

The Story

The Qur'anic story of al-Khidr highlights an encounter between Moses and a mysterious man, known in the Islamic tradition as “al-Khidr.”¹

Khidr has been viewed as one who is at once connected to the Qur'anic text, the exegesis, the hadith (the prophetic tradition), *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā* (the stories of prophets), massive Sufi literature, as well as various folk traditions, many of which remain fluid and ever changing.²

Al-Biqā'ī uses this name to refer to that mysterious figure and servant of God.³ Ibn 'Āshūr asserts using “al-Khidr” not as a proper name but as a title related to greenness, which is a symbol of blessing.⁴ Al-Khidr would turn the surrounding place green, as we find in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*⁵ and according to what al-Ṭabarsī⁶ presents as well. Ibn Kathīr mentions Balyā b. Malakān b. Fāligh b. Ghābir b. Shālikh Arfakhashadh b. Sām b. Nūḥ as his full name and refers to Abū al-'Abbās as another title that some used in addition to al-Khidr.⁷

The story starts in verse 60 of chapter 18 by a scene describing Moses traveling and sharing with his servant his determination of journeying until he reaches the junction of the two seas; a place understood as where he was promised to meet al-Khidr. Moses announces his intention of traveling until he meets al-Khidr, even if this requires him to continue traveling for years. In the next scene, Moses decides to take a rest and asks his servant to bring their dinner, only to be told by his servant about losing the fish they had caught for their dinner in an unexplainably cryptic way. The fish – as described by the servant – seemed to have miraculously come back to life and made its way to the sea. The miracle of the resurrection of the dead fish was interpreted by Moses as a sign indicating the presence of al-Khidr; therefore, he immediately orders his servant to go back to where they have both lost the fish. As they return to where the fish was lost, they find a man who is described in the Qur'an as “one of Our servants – a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own”

(Q. 18:65). Moses asks that man permission to follow him to learn from the divine knowledge he was given. Al-Khidr accepts only after warning Moses of the hardship he might face in his attempt to accompany him; since he might not be as patient as he thinks during the journey. Eventually, al-Khidr agrees on condition not to be asked about anything until he explains it to Moses. As Moses promises to be an obedient follower, they both begin their journey together by boarding a boat. Once on board, al-Khidr damages the boat by making a hole in it. Moses immediately reproaches him saying, “How could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!” (Q. 18:71). However, Moses is merely reminded by al-Khidr about his promise not to ask about anything until it is explained to him. In his responses, he meekly apologizes and continues the journey with al-Khidr. Next, they meet a young boy, whom al-Khidr immediately kills. Once again, Moses forgets what he had promised and rushes to say, “How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!” (Q. 18:74). For a second time, Moses is reminded by al-Khidr that he would never be patient enough to accompany him. Embarrassed by his impatience, Moses asks to be given only one more chance. They both continue traveling to reach a town. At that town, they ask the residents for some food, only to be denied their request. However, as they see a collapsing wall, al-Khidr rushes to rebuild it. Surprised by what he did for this inhospitable community, Moses asks al-Khidr, “But if you had wished you could have taken payment for doing that” (Q. 18:77). Having now reached a point where they both agree that their journey together will no longer be possible, al-Khidr provides a departing explanation for his unfathomable actions to Moses, marking the end of this mysterious Qur’anic story:

He said, “This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patience: the boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea, and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished that the Lord should give them another child – purer and more compassionate – in his place. The wall belonged to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience.”

(Q. 18:78–82)

A long hadith narrates al-Khidr's story in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as follows:

Narrated Sa'īd bin Jubair: I said to Ibn 'Abbās, "Nauf Al-Bakālī claims that Mūsa (Moses) (the companion of Khiḍr) was not the Mūsa of Banī Isrāel but he was another Mūsa." Ibn 'Abbās remarked that the enemy of Allah (Nauf) has told a lie.

Narrated Ubai bin Ka'b رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ : The Prophet ﷺ said, "Once the Prophet Mūsa (Moses) عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام stood up and addressed Banī Isrāel. He was asked, 'Who is the most learned man amongst the people?' He said, 'I am the most learned.' Allāh admonished Mūsa as he did not attribute absolute knowledge to Him (Allāh). So Allāh revealed to him 'At the junction of the two seas there is a slave amongst my slaves who is more learned than you.' Mūsa said, 'O my Lord! How can I meet him?' Allāh said, 'Take a fish in a basket (and proceed) and you will find him at the place where you will lose the fish.' So Mūsa set out along with his (servant) boy, Yūsha' bin Nūn and carried a fish in a basket till they reached a rock, where they laid their heads (i.e., lied down) and slept. The fish came out of the basket and it took its way into the sea (straight) as in a tunnel. So it was an amazing thing for both Mūsa and his (servant) boy. They proceeded for the rest of that night and the following day. When the day broke, Mūsa said to his (servant) boy: 'Bring us our early meal. No doubt, we have suffered much fatigue in this journey.' Mūsa did not get tired till he passed the place about which he was told. There the (servant) boy told Mūsa, 'Do you remember when we betook ourselves to the rock, I indeed forgot the fish.' Mūsa remarked, 'That is what we have been seeking.' So they went back retracing their foot-steps, till they reached the rock. There they saw a man covered with a garment (or covering himself with his own garment). Mūsa greeted him. Al-Khiḍr عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام replied saying, 'How do people greet each other in your land?' Mūsa said, 'I am Mūsa.' He asked, 'The Moses of Banī Isrāel?' Mūsa replied in the affirmative and added, 'May I follow you so that you teach me of that knowledge which you have been taught?' Al-Khiḍr replied, 'Verily! You will not be able to have patience with me, O Mūsa! I have some of the knowledge of Allāh عز وجل which He has taught me and which you do not know, while you have some knowledge which Allāh has taught you which I do not know.' Mūsa said, 'If Allāh will, you will find me patient and I will not disobey you in aught.' So, both of them set out walking along the sea-shore, as they did not have a boat. In the meantime a boat passed by them and they requested the (crew of the boat) to take them on board. The crew recognized Al-Khiḍr and took them on board without fare. Then a sparrow came and stood on the edge of the boat and dipped its beak once or twice in the sea. Al-Khiḍr said: 'O Mūsa! My knowledge and your knowledge have not decreased Allāh's Knowledge except like the amount of water taken by this sparrow from the sea with its beak.' Then Al-Khiḍr went

to one of the planks of the boat and plucked it out. Mūsa said, ‘These people gave us a free lift but you have broken their boat and scuttled it so as to drown its people.’ Al-Khiḍr replied, ‘Didn’t I tell you that you will not be able to have patience with me.’ Mūsa said, ‘Call me not to account for what I forgot.’ The first (excuse) of Mūsa was that he had forgotten. Then they proceeded further and found a boy playing with other boys. Al-Khiḍr took hold of the boy’s head from the top and plucked it out with his hands (i.e. killed him). Mūsa said, ‘Have you killed an innocent person who has killed none?’ Al-Khiḍr replied, ‘Did I not tell you that you cannot have patience with me?’ Then they both proceeded till when they came to the people of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused to entertain them. There they found a wall on the point of collapsing. Al-Khiḍr repaired it with his own hands. Mūsa said, ‘If you had wished, surely you could have taken wages for it.’ Al-Khiḍr replied, ‘This is the parting between you and me.’” The Prophet ﷺ added, ‘May Allāh be Merciful to Mūsa! Would that he could have been more patient to learn more about their story.’”⁸

As we can see, the hadith-based narrative does not add to the story except for al-Khiḍr being sent to Moses as a lesson on humility.

The story is highly contested as it appears in its history of exegetical interpretation. Exegetes seem to be divided almost over all the details. Details concerning the location of the meeting that took place between Moses and al-Khiḍr and concerning who al-Khiḍr himself was vary among different works of *tafsīr*. Some even questioned whether the mentioned Moses is the same Qur’anic/biblical patriarch.⁹ When it comes to the meeting place, the Qur’anic story, however – like the majority of Qur’anic stories – does not pinpoint a specific location of the encounter between Moses and the mysterious figure. Exegetes who seem to be divided over identifying the meeting place provide more than one option. While many provided a loose identification of a place bordered by what exegetes referred to as the Roman Sea (from the west) and the Persian Sea (from the east),¹⁰ some tried to provide a more specific location. Al-Ṭabarsī mentions a view identifying the junction of the two seas as Tangier or somewhere in Africa.¹¹ Al-Biqā’ī infers from Moses and his servant retracing the lost fish that it must have been a sandy place with no clear demarcations. He proposes the Nile Delta as the mentioned junction of the two seas, where the Nile meets the Mediterranean through Damietta and Rosetta.¹² Ibn ‘Āshūr refers to the location as a place somewhere in Palestine. He specifies the place where the Jordan River flows through the Sea of Galilee.¹³ In his commentary, al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī refers to some views pinpointing Palestine as another possible option and identifying Nazareth as the mentioned town. Other views he mentions include even a reference to Azerbaijan as the described meeting place.¹⁴

In addition to debating the location, in their commentaries, many exegetes seem to be divided over what title can best describe this “productive and versatile”¹⁵ figure. As Hamza Tamtam observes, “The Qur’ān has no definition of the ‘Servant of God.’ Nevertheless, the Qur’ān has described him as a wise, knowledgeable and merciful person, which opens a way for reflection on the nature of Khidr, especially his knowledge.”¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr documented this exegetical disagreement. He mentions some suggested titles. While some – as he reports – said he was a prophet, many negated this and thought of him as a *walī*. In addition, he refers to an interesting view that portrayed him as an angel.¹⁷ Al-Biqā’ī refers to believing in al-Khidr as a prophet as the position that the majority of scholars held.¹⁸ Al-Rāzī corroborates this also as the dominant view, although he prefers to refer to al-Khidr as a scholar.¹⁹ Like al-Biqā’ī, Ibn ‘Āshūr, and al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī,²⁰ Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī²¹ and many others argued for al-Khidr as a prophet.²²

While “the protagonist of this narrative is diversely understood,”²³ his role as a mentor to Moses gained more agreement among commentators. According to many narratives, al-Khidr was sent to Moses as a teacher. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal opens a chapter devoted to the legacy of Moses in his book *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (*The Book of Abstinence*) with the advice al-Khidr shared with him.²⁴ Attahir Shehu Mainiyo elaborates on this role as a teacher:

One of the important relevance of Surah al-Kahf to the contemporary search for knowledge is its ability to teach firm resolve in the quest for knowledge which could be learnt by the students. The chapter taught us how Prophet Musa (AS) undertook to travel to a far distant area just to meet his teacher, Al-Khidr, who was a model for the true scholar of Islam and more learned than him regardless of all the troubles and difficulties. This reveals that anyone who wants to acquire sound knowledge must undergo this type of tiresome journey as did by Prophet Musa in order to get the correct and sound knowledge whatever length it may take him. Prophet Musa (AS) was able to attach himself with Al-Khidr with patience until he understood what the teacher teaches him about. This suggests that search for knowledge has no age barrier, since it did not hinder Prophet Musa to come down to Al-Khidr to benefit from what Allah has granted him of wisdom and higher truth.²⁵

However, the view portraying al-Khidr as a teacher – despite its popularity – turned into another highly debated and contested topic among scholars. Ibn ‘Āshūr negates the possibility that Moses could have received any religious instruction from al-Khidr, since Moses as a prophet does not require any religious instruction except through divine revelation.²⁶ The story, as ‘Abd al-Qādir Shayba al-Ḥamd, argues does not assert al-Khidr’s superiority because “bequeathing al-Khidr, who was not a follower of Moses, special

knowledge does not mean that he was better than Moses.”²⁷ Al-Ṭabarsī tried to solve this problem by suggesting that al-Khidr might have been given specific knowledge that Moses sought to learn which was other than prophethood.²⁸ Al-Rāzī opines that a prophet may follow whoever is less than him to learn knowledge other than prophethood.²⁹ In contrast, Ibn ‘Abbās suggests – like many exegetes – that al-Khidr was more knowledgeable and even a better worshipper of God than Moses.³⁰ For many others, solving this dilemma was achieved by arguing that al-Khidr was sent to Moses not only to teach him divine knowledge but to teach him a lesson on humility. Moses, as al-Qummī asserts, returned to his people after he received the Torah, considering himself to be the most knowledgeable person on earth at the time. Therefore, God sent him Gabriel with the command to meet al-Khidr to learn from him.³¹ Moses immediately realized his mistake – as al-Qummī argues – and felt terrified the minute Gabriel instructed him to meet al-Khidr.³²

Sufi readings of the story, meanwhile, highlight al-Khidr’s role not only as a teacher but as a *walī* as well. As a *walī*, al-Khidr was provided knowledge that even Moses did not have access to, namely, knowledge of the unseen (*‘ilm al-ghayb*).³³ The journey that both Moses and al-Khidr underwent takes on a new significance in the mystic tradition. Irfan A. Omar amply explains as follows:

One can see two parallel paths travelled by Khidr and Moses; the former is on the path of an *experience of being given* the knowledge instantaneously and immediately, while the latter is on the path of *witnessing to a revelatory event* which is comparable to the divine mandate received by other prophets such as Abraham, Noah, Jesus and Muhammad. Here, too, the dialectic is invoked between the orthodoxy of the path of Moses and the mystical sublimity of the path of Khidr. In these two figures, the law and the experience, the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*, the hidden and the manifest are differentiated, or as one might argue, differentiated so as to show an even deeper course of their convergence.³⁴

Despite the fact that “the Qur’ānic version nowhere specifies the mystical properties associated with the ‘place where the two rivers meet’”³⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī takes a further step by interpreting even the place where the meeting was held in a metaphorical way.³⁶ He figuratively understands the junction of the two seas as a reference to the gathering of sainthood (*wilāya*) and prophethood (*nubuwwa*), a title which Ibn al-‘Arabī denied al-Khidr.³⁷ This type of vegetative interpretation develops very soon to become a unifying motif across Sufi interpretations. Hugh Talat Halman writes this:

the Sufi commentators recognize in the story of Moses’ journey with al-Khidr the place ‘where the two seas meet’: al-Khidr’s ‘sea’ of inner

knowledge, beyond, but adjacent to, Moses' sea of revelation together describe the inner (*batin/tariqa*) and outer (*zahir/shari'a*) aspects of the spiritual life.³⁸

Some exegetical sources went too far, though, in ascribing an unlimited access to foreknowledge to al-Khidr. An example of this is seen in al-Qummī's commentary. Al-Qummī, despite arguing for al-Khidr as a human being,³⁹ adds a Shī'ī twist to his narrative by reporting⁴⁰ that al-Khidr shared and lamented with Moses the *Ahl al-Bayt* (People of the [Prophetic] Household) and the way they would be afflicted in future. Later-developed mystic exaggerations end up turning al-Khidr from a human being – as described in the Qur'an – to a legendary figure that only occasionally takes the shape of a human being to intervene with humans. Thomas Dahnhardt minutely explains as follows:

According to the canons of orthodox esoteric science, al-Khaḍīr is one of the ancient saint-prophets mentioned in the Holy Qur'ān, along with Idris (Enoch), Ilyās (Elias), and 'Isā (Jesus), who are considered “immortal” (*khālīd*) and “long-lived” (*mu'ammār*). Free in their essential function from the limitative conditions of time and space that characterise God's creatures, including humans, the mission entrusted to these special individuals by Allāh – who in the cosmological doctrines represent the four cornerstones, *awṭād*, of the interior edifice of the Islāmic Dīn – extends over the entire human cycle up until the day of resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*). Their essentially spiritual nature does not, however, prevent them from playing a role in the world's destiny also in historical terms, in a way similar to the first and last in the chain of prophets, Adam and Muhammad. Thus, they assume now and then the shape of human beings so as to directly intervene at the appropriate time in the dominion of mankind (*insāniyāt*).⁴¹

Regardless of the popularity of this line of argument, which adds all kinds of exaggerations to both al-Khidr's character and abilities, among Sunni, Shī'ī, and Sufi interpreters alike, from a purely Qur'anic perspective knowing the unseen strictly remains an exclusive divine faculty that even prophets cannot share, unless occasionally permitted by God. In the Qur'an, we see the Prophet Muhammad himself instructed to announce this human limitation as we read as follows:

Say [Prophet], “I have no control over benefit or harm, [even] to myself, except as God may please: if I had knowledge of what is hidden, I would have abundant good things and no harm could touch me. I am no more than a bearer of warning, and good news to those who believe.”

(Q. 7:188)

Even angels, as the Qur'an confirms, have limits when it comes to their foreknowledge. Angels themselves in chapter 2 acknowledged this limitation: "They said, 'May you be glorified! We have knowledge only of what You have taught us. You are the All Knowing and All Wise'" (Q. 2:32). In a nutshell, then, from a Qur'anic perspective, no created being is given unconditional access to the unseen. All that the Qur'an confirms is occasional accessibility allowed only to prophets via revelation. Al-Khidr, as much Qur'anic evidence supports, was a prophet. However, like all other prophets, he was provided occasional access to the unseen. Usually, this access is limited to revelation. Highlighting and redefining this Qur'anic criterion is crucial – as I explain in this book – to solving the dilemma of the killing of the young boy. Because the story cannot be properly understood unless al-Khidr is necessarily and essentially understood – as I explain in Chapter 3 – as a prophet and unless the knowledge he receives is understood as divine revelation.

Finally, before concluding this chapter, I should make it clear that I do not address in this book the many mythological and legendary details that some traditional narratives kept adding to the Qur'anic story, such as ascribing immortality to al-Khidr or visualizing him as an eschatological figure.⁴² I do not examine these views, first, for being negated by the majority of exegetes; second, for lacking any Qur'anic textual evidence; and third, for contradicting the rest of what is affirmed in the Qur'an. The main question this book is trying to address is the puzzling permissibility of infidel killing that the misunderstanding of this story might lead to. However, before reexamining the dilemma, the Qur'anic stance on infidel killing needs to be explored first.

Notes

- 1 Although no Qur'anic evidence of this name can be found, I borrow "al-Khidr" from the Islamic tradition to refer to this figure.
- 2 Irfan A. Omar, "Reflecting Divine Light: al-Khidr as an Embodiment of God's Mercy (*Rahma*)," in *Gotteserlebnis und Gotteslehre: Christliche und Islamische Mystik im Orient*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 167.
- 3 Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1984), 12:106.
- 4 Muḥammad b. al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya, 1984), 15:363.
- 5 Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus and Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), 841–42 (hadith no. 3402).
- 6 al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2006), 6:280.
- 7 Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-aẓīm* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyiba, 1999), 5:187.
- 8 Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 1:125–28 (hadith no. 122).
- 9 Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Wāḥid, 3rd ed. (Mecca: Maktabat al-Ṭālib al-Jamā'ī, 1988), 458.

- 10 See, for example, al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān*, 13:339.
- 11 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 6:277.
- 12 al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar*, 12:106.
- 13 Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, 15:362.
- 14 al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān*, 13:354–55.
- 15 Shawkat M. Toorawa, "The Modern Literary (After)lives of al-Khiḍr," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2014): 189.
- 16 Hamza Elhadi Mohamad Tamtam, "The Impact of the Figure of Khidr on Medieval Sūfī Thought" (PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2019), 41.
- 17 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm*, 5:187.
- 18 al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar*, 12:106.
- 19 Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 21:160.
- 20 al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān*, 13:339.
- 21 Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, *al-Faṣl fī al-mīlāl wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-niḥāl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Salām al-'Ilmiyya, 1923), 3:25.
- 22 Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, 16:16.
- 23 Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*, 61.
- 24 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, ed. Muḥammad Jalāl Sharaf (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍa al-'Arabiyya, 1981), 119.
- 25 Attahir Shehu Mainiyo, "Relevance of Surah Al-Kahf in the Search of Knowledge," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 7 (2015): 176.
- 26 Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, 15:370.
- 27 'Abd al-Qādir Shayba al-Ḥamd, *Qaṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, 4th ed. (Riyadh: Maktabat Fahd al-Waṭaniyya, 2013), 247.
- 28 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān*, 6:281.
- 29 al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 21:150.
- 30 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abbās, *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1992), 315.
- 31 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī* (Qom: Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, 2014), 2:611.
- 32 Ibid., 612.
- 33 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *Sharḥ 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī 'alā Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam li-Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Maymaniyya, 1904), 258.
- 34 Omar, "Reflecting Divine Light," 179–80.
- 35 Aaron Hughes, "The Stranger at the Sea: Mythopoesis in the Qur'ān and Early *Tafsīr*," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 32, no. 3 (2003): 270.
- 36 al-Qāshānī, *Sharḥ 'alā Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 259.
- 37 Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-'Ulā 'Afīfī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1946), 206.
- 38 Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*, 278–79.
- 39 al-Qummī, *Tafsīr*, 2:611.
- 40 Ibid., 613.
- 41 Thomas Dahnhardt, "Encounters with Khidr: Saint-Immortal, Protector from the Waters, and Guide of the Elected beyond the Confluence of the Two Oceans," in *Guru: The Spiritual Master in Eastern and Western Traditions*, ed. Antonio Rigopoulos (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd, 2007), 107–8.
- 42 See, for example, some views narrated by al-Suyūṭī in 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Kamāl al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr* (Cairo: Markaz Ḥajar, 2003), 9:624.

The Dilemma

As we have seen in the story, al-Khidr kills an innocent child allegedly to protect his believing parents from a hardship that will be caused by his future infidelity. Many studies of the Qur'anic story leave behind deep questions concerning the moral justification of what he did, including the killing of the young boy.¹ More importantly, they leave behind the question of how his act can fit the overall Qur'anic evaluation of the sanctity of life.

Many exegetes did not go beyond mentioning the infidelity of the young boy as the reason al-Khidr killed him, so as to justify his execution as a fair punishment. But does this attitude really reflect the Qur'anic view of the human right to life? Is the human right to life conditioned by faith in the Qur'an? The simple answer is no. To the contrary, we find in the Qur'an numerous affirmations of the right to life as unconditional.

Many others cited al-Khidr's prophethood as a justification. "Khidr murdered the boy according to a divine revelation, which is limited only to the prophets."² However, this solution leaves behind the question, Was the young boy killed as a way to prevent him from growing up to become an infidel? Would it be fair for a prophet to end someone's life due to their current or future infidelity? Was knowing about the boy's future infidelity all what was needed to be uncovered to make his execution lawful? As I argue in this book, an important distinction must be made between ending the boy's life for his future infidelity as a punishment and ending his life as a submission to a divine order. The former portrays the boy as a predator who deserved the sentence. The latter highlights ending the boy's life as a divine predetermined decision. The boy, I argue, died the way everyone dies. God ending his life is an act similar to His ending the life of anyone else, that is, the boy's future infidelity is based on revelation explaining the divine choice to end his life, at that time and in that way. It should not, however, be understood as a justification for ending his life even as a divine decision. In other words, the revelation al-Khidr received concerning the future infidelity of the young boy merely informed him about that infidelity as what made God decide to end his life at that time and in that way. Revelation did not *justify* by any means ending the life of the young boy by making a

reference to his infidelity. Rather, the revelation only *explained* the decision from a divine perspective. To clarify, the future infidelity of the young boy and ending his life are causally connected from a divine perspective. Yet they are merely correlated from a human perspective. God, who creates lives and has the right to end the life of any of His creatures, does not need any justification to do that. God would still have the right to end the boy's life even if he was going to grow up to become a faithful believer. Therefore, from a human perspective, the boy's faith is irrelevant to his death. What al-Khidr disclosed was God informing him via revelation about the reason why He (God) decided to end the boy's life. This should not be confused with why he (al-Khidr) ended the boy's life. The first is a divine decision. The second is a response to a divine order. The first does not need any justification. The second can be justified only if preconditioned by revelation. The case at this point is far from any claim of clarification, I admit. A Qur'anic approach to the case will be introduced in Chapter 6. In the following, I start by explaining the multifaceted, problematic aspect of the story as it is traditionally understood.

1. The Qur'an affirms the right to life as a sacred right preserved for any living soul or *nafs*. "If any one kills a person – unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land – it is as if he kills all mankind" (Q. 5:32). According to the Qur'anic criteria, then, no one can lose the right to life unless he or she violates that right either by murder or spreading corruption. The precisely codified two conditions for the Qur'anic permissibility of killing do not leave much room to argue for apostasy or infidelity as a reason for killing. In other words, killing the young boy for infidelity does not match the Qur'anic criteria for killing as retribution for the two specific cases just cited.
2. The fact that the act of killing the boy was *individually* carried out by al-Khidr nullifies the act as a lawful execution. Even if one is to accept for the sake of argument that infidelity is a punishable crime in the Qur'an – which is not the case – how can this right be individually assessed and even practiced by individuals? Shouldn't it be restricted – like all other religious laws – to the community represented by their appointed judicial authorities? The story does not provide any evidence of al-Khidr consulting anyone or appealing to any collective authority before killing the boy. He did not even disclose to Moses, his prophetic companion, his intention nor the rationale of killing the boy before he was asked by Moses to provide an explanation.
3. The fact that the boy was killed for his future and not his current infidelity nullifies the act as a lawful punishment that can be undertaken by any human being. No matter what was divinely revealed to al-Khidr about the future conduct of the boy, the fact that what was announced is to take place in future negates the boy's accountability. Once again,

for the sake of argument, even if infidelity is punishable in the Qur'an – which it is not – the boy at the time was not an infidel. In short, thinking of killing the boy as a punishment, a consequence, or even an outcome of his infidelity cannot solve the problem because the case is not one of an actual infidelity but one of future infidelity that never took place.

4. The fact that the boy did not even say or do anything to lead to his assessment as a current infidel negates the permissibility of his execution. No evidence leads to suspecting the current or even future infidelity of the boy. Based on revelation, knowledge does not work as a valid reason for the legitimacy of ending his life. In all Qur'anic stories, divine punishment follows and never preempts peoples' wrongdoing. It is of great importance to keep in mind how silent the Qur'anic text was about the boy, who was not described by any means as saying or doing anything. God's foreknowledge, which can determine the outcome of people prior to any behavior or conduct, is not introduced in the Qur'an as a fair ground to judge, evaluate, or punish people. It is what people actually do, and not God's knowledge of what they will do, that constitutes the basis of fairness in Qur'anic assessment.
5. The Qur'an's strong endorsement of religious freedom as a right that should always be well preserved leaves no room for arguing for the boy's future infidelity as a justification for killing him. This Qur'anic endorsement is clear: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q. 2:256). This means that disbelieving in God is not acknowledged as a good enough reason to lose the right to life. Even in cases of clear rejection of faith, no endorsement of any further action seems to be authorized by the Qur'an, as we read in the following verses:

Misfortunes can only happen with God's permission – He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him: God knows all things – so obey God and the Messenger. If you turn away, remember that Our Messenger's duty is only to make plain his message.

(Q. 64:11–12)

The Qur'an's assertion of freedom of belief as an unconditional right can also be found in "Say, 'Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so'" (Q. 18:29). This assertion posits the question: How can someone be punished for a right he or she is already promised in the Qur'an? This verse, as Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī affirms, confirms the freedom one can have in choosing any religion.³

6. Quite contrary to many who wrongly think of Islam as a militant or violent religion, religious authoritative guardianship was not given as a right even to the Prophet himself. In chapter 33, we find a definition of prophetic responsibilities to include being a witness, a preacher of

good news, and a warner: “Prophet, We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news and warning, one who calls people to God by His leave, as a light-giving lamp” (Q. 33:45–46). In the Qur’an, the Prophet is strictly instructed to limit his role to preaching and reminding people: “So [Prophet] remind them; your only task is to remind, you are not there to control them” (Q. 88:21–22); and “The Messenger’s duty is only to deliver the message: God knows what you reveal and what you conceal” (Q. 5:99). This restriction of the Prophet’s role to reminding and preaching calls to question the so-called authority al-Khidr had, allowing him to end the boy’s life due to his predicted future infidelity.

7. The Qur’an affirms religious diversity, pluralism, and even infidelity as a worldly norm and a divinely decreed plan that no human being has the right to remove forcefully. While rejecting religion is not desired by God, it is still divinely permitted and allowed. “Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?” (Q. 10:99).
8. Contrary to arguing for al-Khidr as a judge who was bringing about God’s justice by way of executing the boy for his predicted future infidelity, the Qur’an acknowledges no worldly divine-human authority other than God. This exclusive divine authority to judge people’s faith and religious and moral merit, as the Qur’an confirms, will be restored by God only on the Day of Resurrection. This affirmation is made clear in many places, such as, “On the Day of Resurrection, God will judge between you regarding your differences” (Q. 22:69). Even in cases of faith-based conflict, the Prophet is commanded in the Qur’an to avoid mere arguments and leave it up to God to judge:

So [Prophet] call people to that faith and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not go by what they desire, but say, “I believe in whatever Scripture God has sent down. I am commanded to bring justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord – to us our deeds and to you yours, so let there be no argument between us and you – God will gather us together – and to Him we shall return.”
(Q. 42:15)

9. As previously discussed, in a Qur’anic sense, understanding the meaning of infidelity goes beyond humans’ superficial assessment. Such an assessment requires divine access not only to what one might announce but to what one conceals. As also mentioned, no one can be soundly described as a disbeliever unless he/she fully comprehends the truth as a truth and then he/she fully consciously decides to deny it.
10. The fact that the young boy was not even an adult complicates the argument further. How can he be taken accountable for his future infidelity at that early age? As can be easily inferred from the Qur’an, puberty is

a prerequisite to be morally responsible for one's actions. "When your children reach puberty, they should [always] ask your permission to enter, like their elders do. This is how God makes His messages clear to you: God is all knowing, all wise" (Q. 24:59).

These Qur'anic challenges collectively turn answering the question of how al-Khidr's act can be justified from a Qur'anic perspective into a priority. Few indeed are those who seem to have gone beyond reporting the predicted future infidelity of the young boy as a reason for his execution. Many exegetes seem to have satisfied themselves with the outward purport (*ẓāhir*) of what al-Khidr said in chapter 18 as a justification for what he did. It is true that the future infidelity of the young boy is what al-Khidr in the Qur'anic story provides as a response when he was asked about what his actions, but the justification does not lie – as I explain this book – in understanding what al-Khidr said but in understanding who al-Khidr is.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the detailed study of the story provided by Sa'īd 'Abd al-'Azīm. In this study, like many others, the question of the moral permissibility of killing the young boy is totally ignored. Sa'īd 'Abd al-'Azīm, *Qaṣaṣ al-Qur'ān: 'izāt wa-'ibar*, 1st ed. (Alexandria and Cairo: Dār al-'Aqīda li-l-Turāth, 2001), 135–96.
- 2 Tamtam, "The Impact of the Figure of Khidr on Medieval Sūfi Thought," 58.
- 3 Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, *Ṣafwat al-'irfān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sha'b, 1903), 150.

Exegetical Attempts to Solve the Dilemma

Classical and Modern

The majority of exegetes, as I explain in this book, appear to have merely highlighted the predicted future infidelity as the reason that justifies ending the boy's life. However, this reason is unacceptable because it is not consistent with the rest of the Qur'an. In the following, I explain the way exegetes reacted to the challenging case, and I elaborate on the insufficiency of the majority of exegetical attempts to solve the dilemma caused by the killing of the young boy. As one can easily observe, the majority of exegetical attempts to understand the story complicate our Qur'anic dilemma even more because while they provide different approaches to the story, they all share one shortcoming: They all start from the infidelity of the young boy as a justification for al-Khidr killing him. Some suggested – as we have seen – that the murdered boy was not a minor but an adult. However, even this non-textual twist cannot provide much help in terms of solving our Qur'anic dilemma. Because according to the Qur'an – as already discussed – apostasy or infidelity are not reasons that can cause one to lose one's right to life. There is an implicit puzzling anti-Qur'anic exegetical consensus that the boy deserved to be executed due to his future infidelity. For many exegetes, it seems that all that was required for the justification of the boy's murder is for his infidelity to be disclosed and assured by God via revelation. In addition, as many of these interpretations implied, Moses did not know about the boy's future infidelity, which is the only reason, they cite, that caused him to object to what al-Khidr did. But this argument contradicts the Qur'an. To stay faithful to what is affirmed in the Qur'an, one should object to killing the boy even after knowing about his future or even his current infidelity. As explained before, people do not lose their right to life in the Qur'an for infidelity. The traditional exegetical analysis I provide in this chapter leaves us with questions like the following: Why was the killing of the young boy made permissible in the Qur'an? How can one make sense of this case that ostensibly appears to contradict the rest of the Qur'an? How can infidel killing be both prohibited and allowed in the Qur'an? And finally, why did the majority of exegetes – contrary to the Qur'an – find it quite plausible to argue for the boy's infidelity as a justification to killing

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First published 2023
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: Hasan, Abia, 1978– author.

Title: The Qur'anic dilemma : a hermeneutical investigation of al-Khidr / Abia Hasan.

Description: 1. | New York City : Routledge, 2022. | Series: Routledge studies in Islam and human rights; book 2 | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022028182 | ISBN 9781032384306 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032384313 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003345022 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Khidr (Legendary character). | Prophets in the Qur'an. | Islamic legends. | Qur'an stories. | Islam—Relations. | Qur'an—Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BP137.5.K5 H368 2022 | DDC 297.1/8—dc23/eng/20220622

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022028182>

ISBN: 978-1-032-38430-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-38431-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-34502-2 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003345022

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC