entrusted.³¹ The fish is described as passing through an archway of water made by God.³² Moses' fatigue occurs at the very moment he passes the place where two seas meet.³³ Al-Khidr is described as a man (*rajul*),³⁴ suggesting that he is a human being, not an angel or apparition.

The exchange of greetings between al-Khidr and Moses echoes the question of identity which Ibn 'Abbas tries to resolve. After receiving Moses' greeting, al-Khidr asks Moses how people greet each other in Moses' land. When Moses responds, "I am Moses," he seems to be avoiding al-Khidr's request. The apparent avoidance conforms to the pattern Moses will show in his journey with al-Khidr of being unable to obey his mentor with patience. Whatever rapport may eventually develop between them, it is not evident at this point; nor is a sense of rapport conveyed through their conversation. This exchange about greetings and identity also corresponds to the disputes to which Ibn 'Abbas alludes as he champions the

identification of al-Khidr as the name of Moses' companion and asserts that this Moses is the same Moses whose story is narrated throughout the Qur'an, the Moses of the Torah from the Children of Israel.

The young servant (*fata'*) is identified as Joshua; the water through which the fish vanishes is described as assuming the shape of an arch; the travellers' fatigue sets in exactly when they pass the place where two seas meet.³⁵ The description which follows describes al-Khidr as one covered in a garment (*musaja' bi-thawb*). In Sufi hagiographies, the motif of this garment reappears as the mantle of initiation (*khirqā*) (Addas 1993: 143, 145; Chittick 1998: 395). After they greet, al-Khidr asks about Moses's greeting, but then announces that each of them, al-Khidr and Moses, possess their own distinctive and complementary domain of divine knowledge. It is as if their different forms of greeting symbolise these distinctive modes of knowledge.

And there was a man covered in a garment. Moses offered the greeting of peace (*fa-sallama*) and he replied, "How in your land do you offer greetings of peace?" Moses said, "I am Moses." He said, "Moses of the Children of Israel?" He [Moses] said, "I have come to you that you might teach me what you have learned of guidance (*rushd*)." He [al-Khidr] said, "O Moses, I have some of the knowledge from the knowledge of Allah which Allah has taught me and not taught you; and you have some of the knowledge of the knowledge of Allah which He has taught you and not taught me." Moses asked, "May I follow you?" He said, "But you will not be able to bear with me patiently, for how can you be patient with what your knowledge cannot comprehend?"³⁶

Al-Khidr tells Moses that each of them possesses a part of God's knowledge. The hadith accounts quoted here make it clear that their types of knowledge are distinct. Thus al-Khidr stresses that Moses might not be able to follow him. Implicit in these accounts is the answer to the question of chronology: Did Moses travel with al-Khidr before or after he had received the Torah? Al-Khidr's reference to his and Moses' complementary knowledge is suggestive. But more conclusive is this statement attributed in a different report to al-Khidr: "Is it not sufficient for you that the Torah is in your hands and the Divine Inspiration comes to you, O Moses."³⁷ Both statements establish a chronology in which Moses had already received the Torah when he embarked on the journey with al-Khidr.

Given Joshua's disappearance and the extent of death motifs in the story, it is possible to symbolically interpret the place where the two seas meet as between life and death and that Moses' journey with al-Khidr is a transition into death. In addition to the explicit reference to the Torah, Moses' engagement with al-Khidr reflects his incorporation of the Torah; his perspectives on the journey are informed by his knowledge of the Torah. In this sense, the narrative presents al-Khidr's God-given knowledge (*'ilm al-laduni*) and apprehension of true meaning (*ta'wil*) in relation to Moses' knowledge of Torah as revealed scripture (*tanzil*). From these factors, one might speculate that Moses and al-Khidr symbolize the relationship

between orality and writing in the transmission of knowledge.³⁸ Even though the Torah involves the dynamics of oral transmission, it is a written knowledge to an extent that does not apply to al-Khidr's knowledge. The idea presented in the above hadith report that Moses received Torah before journeying with al-Khidr implies a priority of al-Khidr's knowledge (*'ilm al-laduni, ta'wil*) as an extension or completion of prophetic knowledge (*nubuwwa*). It is, after all, the case that God had indicated that al-Khidr is wiser than Moses. This is part of the reason God sent Moses to seek al-Khidr.

Other hadith provide further explanatory details supplementing the Quranic narrative. The boat's crewmen recognize al-Khidr and charge no fare (*bi-ghayri nawl*). Then a sparrow appears dipping its beak into the water, an act which al-Khidr explains to Moses as a symbolic measure of their composite knowledge:

Khidr said to Moses, "O Moses, My knowledge and your knowledge have not decreased Allah's knowledge except as much as this sparrow has decreased the water of the sea with its beak."

Al-Khidr's first statement compared the knowledge of al-Khidr as complementary to the knowledge of Moses; this second statement now measures both of their "seas" of knowledge as drops compared to God's ocean of knowledge. This incident of the sparrow continues the lesson of the admonition Moses had received earlier about crediting all knowledge to God.³⁹ It is also a comparison of the scope of prophetic and esoteric knowledge compared to all divine knowledge.

In this hadith, as well as in a hadith Bukhari includes in his "Book of Stipulations"⁴⁰ (*Kitab ash-Shurut*), the Prophet Muhammad highlights a pattern in Moses' answers: Moses moves from giving the excuse of forgetfulness, to then setting up, and finally intentionally imposing upon himself his own condition of separation from al-Khidr:

Ubay ibn Ka'b narrated: God's Messenger said, "Moses, the Messenger of God," and then he narrated the whole story about him. Khidr said to Moses, "Did I not tell you would not be able to be patient with me?" (18.72) [1] Moses then violated the agreement for the first time because of *forgetfulness*. [2] Then Moses *promised* that if he asked Khidr about anything, the latter [Khidr] would have the *right to desert* him. Moses abided by that condition and on the third occasion [3] he *intentionally asked* Khidr and *caused that condition to be applied*.⁴¹

The commentators will further develop this aspect of the story and its implications in (*shar'ia*) concerning the legal limits, stipulations, or conditions of responsibility (*shart/shurut*). Moses' excuse relates to the principle that if a person is not aware of his obligations, he is not accountable for their violation. Indeed, in his "Book of Oaths," Bukhari transmits an account from the Prophet's wife 'A'isha in which Moses' excuse, "Do not blame me for forgetting..." serves as a commentary on the Qur'anic verse, "God will not call you to account for that which is unintentional in your oaths."⁴²

Bukhari uses Moses' statement about the justice of taking wages for rebuilding the wall as a precedent in his "Book of Wages" (*Kitab al-Ijar*). The chapter is titled: "It is permissible to employ someone to repair a wall which is about to collapse."⁴³ The hadith reads:

Allah's Apostle said, "Both of them [Moses and Al-Khidr] proceeded on till they reached a wall which was about to fall." Sa'd said, "[Al-Khidr pointed] with his hands [towards the wall] and then raised his hands and the wall became straightened up." Ya'la said, "I think Sa'd said, 'He (Khidr) passed his hand over it and it was straightened up.'" [Moses said to him], "if you had wanted, you could have taken wages for it." Sa'd said, "Wages with which to buy food."

Compared to Bukhari's contexts for this episode in his other accounts as one of Moses' failures, this application seems ironic. After all, in the story of Moses and al-Khidr, al-Khidr goes unrewarded. Yet Bukhari's application stresses the two-tiered framework which is at the heart of the narrative of Moses and his companion. In al-Khidr's words to Moses: "I have some of the knowledge of Allah which he has taught me and which you do not know, while you have some of the knowledge of Allah which he has taught you which I do not know." While the hadith reports accept the positive value of this precedent for the stipulations of oaths and the acceptability of wages, Sufi commentators expose the limits of these perspectives and explore a further horizon of virtue.

Why is this figure called the "green man." It is in hadith that we discover why the Qur'an's elect servant earned the nickname (*laqab*) of al-Khidr, the "Green":

Abu Huraira narrated: "Al-Khadir was so named because when he sat over a barren white land, it would turn green with vegetation."⁴⁴

Muhammad's evaluation of Moses' quest

How did the Prophet Muhammad interpret Moses' companionship (*suhba*) with al-Khidr? One of the most noteworthy features of this hadith is the Prophet Muhammad's summary evaluation of Moses' performance. Among a number of the Prophet's observations, the following two are especially poignant:

- 1 "We would have wished that Moses had been patient; then Allah would have narrated more of their story."⁴⁵
- 2 "May Allah bless Moses with Mercy; had he been patient we would have been told more about their case."⁴⁶

This final judgement by Muhammad implicitly lauds al-Khidr's knowledge at the same time that it underscores Moses' lack of patience. On both accounts, the prophetic dictum opens a way for reflection on the meaning of al-Khidr's role.

As we have discussed, in a related interpretation, the Prophet also distinguished Moses' role in bringing the journey to a close: "He [Moses] asked al-Khidr and caused the condition [of Moses' excuse] to be applied."⁴⁷

Throughout this work, we will see how the narrative's motifs, events, and exegetical nuances are interpreted in different contexts. In the following integrated synopsis of the accounts in the Qur'an and hadith, I have, as indicated before, divided the narrative into four sections and given each section a title to highlight the thematic developments and accents on al-Khidr's role which the hadith contribute.

The quest for the meeting of the two seas

- Once when Moses and the Children of Israel were gathered and Moses preached to them, a man stood up afterwards and asked Moses if anyone in the world was more learned than he.⁴⁸
- When Moses said, "No." Allah told Moses by inspiration (*wahy*) that there exists one of His precious servants to whom He has given deeply of His Mercy and Compassion (*rahma min 'indana*) and of inner Knowledge and Wisdom (*'allamanahu min ladunna* [*'ilm laduni*]).⁴⁹
- Allah admonished Moses for not attributing all knowledge to him⁵⁰ and inspired (*awha* ') Moses to look for "our servant Khadir"⁵¹ at the place where the two seas meet (*majma' al-bahrain*) and to bring along in a basket a fish. Allah explained the sign by which Moses will know he has reached the place where the two seas meet: he will lose and forget the fish.⁵²
- In the opening of the narrative in the Qur'an, Moses resolved to journey on a quest⁵³ to find this precious servant of Allah so as to learn of his gifts of wisdom (*'ilm al-ladunni*), compassion (*rahma min 'indana*), and guidance (*rushd*) from Allah.⁵⁴
- As Moses journeyed along the seashore, he proclaimed to his disciple Joshua (identified in the hadith) his intention not to cease searching until finding the place where the two seas meet, even if it takes ages.⁵⁵ They continued on their journey until they grew weary. As they rested on a rock, their fish slipped out of the basket, slid off the rock, touched the water, sprang to life, and swam away as if plunging through a tunnel. Allah stopped the flow of the water and it became an arch. When Muhammad described this, he drew an arch with his hands.⁵⁶ But even though Joshua had witnessed the fish tunnelling through the arch of water, he forgot to tell Moses.
- They travelled through the night. Joshua said nothing until the next day when Moses suggested they eat their meal. Then Joshua informed Moses that the fish got away and that Satan made him forget to disclose that when the fish slipped off the rock and touched the water, it sprang to life and took off miraculously. Identifying this miracle of the fish and their forgetfulness of it as the sign of the place where the two seas meet – the place to which Allah had sent him – Moses commanded that they retrace their steps to this place where they had lost and forgotten their fish.

The meeting with al-Khidr and the contract of following

- So they retraced their steps until they came to the rock at the place where the two seas meet. And they found there one of God's servants, one God had selected to directly receive His merciful compassion and inner knowledge (18.64–65), al-Khidr, the Green One. When Moses approached him, he was lying covered with a garment.⁵⁷ Moses greeted him and he asked, "How do people greet each other in your land?"⁵⁸ Moses said, "I am Moses." Al-Khidr asked, "Moses of the Children of Israel?" Moses asked, "May I follow you so that you may teach me spiritual growth and give me some of the guidance you have been taught?"⁵⁹
- Al-Khidr replied, "But, truly, you will not be able to be patient with me. And how can you be patient when you will be faced with what is beyond what you can understand?"⁶⁰
- Al-Khidr said, "O Moses, I have some of the knowledge of Allah which he has given me which you do not know, and you also have some of the knowledge of Allah which he has given you which I do not know."⁶¹
- Moses expressed his determination to fulfil his mission and follow al-Khidr: "You will find me patient, God Willing, and I will not disobey your commands."⁶² Al-Khidr finally agreed, but set one condition: "If you wish to follow me, you must not ask anything until I mention it to you first."⁶³

The journey of the companions

- So they travelled on along the seashore until they met the crew of a boat who recognized al-Khidr and let him and Moses ride for free.⁶⁴ Then a sparrow came and sat on the edge of the boat and dipped its beak into the sea. Al-Khidr said to Moses, "My knowledge and your knowledge, compared to the knowledge of Allah, is like what this sparrow has removed from the sea."⁶⁵ As they were riding, al-Khidr took out a woodworking tool, broke the boat, and plugged the holes. Moses protested and asked, "Are you breaking this boat to drown its people? You have done a strange thing!"⁶⁶
- Al-Khidr answered, "Did I not tell you that you would not be able to find enough patience to bear with me?"⁶⁷
- Moses said, "Please do not blame me for forgetting, or for causing difficulties."⁶⁸ The Prophet Muhammad underscored the fact that the first excuse given by Moses was that he had forgotten.⁶⁹
- They continued further until they came upon a young boy playing among other boys. Al-Khidr stepped forward and, as if plucking a piece of fruit, killed him by pulling his head off. And Moses challenged, "Have you killed a pure soul who has not killed anyone? You have done a terrible thing."⁷⁰
- Al-Khidr then reminded Moses, "Didn't I tell you that you could not patiently bear with me?" And Moses said, "If I ask you about anything after this don't keep company with me. Now you have my excuse." The Prophet Muhammad commented that in this way Moses indicated that he would understand and accept al-Khidr's decision to part ways with him.⁷¹

- Next they journeyed until they came to the people of a village. They asked for food and drink, but the people of the village refused to grant these favours. Al-Khidr then found in the village a wall which was on the verge of falling down. So al-Khidr passed his hand upwards over the wall and it straightened back up. Moses protested, observing that these people had denied them food and refused them as guests, and yet al-Khidr had chosen to rebuild their wall, even though, had he desired, he could have taken a reward for this service. Moses was thinking that they could use the wages for food. But al-Khidr was not acting for the sake of his own reward.⁷²

The separation and the Prophet's critique of Moses

- At this point, al-Khidr announced to Moses, "This is the parting between me and you. However, I will reveal to you the real meaning (*ta'wil*) of what you were not able to bear with patience."⁷³ The Prophet added, "We wish that Moses could have remained patient by virtue of which Allah might have told us more about their story."⁷⁴
- Al-Khidr then began to show Moses the ultimate meaning (*ta'wil*) surrounding the events which Moses had not understood: "As for the boat, it belonged to poor people (*masakin*) who worked on the sea and I wanted to make it useless because coming from behind was a king seizing every boat by force."⁷⁵
- Al-Khidr explained that in the case of the youth, his parents were believers (*mu'minayn*)⁷⁶ and that Allah and al-Khidr together feared that the child would cause them grief by his stubborn rebellion, disbelief, and ingratitude. In fact, he was likely to corrupt his parents, who, in their love for him, might have been lured into a life of evil. So their Lord and al-Khidr desired to give them in exchange a child better in purity and closer in Mercy, perhaps a girl.⁷⁷
- Finally al-Khidr explained that the wall belonged to two young orphans in the town. Beneath their wall lay a treasure left for the two orphans by their father, a righteous person of virtue (*Abuhuma Salih*).⁷⁸ Al-Khidr told Moses, "Your Lord desired that these young orphans should reach their strength and maturity so that they might bring out their treasure – a treasure of Mercy from their Lord. And I did not do these acts on my own authority. This is the real meaning (*ta'wil*) of what you could not bear with patience."⁷⁹

Even in advance of the classical and Sufi commentators, these *hadith* reports detail the Qur'anic idea that al-Khidr is invested with knowledge beyond that of Moses. The Qur'an as well alludes to this special inner knowledge through the motifs of seeking guidance (*rushd*) and al-Khidr's question to Moses concerning Moses's ability to understand what his knowledge does not encompass. But the *hadith* reports underscore how vast that knowledge is without articulating how it might be learned. For that development, we must look to the Sufi commentaries.

The classical *tafsir* of at-Tabari

Next we outline at-Tabari's exegesis in his classical and encyclopaedic *tafsir* along with some of the material he incorporates in his *Ta'rikh (History)*.⁸⁰

At-Tabari affirms that the Moses of this narrative is the same Moses, the son of 'Imran narrated in the Torah and the Qur'an. The two seas are the "Roman Sea in the west" (Mediterranean) and the Persian Gulf in the east.⁸¹ An alternative account identifies the meeting of the two seas in North Africa at Tanja (Tangier).⁸² The length of time Moses announces he is willing to travel (*huqub*) is assessed as an epoch (*dahr*).⁸³ At-Tabari transmits different interpretations of the fish's disappearance through the archway of water: the fish circled; the fish went through the ground; the water was frozen; and the water was hard as a rock. The reason for the journeying by Moses and his servant is the knowledge given to al-Khidr from the presence of God.⁸⁴ When not referring to al-Khidr by name, at-Tabari calls him the "sage" (*al-'alim*).

In his *Ta'rikh*, at-Tabari identifies al-Khidr's time as the reign of the Persian mythical king Afridhun (Fredon) (Tabari 1991: 1). Other sources that at-Tabari transmits in his *Ta'rikh* associate al-Khidr with Dhu'l-Qarnayn, who is said in these traditions to have arbitrated for Abraham at Beersheba.⁸⁵ While serving over the vanguard of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, al-Khidr found the water of life, drank it, and became immortal. This understanding of the identity of Dhu'l-Qarnayn varies from the popular association with Alexander the Great. Another report says al-Khidr was the son of one of Abraham's communities who joined Abraham in his emigration from Babylon. Al-Khidr's full name was Baliya ibn Malikan,⁸⁶ the son of the biblical Peleg, five generations descended from Noah and 12 generations before Abraham.⁸⁷

Al-Khidr, at-Tabari asserts, was a Persian, Elijah an Israelite. The two are said to have met during annual festivals. At-Tabari repeats and repudiates Ibn Ishaq's remarkable identification of al-Khadir as Jeremiah.⁸⁸ At-Tabari reiterates the hadith accounts which begin with Moses claiming to be the most learned of God's creatures. He also transmits the other motifs introduced in the hadith which inform the narration: the exchange of greetings; the bird pecking water; Moses' pattern of forgetting; and Muhammad's wish for more of the story to have been known had Moses only shown greater patience. At-Tabari transmits Ibn 'Abbas' report that Moses and his people had settled in Egypt after their victory over Pharaoh. In Ibn 'Abbas' account, God sends Gabriel to correct Moses for claiming to have the most knowledge. In this account, when Moses returns to the rock, he finds the fish, follows it by poking with his staff, and discovers that whatever the fish touches dries up and turns to rock. The fish leads Moses to an island in the sea. Another account from Ibn 'Abbas describes Moses, not proudly claiming to be the wisest, but rather in conversation with God, asking a series of questions which culminates in "Which of your servants is the wisest?" Another transmission places Moses' commission to find al-Khidr at the time and place of the splitting of the sea.⁸⁹

At-Tabari on inner knowledge and teaching authority

In certain passages, at-Tabari focuses on knowledge (*ilm*) and points to the authority of the teacher in ways that compare with the treatment of these themes in Sufi commentaries. Discussing the term “divinely-disclosed knowledge” (*ilm al ladunni*), a term derived from “And we taught him from Ourselves knowledge” (*‘allamnahu min ladunna ‘ilm*), at-Tabari reports that this was the cause of the journey (*safar*) of Moses and the servant and concludes: “...He [God] guided him to a sage (*‘alim*) who would increase his knowledge of himself to himself.”⁹⁰ In this sense, al-Khidr’s gift exemplifies what might be identified as a particularly Sufi mode of knowing, following the *hadith*, “Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord.”⁹¹

At-Tabari defines al-Khidr’s knowledge as “knowledge of the unseen” (*ilm al-ghayb*) which goes deeper than the explicit terms of justice. At-Tabari paraphrases al-Khidr’s statement, “How can you be patient about what your understanding does not encompass?” (18.68) with a gloss that defines the terms of the distinctions between the levels of understanding of Moses and al-Khidr. In at-Tabari’s paraphrase, al-Khidr’s reply takes on an almost Sufi resonance: “That is, you only know of the visible outer (*zahir*) part of justice and you cannot encompass what I know of the unseen (*ilm al-ghayb*).”⁹²

At one point, at-Tabari touches on the theme of submitting to and following the teacher:

He [Moses] said, “You will find me if God wills, patient. (18.69a) concerning what I see from you and even if it contradicts what seems to be correct.” “And I will not disobey you in anything” (18.69b) He said, “I will go to the end of what you command me to do, even if it does not agree with my passions ... Certainly I [al-Khidr] have taught you and the work that I do is in the realm of the unseen knowledge which you cannot encompass.”⁹³

In his comments on al-Khidr’s caution, “You will not be able to have patience with me...” (18:67; 23214), at-Tabari explains:

This is [because]: I am working according to the inner [aspect of] knowledge (*bi-batin al-‘ilm*) [which] God taught me and the only kind of knowledge which you have [which] is only of the outer aspects of affairs. So that is why you cannot be patient regarding what you see of actions. [At-Tabari remarks this is] just as we mentioned from information (*khabar*) from Ibn ‘Abbas before, that he [al-Khidr] was a man who worked in the [realm of] the unseen (*al-ghayb*) who knew that.⁹⁴

One of the subtle issues in the story of al-Khidr and Moses involves the question of Moses’ excuses to al-Khidr. At-Tabari reports that some of the interpreters (*ahl al-ta’wil*) differ on this point. According to some of the interpreters, when Moses requested al-Khidr, “Do not blame me for forgetting...” (18.73), he was

challenging al-Khidr. But at-Tabari concludes, alluding to sound hadith, that Moses was admitting he had broken his promise not to ask.⁹⁵ Continuing his examination of Moses's *adab* (refined behaviour) with al-Khidr, at-Tabari evaluates Moses' plea, "Do not make my affair difficult." (18.73b): "It would have been more worthy of Moses that he forgot."⁹⁶ Finally, when Moses proposes to al-Khidr that al-Khidr cease keeping company with him if he raises questions again, this is because of Moses' shame. At-Tabari recounts that the Prophet would follow this verse by saying, "Moses was ashamed before God."⁹⁷ This suggests that Moses was aware of the deficiency of his *adab* towards al-Khidr.

At-Tabari correlates the hidden dimension of the unseen with the "inner [aspect of] knowledge" (*bi-batin al-'ilm*) which he calls "knowledge of the unseen" (*'ilm al-ghayb*). At-Tabari develops this within the context of al-Khidr's warning about Moses' impatience:

How will you be patient O Moses, over what you see of my actions which you do not see in their correct aspects, although they are established correctly for me. You did however judge with the greatest degree of correctness, though also err regarding the outer form (*bi'l-zahir*) by the degree of knowledge you had. But my actions happen without an outer proof (*dalil zahir*) recognizable to your eyes, because it is established with reasons disclosed later, not immediately. You cannot know [this] by being told because it is unseen. Your knowledge does not encompass the knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*).⁹⁸

In his concluding statements, at-Tabari touches on themes which are more fully developed in the Sufi commentaries. Unlike the Sufi commentaries, at-Tabari has taken the story's imposition of the limits to Moses' knowledge as a lesson that Moses should not wish for swift punishment. In a move in some ways more radical than any which the Sufi exegetes make, at-Tabari suggests that even God's enemies are doing God's work. This ambiguity of agency and the deeper, hidden logic of the postponement of divine punishment suggests the reversal of the obvious meaning, implicit in the allegorical readings of the Sufi commentators. Most significantly, at-Tabari identifies the lessons in this story about God's punishment as a lesson which only the saints (*awliya'*) would understand. While at-Tabari's reference to saints does not place him in the direct realm of Sufi commentary, his introduction of an exclusive and elusive "hermeneutics of the saints" paves the way for the Sufi commentators to progress on that exegetical path which is lined with signs seen only by the saints.

And His statement: "That is the ultimate interpretation (*ta'wil*) of what you could not bear with patience." (18.82) That is to say, "This is what I mentioned to you of the causes on account of which I performed the deeds for which you criticised me." "*Ta'wil*" means what returns to itself and returns of the deeds [about] which you could not leave off questioning me concerning [these deeds] and you refused to be patient about it."⁹⁹

At-Tabari reminds us that *ta'wil* involves returning to the source. *Ta'wil* is “what returns to itself, and returns of the deeds...” It traces a path from manifestation to origins. At that point of return, a “meaning contrary to what seem[s] evidently right” is disclosed. And what powers that return is patience. At-Tabari identifies *ta'wil* as a kind of “hermeneutics of the saints.”

In summary, at-Tabari enriches the narrative deeply at the literal level and initiates some interpretations at the analogical level (*ishara*). However, his preliminary exegesis of symbolic allusion (*ishara*) is implicit in the hadith, and his horizons of interpretation only suggest the radically inner and existential orientation of Sufi *tafsirs*.

It is left to the Sufi commentators to adopt this story as a paradigm and precedent for the master-disciple relationship (*irada, suhba*), for the training it produces, and also for the special forms of knowledge and experience which are imparted on the journey of moral training (*safar al-ta'dib*).

We have seen the outline of al-Khidr provided by Qur'an, hadith, and at-Tabari's encyclopaedic commentary as a saint (*wali*), sage (*a'lim*), and *senex* who teaches beyond the confines of words but instead through the medium of patience (*sabr*). The story of al-Khidr and Moses provides a model of pedagogy and training (*ta'dib*) that surpasses ordinary instruction (*ta'lim*). It is a pathway of relationship and companionship (*suhba*) transcending the limits of textuality. In the heart of al-Khidr and his story is a message of divine mercy and inner knowledge imparted by God that has moved countless people throughout the ages.

Notes

- 1 A longer version of this chapter appears as chapter three in Hugh Talat Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qur'anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013).
- 2 *Senex* refers to a wise and elderly person.
- 3 This “inner knowing” (*'ilm al-laduni*) is lived through the practice of patience, forbearance, and endurance (*sabr*). The word *sabr* appears seven times in this 23-line narrative. It is obviously the key to learning from al-Khidr, and it is for not practising *sabr* that Moses fails, though he learns the deep meaning of the three events. The association of Elijah with “the still small voice” (1 Kg. 19:12) suggests an intimacy to his revelation that corresponds to his transmission of esoteric wisdom.
- 4 See Sayyed Hosein Nasr, “Hermes in the Islamic Tradition”; Hugh Talat Halman, s.v. “Idris,” in Phyllis Jestice, *An Encyclopedia of Holy Persons*, Vol 2.
- 5 The ideas of immortality symbols and death anxiety are developed in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
- 6 As at-Tabari recounts, “...al-Khidr reached the River of Life and drank its waters unawares ... so he became immortal and remains alive until now.” Quote from *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. 3: *The Children of Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2–3.
- 7 The 16th *juz'* (section) falls at 18:75, the midpoint of the text.
- 8 *Irada* ([spiritual] aspiration) is the term most Sufis use for the relationship between the *murid* (aspirant, a word from the same root as *irada*) and the teacher, or guide (*murshid*).
- 9 This story compares with the recension presented in Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London: Penguin, 1991).

- 10 Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Al-Jami'us-Sahih* (trans. 'Abdul Hamid Siddiqui) (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1973), Chapter 750, sec. 4456–4461.
- 11 Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir at-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk*. Translated as *The History of Prophets and Kings*. Vol 3. "The Children of Israel" (trans. William M. Brinner) (Albany: S.U.N.Y., 1991), 14.
- 12 Mevlana Jalal ud-Din Rumi, *Masnavi* III, 4160–4168, 4197–4208, quoted in Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 132–133.
- 13 Since the length of chapters in the Qur'an varies, this story comes at the middle of the text. The 16th section (*juz'*) of the 30 sections of the Qur'an begins at Qur'an 18:75, in the midst of the Khidr narrative.
- 14 This distinction identifying *walaya* as the inner aspect of sainthood and *wilaya* as the outer aspect is taken from Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). Cornell argues for this distinction based on literary and socio-historical usage in the Maghrib which is applicable throughout the Muslim world. This distinction complements that of al-Qushayri (986–1072). Al-Qushayri articulates two meanings of sainthood – one passive and one active – by interpreting the word *wali* in terms of two grammatical paradigms: (1) *fa'yl* – the *passive* meaning that God takes possession (*yatawalla*) of the saint's affairs and (2) *fa'il* – an *active* sense of a saint as one who undertakes worship and observance. For al-Qushayri, the true saint fulfils both meanings: God takes possession of the affairs, and the saint actively worships and obeys God; al-Qushayri, *Principles of Sufism* (Berkeley: Mizan, 1990), 268–269.
- 15 Moses' narratives encompass 535 verses representing 8% of the content of the Qur'an. By comparison, Ibrahim appears in 4% and Jesus in 2%. For the case that the narratives of Musa are aimed at providing a specific model for the challenges to Muhammad in the development of the *umma* in its transition before the triumphal return to Mecca, see Hugh Talat Halman, "We Have Found Muhammad, a Prophet like Moses": *How Comparisons between Muhammad and Moses in the Qur'an and Sira Are Guided by the Hermeneutics of Genre* (Duke University, Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1993).
- 16 Muhammad ibn Isma'il b. al-Mughirah al-Bukhari (194–256), *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. I, Book 3, Chapters 17 (no. 74), 20 (no. 78), 45 (no. 124), ed. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Medina: Islamic University, 1976), 401.
- 17 Rosenthal, Franz, *The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 6, sec. 19.
- 18 Brown explains that the *paideia* of the Christian saints focused on establishing virtue in a person through face-to-face contact. For a comprehensive discussion of the evolution of this concept, see Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939).
- 19 This form is a variant spelling related directly to the name al-Khidr. The accounts in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* vowel the *laqab* (nickname) as "Khadir." This shade of meaning connotes one who makes green. Later traditions and popular usage use the vowel "al-Khidr" and sometimes even the simple form "Khidr." Also, since the letter *dad* in Arabic is in vernacular speech ('*ammiya*) pronounced as a "z," one often hears (and sees) al-Khazir or al-Khizr. In Farsi, the name is pronounced *Khezr* ("Kheh-zr").
- 20 *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. I, Book 3, Chapter 17, Number 74; Ch. 20, no. 78; Ch. 45, no. 124.
- 21 *Ibid.*, III. 36. 7. 467.
- 22 *Ibid.*, III. 50. 12. 888.
- 23 *Ibid.*, IV. 55. 23. 612–614.
- 24 *Ibid.*, VI. 60. 249–251.
- 25 *Ibid.*, I. 3. 45. 124.
- 26 *Ibid.*, I. 3. 45. 124; IV. 55. 23. 613; VI. 60. 249, 250.
- 27 Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Al-Jami'us-Sahih* (trans. 'Abdul Hamid Siddiqui) (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1973), Chapter 750, sec. 4456–4461.

- 28 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 612. The content is almost identical to the entries which follow (no. 613, 614) and to the entries in Bukhari's "Book of Knowledge" (Vol. I, Book 3, Chapters 17 [no. 74], 20 [no. 78], 45 [124]).
- 29 *Ibid.*, I. 3. 74; I. 3. 20. 78; IV. 55. 23. 612.
- 30 *Ibid.*, I.3. 45. 124; IV. 55. 23. 613; VI. 60. 249, 250, 251.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*, IV. 55. 23. 613; cf. VI. 60. 249.
- 33 *Ibid.*, VI. 60. 251.
- 34 *Ibid.*, I. 3. 45. 124.
- 35 *Ibid.*, IV, 55, 23, 613.
- 36 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613.
- 37 *Ibid.*, VI. 60. 250.
- 38 On orality and literacy, see Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Oral and the Written*. Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 39 *Ibid.*, I. 3. 45. 124; IV. 55. 23. 613; VI. 60. 249, 250.
- 40 *Ibid.*, III. 50. 12. 888.
- 41 *Ibid.*, III, 50. 12. 888 (cf. Bukhari I. 3. 124; VI. 60. 249; VI. 60. 251).
- 42 *Ibid.*, VIII. 78. 656; Qur'an 2:225.
- 43 *Sahih Bukhari*, III. 36. 7. 467.
- 44 *Ibid.*, IV. 55, 23, 614.
- 45 *Sahih Bukhari*, I.3.124; VI. 60. 249; VI. 60. 251.
- 46 This same hadith is recorded in Muslim, *Al-Jami'*, Chapter 992, sec. 5864. I have modified the translation at times for style.
- 47 Bukhari, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 405.
- 48 *Ibid.*, IV. 55. 23. 612.
- 49 Qur'an Surat al-Kahf (18:65).
- 50 *Sahih Bukhari*, I. 3. 45. 124.
- 51 *Ibid.*, IV. 55. 23. 612, p. 401.
- 52 Qur'an 18:61; *Sahih Bukhari* I. 3. 17. 74; I. 3. 20. 78; I. 3. 45. 124; III. 36. 7. 467; III. 50. 12. 888; IV. 55. 23.612, 613, 614; VI. 60. 249, 250, 251.
- 53 Qur'an 18:60.
- 54 Qur'an 18:65–66.
- 55 Qur'an 18:60.
- 56 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 402–403.
- 57 *Ibid.*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 403.
- 58 *Ibid.*, IV, 55. 23. 613, p. 402.
- 59 *Ibid.*, IV, 55. 23. 613, p. 403.
- 60 Qur'an 18:68.
- 61 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 403.
- 62 Qur'an 18:69; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 403–404.
- 63 Qur'an 18:70.
- 64 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 404.
- 65 *Ibid.*, IV. 23. 613, p. 404.
- 66 Qur'an 18:71; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV, 23, 613, p. 404.
- 67 Qur'an 18:72.
- 68 Qur'an 18:73.
- 69 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV 55. 23, 613, p. 404.
- 70 Qur'an 18:74; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 404–405.
- 71 Qur'an 18:76; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 405.
- 72 Qur'an 18:77; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 405.
- 73 Qur'an 18:78; *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 405.
- 74 *Sahih Bukhari*, IV. 55. 23. 613, p. 405.
- 75 Qur'an 18:79.

- 76 Quran 18:80.
- 77 Qur'an 18:80–81.
- 78 Qur'an 18:82
- 79 Qur'an 18:82.
- 80 Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*. Material on Moses and Khidr appears in Vol. 3 of *The History of al-Tabari: The Children of Israel* (trans. William M. Brinner) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1–18.
- 81 At-Tabari, *Jami'*, vol. 15, no. 23167–8.
- 82 Ibid., 23172.
- 83 Ibid., 23176.
- 84 Ibid., 23203.
- 85 Ibid., 2.
- 86 A complete rendering of al-Khidr's name is alternatively given by Simnani as Abu'l 'Abbas Balyan ibn Qalyan ibn Faligh al-Khidr. See Massignon, *Essay*, 91.
- 87 In the *Qisas al-anbiya'* of al-Kisa'i (p. 247), al-Khidr is listed as the son of Malkan (Gen. 11:10–18). Accorded with Genesis, Al-Khidr follows seven generations after Noah. Abraham is ten generations descended from Noah.
- 88 For this interpretation, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 182–188.
- 89 Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, 417; *History* III, 17.
- 90 Idem, *Jami'*, no. 23203.
- 91 (*Man 'arafa nafsahu fa-qad 'arafa rabbahu.*) This tradition, sometimes claimed as a hadith, can be found in Javad Nurbaksh, *Traditions of the Prophet*, Vol. 2 (New York: Nimatullahi Publications, 1983), 45. As reported by Ajluni, Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240) said, "If this hadith is not sound by way of its transmitters (*min tariq al-riwaya*), from our perspective it is sound by way of unveiling (*min tariq al-kashf*)" (*Kashf al-Khafa'*, vol. 2, 343), quoted in Alan Godlas, "Psychology and Self-Transformation in the Sufi Qur'an Commentary of Ruzbihan al-Baqli," 58–59, fn. 37.
- 92 Ibid., 23209.
- 93 At-Tabari, *Jami'*, 256, no. 23214.
- 94 Ibid., 23214.
- 95 Ibid., 23221.
- 96 See Bukhari, Kitab al-Shurut, 3.50.12.888: "Moses then violated the agreement for the first time because of forgetfulness..." and idem, Kitab al-Tafsir 6.60.250: "The first inquiry of Moses was done because of forgetfulness; the second caused him to be bound with a stipulation; and the third was done intentionally."
- 97 Ibid., 23230.
- 98 Ibid., 23209.
- 99 At-Tabari, *Jam'*, vol. 8, 23274, 270.

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Inter-religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World

Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia

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First published 2024
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Boivin, Michel, 1955- editor. | Pénicaud, Manoël, editor.

Title: Inter-religious practices and saint veneration in the Muslim world :
Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia / edited by Michel
Boivin, Manoël Pénicaud.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. | Series:
Routledge studies in Asian religion and philosophy ; 31 | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023023048 (print) | LCCN 2023023049 (ebook) | ISBN
9781032478647 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032478661 (paperback) | ISBN
9781003386285 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Khidr (Legendary character) | Muslim saints--Cult. |
Hagiography.

Classification: LCC BP137.5.K5 I58 2023 (print) | LCC BP137.5.K5 (ebook) |
DDC 297.4/4--dc23/eng/20230522

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023023048>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023023049>

ISBN: 978-1-032-47864-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-47866-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-38628-5 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003386285](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003386285)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.