



Khidr: The History of a Ubiquitous Master

by Shawkat M. Toorawa

Sura eighteen of the Koran (The Cave', 18:61-83) tells the story, among others, of the encounter between the prophet Moses (Musa) and an unnamed teacher-guide. This account is influential in elaborations of the notion of the master-disciple relationship in Sufism and in elaborations of the concept of prophecy in Islam.

The Koran explicitly names only twenty-five prophets, but it does attest that there have been others (Koran 40: 78). Indeed, tradition records the figure 124,000. The Prophet Muhammad himself mentions several of these others in the *hadith* literature (authenticated reports), and identifies the companion of Moses as Khidr in one such report (Abu Dawud 1984, vol. III, p. 1319)¹.

There is no agreement about Khidr's full name, but Balya, son of Malikan, is widely accepted by Koran commentators and narrators of Prophet Stories (*qisas al-anbiya'*) (See Tha'labi n.d., pp. 192-94, 199-203; Tabari 1989, vol. III, pp. 2-18). Malikan was reputed to be a great king, and may be the Malkam of I Chronicles viii, 9. But other genealogies are also proposed: that he is a son of Adam; a grandson of Cain; the son of Pharaoh's daughter; the son of a Greek father and a Persian mother; the son of a Persian father and a Greek mother. Some say he was raised by wild beasts.

The Arabic word *al-khadir* means 'green'; the honorific name *al-Khidr* consequently means 'The Green One'. According to the Alexander Romance, after Khidr dove into the Water of Life — which he had found by using a shining jewel brought from Paradise by the prophet Adam — "all the flesh of his body became bluish-green and his garments likewise". In the Ethiopian version of the Romance, he is told: "You are Khidr: wherever your feet touch, the earth will become green". His greenness suggests links to St. Gregory and St. George and echoes, if distantly, Zachariah, vi, 12: "Behold the man whose name is The Branch".

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The Koranic story (18: 61-83) of the meeting of Moses and Khidr begins with a quest undertaken by Moses and his servant (possibly Joshua) for the place where the two seas meet. At one point, once they have passed the confluence, Moses tells his servant, "Prepare our food, this journey has tired us." The servant explains that he has left the fish that they had brought along on a rock, blaming Satan for having forgotten to mention this earlier, then adds, "The wonder is, the fish revived and leapt back into the sea!" "That loss is a sign of what we are seeking!" exclaims Moses, so they retrace their steps, going back to the confluence, where they find one of "Our servants, to whom We had shown Our special favor [i.e., prophecy] and endowed with knowledge from Us" (*min ladunna 'ilm*).

Moses said to him, "May I follow you that you may guide me true with the knowledge you have been taught?"

He said, "You will not be able to bear with me. How can you endure what is beyond your comprehension?"

"If God wills, you will find me patient," said Moses, "and I will obey you in all things."

"If you must follow me," he said, "do not question me about anything until I myself mention it to you."

Moses and Khidr set out. Eventually they come upon a quay where there is a boat docked. Khidr proceeds to stove a hole in the boat, sinking it. Moses is unable to keep his peace, exclaiming, "Is it to

drown its passengers that you have scuttled it? You have done a terrible thing!" Khidr replies, "Did I not tell you that you would not be able to bear with me?" Moses apologizes for having forgotten his pledge and entreats Khidr, "Do not reproach me for what I have done, do not make my journey with you difficult."

Next they encounter a young boy, whom Khidr proceeds to slay with a sword. Moses is incredulous and reproves Khidr, "Have you killed an innocent person who has himself killed no one? You have done an abominable thing!" Again Khidr says, "Did I not tell you that you would not be able to bear with me?" Once again Moses craves indulgence: "If I question you about anything again, then part company with me, our parting will then be justified."

They next arrive at a small village where no one will receive them. In spite of this, when they come upon a ruined wall, Khidr sets about building it up. Although Moses is not accusatory, he does make the guarded remark, "If you had wanted, you could have demanded wages for it."

Khidr promptly responds: "This is where you and I part ways, but I will now give you the explanation of the things to which you could not forbear objecting:

"The boat belonged to poor people who work at sea. I wanted to render it unusable because a king was approaching and commandeering every boat around.

"As for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared that he would torment them with defiance and unbelief. We therefore wanted their Lord to give them a more virtuous and affectionate child in place of him².

"As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys of the city: their treasure was buried under it. Their father was a righteous man. Your Lord therefore Willed that with their Lord's compassion they should themselves dig out the treasure when they come of age.

"I certainly did not do this of my own accord. This is the explanation of the things to which you could not forbear objecting."

In his brief analysis of this story, Hodgson calls it one of the several points of departure for the mythic imagination in the Koran due to its personal and symbolic mode. He cites antecedents in Sumerian literature, such as the story of Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic, the Syriac Alexander Romance, and Jewish legendary accounts (Hodgson 1974, vol. II, p. 460. See Friedlander 1913, p. 333). The Judaeo-Arabic version of the Elijah/Rabbi Joshua ben Levi story, for instance, mirrors that of the Khidr/Moses one: Rabbi Joshua accompanies Elijah under certain conditions laid down by him, Elijah performs a number of seemingly outrageous acts, Joshua is baffled (Nissim ben Jacob 1978, pp. 13-16).

The reason Moses sought Khidr in the first place is explained by the Prophet Muhammad. One day, when Moses was preaching, someone asked, "Who is the wisest man of all?" Moses answered that it was he himself. God then revealed to the arrogant Moses that there was someone wiser, that he could be found at 'the confluence of the two seas,' and that Moses "would meet him when he lost his fish, which, as we have seen, is what happened (Tabari 1989, pp. 6, 11; Suyuti/Mahalli 1986, pp. 301-02; Schwarzbau, 1959, vol. III, pp. 119-69).

Islamic tradition sometimes describes Khidr as *Mu'allim al-anbiya'* (Tutor of the Prophets), for the guidance he has shown every prophet since his birth, dated by Tabari and others sometime during the reign of the early Persian King Afridun/ Faridun. The one prophet whom Khidr did not teach is Muhammad; significantly, it is Muhammad who taught Khidr. This is an unsurprising inversion of the master-disciple relationship exemplified by Khidr/Moses. Having the young, unlettered Muhammad teach the wise, ancient Khidr underscores the superiority of Muhammad's prophethood and the fact that he too is a repository of knowledge emanating from God (*'ilm ladunni*).

How often Muhammad and Khidr met is not recorded, but Khidr's appearance at Muhammad's funeral is related as follows:

A powerful-looking, fine-featured, handsome man with a white beard came leaping over the backs of the people till he reached - where the sacred body... lay. Weeping bitterly, he turned toward the Companions and paid his condolences. Abu Bakr and 'Ali said that he was Khidr. (Ibn al-Jazari 1994, p. 228.)

That Abu Bakr and 'Ali are the ones to identify him is noteworthy. They are the only two Companions of Muhammad to whom are ascribed esoteric (*batini*) knowledge. This is why all Sufi *silsilas* (spiritual chains of investiture) derive from them and them alone. This hidden knowledge is not learned, it must be bestowed by God.

The attainment of spiritual station is confirmed by an individual's association or contact with Khidr. *Sabzpush*, Persian for 'the one who wears a green *khirqā*', is the epithet for those occupying the highest plane, among whom number angels and prophets, especially Khidr. The *khirqā*, often dark blue, is the rough (usually woolen) cloak given by the master to the disciple/initiate as a sign of his investiture and incorporation into the master's spiritual chain. Sufi mystics who speak of investiture without formal initiation are usually called Uwaysi, after the eponymous Yemeni contemporary of Muhammad, Uways al-Qarani, who embraced Islam without having met the Prophet. In such cases, they receive their spiritual guidance and initiation from Khidr; their garment is then given the name. 'Khidr's Cloak' (*khirqā khidriyya*). Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) claimed such an investiture (*New Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, p. 17).

In the *Seal of the Saints*, the earliest surviving detailed hagiography in Islam, Tirmidhi (d. ca. 932) enumerates the seven signs of the Friends of God (*awliya*):

The Prophet Muhammad said: 'When they see, they remember God.' This means that they have the power of truth, so that no one opposes them but they overcome him with it. That they are given clairvoyance. That they have inspiration. That those who injure them receive quick retribution. That all tongues praise them except those of the envious. That their prayers are answered and that signs occur, such as their disappearing into the earth, walking on water, and speaking with Khidr, the one who goes through the world on sea and land, mountain and plain, seeking them in longing and sympathy for them. (Tirmidhi 1965, pp. 336-47, based on.], A. Williams 1971, p. 320)

The Sufi Ibrahim ibn al-Khawwas (d. 904) is quoted as saying that Khidr offered to accompany him but Khawwas refused, fearing that in Khidr's company he would put his trust in Khidr instead of in God (al-Hujwiri 1959, p. 153). This is, of course, another inversion of the Khidr/Moses encounter, intended to demonstrate the degree of Ibrahim's piety and proximity to the Divine.

Early sources report that the Sufi Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. ca. 790) learned true spiritual knowledge from a solitary Syrian monk (sometimes said of Muhammad). The hagiographer al-Sulami (d. 1020) rejects that explanation, quoting Ibrahim as follows:

While in the desert, I came across a man who had no water or provisions. When evening came, he performed the sunset prayer, moving his lips to frame words I did not understand. Then I found food in my bowl and drink in my bottle. He was with me for some days, and taught me the Supreme name of God. Then he left me alone. Once, in my utter solitude, I called on God with the Name and immediately felt someone holding my waist, saying 'Ask, and it shall be given!' I was frightened, He said 'No harm, no fear! I am your brother Khidr. It was my brother David who taught you the Greatest Name. Never use it against anyone for whom you have a grudge, for it will be his destruction in this world and the next [...]' Then he went away, leaving me by myself. (Sulami 1953, pp. 30-31)

The desert is important also in the initiation and preparation of the great Sufi 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166). When he arrived at the gates of Baghdad at the age of eighteen, Khidr prevented him from entering the city, telling him that it was Allah's order that he not do so for another seven years. Khidr then took him to a ruin in the desert and told him not to leave that place. While there, Abd al-Qadir underwent numerous trials and tribulations which he himself describes:

All that appears beautiful but is temporal and of this world came to seduce me. ... My ego visited me daily in my own form and shape, begging me to be its friend. ... In time I was able to make it my prisoner and I kept it with me all those years, forcing it to stay in the ruins of the desert. (Translator's Introduction in 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani 1994, pp. xvi-xvii) At the end of seven years, he heard a voice at night instructing him to enter Baghdad and serve its people.

A dominant image in descriptions of Khidr's actions is that of destruction. In the Koranic account, he sinks the boat and kills the young boy. When he teaches Ibrahim ibn Adham the Supreme Name of

God, he warns of its destructive power. In one tale, the hero Amir Hamza (a figure modeled on the Prophet Muhammad's uncle Hamza) encounters him and Khidr tells him how to use his arrow to split his nemesis in two. On another occasion, Khidr addresses Hamza in a dream and shows him how to destroy the *div-i bazar-dast*, the thousand-armed demon (Bilgrami 1969, pp. 282, 499).

Destruction and breaking imagery is, in fact, widespread in Sufi descriptive language. Sometimes the heart (*qalb, dil*) is rent, for the sake of God, sometimes the ego (*nafs*) during the ritual recollection of pious formulae (*dhikr*), sometimes the body in the course of such practices as the forty-day seclusion (*chilla*). Rumi, contemplating destruction, explains:

*The cold wind became a
murderer for the people of 'Ad³,
but for Solomon
it served as a porter,*

Elsewhere he writes:

*How many enmities
were friendship,
how many destructions
were renovation!*

(Rumi 1924-40, vol. V, p. 186 and vol. III, pp. 192-98)

Indeed, Khidr's third act in the Koranic tale is not a destruction, but a construction, a renovation as it were.

Although Khidr is a prophet (*nabi*), for Sufis he is above all a Friend of God (*wali*, pi. *awliya*), able to perform wonders as a matter of routine. The sky and sea obey his will. He performs the Friday congregational prayers in Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives simultaneously. In a section entitled, 'On traces of the Prophets in Jerusalem', Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 940) even mentions Khidr's prayer-rug (Ibn 'Abd. Rabbih 1987, vol. VII, p. 292). He is able to appear anywhere and everywhere, at all times, for all time.

Khidr's longevity/immortality is explained in different ways. In one account, it is a decision of God's taken shortly after Khidr's conversation with his friend, the angel Raphael, in which they lament the fact that there will be no everlasting true worship of God on Earth. But by far the most widely accepted explanation is that he acquired immortality by drinking from (or diving into) the Water of Life.

The association of Khidr with water is maintained throughout the hagiographical and anecdotal corpus. Abu Bakr Warraq (d. 10th c.) recounts that when his master handed him some writings to be thrown into a river, an open chest emerged to receive the material, then vanished back into the waters. When Abu Bakr asked his teacher about this marvelous event, he replied, "I composed a work on theology and mysticism which could hardly be comprehended by the intellect. My brother Khidr desired it of me, and God bade the waters bring it to him" (Hujwiri 1959, p. 142).

This connection with "water is one of the many similarities between Khidr and Jesus. Both walk on water (some reports of Jesus portray him as dripping wet); they are both assumed into heaven without dying; both wear wool (the traditional Sufi garb); both have a profound connection with vegetation; and they are both alienated from the rest of humanity. In the latter instance, Khidr has been linked to the biblical Melchisedec, "Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually" (Hebrews vii, 3; see Genesis xiv, 18). Jesus and Khidr are also companions in the theosophy of Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209). This comprises three hundred saints whose hearts are like Adam's, forty like Moses', seven like Abraham's, five like the angel Gabriel's, three like the angel Michael's, and one, the vortex, like that of Israfil, the angel who blows the trumpet to herald the Resurrection. Jesus and Khidr are also joined with two other prophets who have been/ will be assumed living into heaven, those who, in Wensinck's words, form the quartet of those who have not tasted death, namely Idris (Enoch/Hermes), Ilyas (Elijah), Jesus and Khidr (See H. Corbin 1971, p. 83).

Khidr has also been (tenuously) linked to the Indian demon Rahu. According to legend, they are both put to death but survive because they have sipped from the Water of Life, Khidr immortalized as a maleficent demon fettered to the bottom of the sea, Rahu immortal and headless. Both then become

enemies of the stars (Hartner 1938, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 120-134). In another Indian account, he is the river saint (river deity for the Hindus), Khwaja Khizr who, not surprisingly, rides a fish and wears green.

In Turkey Khidr (and Ilyas) are celebrated on the feast day Hidrellez. In Iraq, he is still revered as a patron saint of water. The Iranian island of Abadan, is known as the Island of Khidr because he once appeared there. He is also believed to live on a *tinfisa*, a green carpet, in the heart of the sea. For the Koran commentators this is supported by the fact that Moses is told to search for Khidr at a confluence. Indeed, the sea is prominent in Khidr's own mind. When he sees a bird drinking from it, he says to Moses, "O Moses! My knowledge and your knowledge are to God's like the quantity of this water the swallow drinks is to the ocean" (*New Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, p. 906; Tabari, pp. 7, 12-13).

This indication of Khidr's humble view of his own knowledge, as one who has been favored with divine instruction, provides yet another facet of the rich lore surrounding this prophet who wanders over land and sea, the ubiquitous master.

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Notes

1. Translations of Koranic passages are my own; Biblical quotes are from the King James version.
2. God replaces the boy Khidr kills with a daughter who is free from evil and who brings joy to her parents. She marries a prophet and among her descendants are another seventy prophets, Suyuti/Mahalli (1986), p. 303.
3. 'Ad is an ancient Arab tribe mentioned frequently in the Koran to whom the Prophet Hud was sent.

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