

# The Path of Spirituality: The story of Mūsā's encounter with al-Khidr (peace be upon them)

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## Introduction

The Qur'ān is full of beautiful stories and certainly the story of Mūsā and al-Khidr (peace be upon them) is one of them. In twenty-two verses from Sūrah al-Kahf, Allāh explains the encounter of these two great figures. The result is a thought-provoking, faith-strengthening story that teaches us so much about our religion.

## The story in brief

One day Mūsā told his followers that he was the most learned man on earth. Allāh did not approve of the fact that he did not ascribe this knowledge to Him and so He told him to seek al-Khidr, someone who had knowledge Mūsā himself did not possess. When they met, al-Khidr agreed to let Mūsā accompany him, but only on the condition that he did not ask questions. Al-Khidr did three strange things in three different locations that Mūsā could not understand. When he saw that Mūsā could not bear patience with him, he left him but not before telling him the explanation for his actions.

## The story and analysis (*Tafsīr*)<sup>1</sup>

*In order to explain the story, I have used the hadīth of Imam al-Bukhārī as a foundation (which is in red font). Where required, I have added the commentary from different Tafsīrs.*

Sa'īd ibn Jubayr narrated that 'I said to Ibn Abbās (may Allāh be pleased with him) that Nawf al-Bikalī (a story teller in Kūfa) claims that Mūsā, the Companions of al-Khidr, was not the Mūsā of Banū Isrā'īl.' Ibn Abbās replied, 'The enemy of Allāh (Nawf) has lied. Ubayy ibn Ka'b narrated that he heard Allāh's Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) say:

### Which Mūsā is this story referring to?

Sa'īd ibn Jubayr reports that he asked Ibn Abbās about which Mūsā this story is referring to. He said that it was the opinion of Nawf al-Bikalī that the story does not relate to the Mūsā of Banū Isrā'īl but Mūsā ibn Afrā'thīm ibn Yūsuf. Ibn Abbās totally rejected this opinion and reminded them that Ubayy ibn Ka'b had reported from the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) that the story relates to the Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him).

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<sup>1</sup> The Literal Meaning of Tafsir: It is taken from the root letter Fa-Sa-Ra which means to unveil (*Kashf*) and expose (*Ibana*). Terminological Meaning of Tafsir: 'It is a field of knowledge which seeks to reach the meaning of Allah Almighty in what He revealed to His Messenger (peace be upon him), according to human ability.' Another definition is: 'It is a field of knowledge which aims to understand how to bow to the commands of Allah and His prohibitions, in what He revealed to His Messenger (peace be upon him)'

The different types of Tafsir: There are many ways to classify the different types of Tafsirs. Perhaps the most famous way is to classify them according to the source they depend on. On this basis, there are two types of Tafsir; Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur and Tafsir bi'l-Ra'y.

#### i. Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur

Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur depends on primary sources like the Qur'an, the Sunna, the sayings of the Companions and the sayings of the Successors (Tabi'un). This is the strongest and most reliable form of Tafsir, because it depends on the best possible sources.

These types really took off in the third Islamic century. Famous examples of Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur include *Jami al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Ibn Jarir al-Tabari d. 310), *Bahr al-Ulum* (Abu al-Layth al-Samarkhandi d. 375), *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim* (Hafiz Ibn Kathir d. 774) and *Mu'alim al-Tanzil* (al-Baghawi d. 516).

#### ii. Tafsir bi'l-Ra'y.

Some have called this Tafsir bi'l-Ijtihad, which perhaps is a better name. This is because it indicates that such types of exegeses can only be done by highly-skilled Mujtahids. Amongst the scholars, there is a difference of opinion as to whether this type of explanation is allowed.

Overall, most scholars agree that it is, so long as the opinion expressed is based on Shariah, on sound evidence and reasoning. The type of Tafsir that is forbidden is one based on prejudice, heretic beliefs, ignorance and difference.

The scholars have said that the author of a Tafsir bi'l-Ra'y must be (i) an expert in language (ii) an expert in etymology and syntax (iii) an expert in literature (iv) an expert in the field of Qira'at (v) an expert in Usul al-Din (vi) an expert in Usul al-Fiqh (vii) an expert in the reasons behind verses (viii) an expert in the abrogating and abrogated (ix) an expert in Fiqh (x) an expert in Ahadith (xi) the possessor of Ilm al-Muhiba, a knowledge that Allah bestows to a servant who acts upon what he knows.

Famous examples of Tafsir bi'l-Ra'y include *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (Fakhr al-Din al-Razi d. 606), *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Israr al-Ta'wil* (al-Baydawi d. 675), *Lubab al-Ta'wil fi Ma'ani al-Tanzil* (al-Khazin d. 741), *al-Bahr al-Muhit* (Andalusi, d. 745).

Once, Mūsā preached to the people till their eyes shed tears and their hearts became tender, whereupon he finished his sermon. When he finished, he was asked, 'Who is the most learned person amongst the people?' Mūsā replied, 'I am.' Allāh admonished him for he did not ascribe this knowledge to Allāh alone. So Allāh revealed to him: 'At the junction of the two seas, there is a slave of Ours who is more learned than you.' Mūsā asked, 'O my Lord! How can I meet him?' Allāh said, 'Take a fish and put it in a basket (and set out) and where you lose the fish, you will find him.'

### **What is the background to the story?**

Ibn Abbās reports that when Mūsā and his people reached Egypt, Allāh instructed Mūsā to remind his followers of the 'days of Allāh.' So he delivered a speech to his people, reminding them of how Allāh had favoured them by saving them from Fir'awn and making them the caliphs of the earth. Then he reminded them that Allāh had spoken to him directly, how He had chosen him, how He loved him and how he had given his people respect after insult, richness after poverty and the Tawrah after their ignorance. At that point a man from Banū Isrā'īl asked, 'We acknowledge what you have said; so is there anyone on earth more learned than you?' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 9) Mūsā asserted that he was. Allāh did not like the fact that Mūsā ascribed the knowledge to himself. So Allāh sent him *Wahy* (revelation) that at the *Majma al-Bahrayn* (the meeting of the two seas), there resides a man who is more learned than you. Mūsā expressed his desire to meet and learn from him and so Allāh told him how this meeting could take place. He told him to travel with a fish in a basket. Where the fish is lost, that is where this servant will be found.

Shaykh Sayyid Muhammad Madanī Ashrafī Jilānī points out that when Mūsā said he was the most learned amongst the people, he was clearly not lying. It was just that he did not ascribe this knowledge to Allāh (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, III: 603). Or to put it another way, (like Shaykh Hishām did) Allāh wants the men of knowledge to be humble. Some have said that Mūsā did not even utter these words (I am the most learned), he merely thought it in his heart (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, III: 603).

Imām Nawawī writes that from this episode, we learn that no one should claim to be the most learned person, and if someone is asked 'who is the most learned' then he should reply 'Allāh knows best' (*Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, XV: 155).

### **Where is the *Majma al-Bahrayn*?**

There are several different opinions where the 'meeting of the two seas' actually is:

- a. The sea between Persia and Rūm.
- b. Tanja.
- c. Where the Mediterranean and Atlantic meet.
- d. The river Nile, where it branches to the White and Blue Sea.
- e. One strong opinion is that it is the place where Aqba and Suez meet (*Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1216, Imām Sha'rāwī).

Regardless of where it is, it is not the purpose of the story per se. Therefore, knowing its exact location is not necessary (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 38).

So Mūsā put a fish in a basket and set off, along with his servant Yūsha ibn Nūn, till they reached a rock (on which) they both lay their heads and slept.

Mūsā was eager to meet him. Like the Qur'ān affirms:

And (O Messenger!) Remember when Mūsā said to his servant 'I will not give up travelling until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travelling.

Imām Sha'rāwī comments that so strong was Mūsā's desire to meet him that he said he would keep searching for him until a *Hiqba* (plural, *Huqub*) passes. The Arabs say that a *Hiqba* equates seventy or eighty years. So Mūsā was willing to travel for up to 240 years to meet al-Khidr.

#### **Who was the servant with Mūsā?**

The servant who travelled with Mūsā (peace be upon him) was Yūsha ibn Nūn. He was a young man who assisted Mūsā during his travels. Imām Nawawī writes that he was from the lineage of Yūsuf (peace be upon him) (*Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, XV: 150).

Instead of calling him a servant, the Qur'ān calls him a boy (*Fata*), out of respect. We learn from this that we should not call people by names that lessen their status, but rather raise it (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 39).

The fish moved vigorously and managed to escape the basket and fell into the sea and there it found its way through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel (18: 61). Allāh stopped the current on both sides of the way created by the fish, and so that way it was like a tunnel. Mūsā was asleep so the servant decided to inform him when he awoke. When Mūsā got up, his companion forgot to tell him about the fish, and so they carried on their journey during the rest of the day and whole night.

#### **The fish**

Hāfiz Ibn Kathīr writes that Mūsā and his servant travelled until they reached the junction of the two seas, where there was a spring called *Ayn al-Hayāt* (the Spring of Life) (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 183). The fountain was where the rock was too where they had rested (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12). Some drops fell on the fish as Yūsha was performing ablution (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, III: 604). Hence the fish became alive again. The same opinion can be found from Imām al-Bukhārī reporting from Ibn Abbās.

Regarding the fish and how it escaped into the sea, Ibn Jurayj said, citing Ibn Abbās, that 'it left a trace as if it were a rock' (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 183). Wherever the fish went, it left a dry path behind it (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, III: 603).

Shaykh Nāzim adds that the fish was cooked and was out of the sea. But Allāh gave it life and then ensured it returned alive to its natural habitat of the sea. So this was an indication to Mūsā and his servant; that the astonishing feat of the fish meant they were about to meet someone astonishing too.

Imām Sha'rāwī writes that the fish knew where al-Khidr was. He jumped out by Allāh's command at that precise point because he knew al-Khidr was there. Even animals are aware of the men of Allāh. There are countless stories where animals recognised and greeted the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).

The next morning, Mūsā said to his servant 'Bring us our meal; no doubt, we have suffered much fatigue in this journey of ours' (18: 62). Mūsā did not get tired till he had passed the place which Allāh had ordered him to seek after. His servant then said to him, 'Do you remember when we be-took ourselves to the rock, I indeed forgot the fish, none but Shaytān made me forget to remember it. It took its course into the sea in a marvelous way (18: 63). There was a tunnel for the fish and for Mūsā and his servant, there was astonishment. Mūsā said, 'That is what we have been seeking.' So they went back retracing their footsteps (18: 64). They both returned, retracing their footsteps till they reached the rock. Behold! There they found a man covered with a garment.

### **Who was the person Mūsā was to meet?**

Allāh describes him not by name but by description:

They found one of Our slaves, on whom We had bestowed mercy from Us, and whom We had taught knowledge from us (18: 65).

The scholars almost unanimously agree that the individual Mūsā was to meet was named al-Khidr (peace be upon him). His actual name was Balyā ibn Malkān (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 38) and was famously known as al-Khidr (greenness). The reason was that wherever he would sit or pray, that place would become green with life (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12).

Allāh, like the verse indicates, gave al-Khidr only a portion of mercy. But He made Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) an embodiment of mercy. Allāh, as the verse indicates, gave *some* knowledge to al-Khidr. But with Sayyiduna Muhammad, He 'taught that which you knew not. And ever great is the grace of Allāh upon you' (4: 113).

We also learn that to travel with the intention of knowledge is the practice of the prophets (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 9). Jābir ibn Abd Allāh, for example, travelled a whole month to hear one hadīth from Abd Allāh ibn Anīs (Ibid.) Additionally, it is their Sunna to also take provisions for the travel too (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 11)

In the order of the verse, mercy is mentioned first then knowledge. One cannot gain knowledge except with the true mercy of Allāh (Shaykh Hishām Kabbānī).

Mūsā greeted him. Al-Khidr said astonishingly, 'is there such a greeting in your land?' Mūsā said, 'I am Mūsā.' He said, 'Are you the Mūsā of Banū Isrā'īl?' Mūsā said, 'I have come to you so that you may teach me of what you have been taught.'

In another report, Mūsā finally met al-Khidr, whilst he was sitting with a white cloth over him. Mūsā greeted him and al-Khidr replied, adding 'you are Mūsā.' Mūsā asked 'how do you know who I am?' He replied, 'The One who sent you to me also told me who you are' (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 40; *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12).

Mūsā said, 'May I follow you so that you teach me something of that knowledge which you have been taught? (18:66).

Mūsā, despite being the favoured prophet of Allāh, showed utmost respect to al-Khidr. The lesson here is for students to respect the teacher. If one does not respect the teacher, then he cannot take benefit at all. This indicates that if someone finds a good quality in someone who is otherwise lower in rank, then the person should seek that good (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 41).

Ibn Kathīr adds 'this is a question phrased in gentle terms, with no sense of force or coercion. This is the manner in which the seeker of knowledge should address the scholar (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 190). Mūsā did not approach al-Khidr and say 'Allāh has ordered me to follow you.' He wanted two things; *Suhba* (companionship) and *Ilm* (knowledge). Most of the time *Ilm* is impossible without good *Suhba*.

Al-Khidr said, 'You will not be able to have patience with me (18:66). O Mūsā! I have some of Allāh's knowledge which He has bestowed upon me but you do not know it: and you too, have some of Allāh's knowledge which He has bestowed upon you, but I do not know it.' Mūsā said, 'Allāh willing, you will find me patient and I will not disobey you in anything.' Al-Khidr said to him, 'If you then follow me, do not ask me about anything until I speak myself concerning it' (18: 70).

Al-Khidr immediately told Mūsā that he may not be able to adopt patience in what he sees. This is why the Sūfiyā say that 'the *Murīd* should refrain from questioning the Shaykh (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 41).

Al-Khidr said, 'O Mūsā! I have some of Allāh's knowledge which He has bestowed upon me but you do not know it: and you too, have some of Allāh's knowledge which He has bestowed upon you, but I do not know it.' There is only one individual who Allāh has blessed with all types of knowledge and all types of perfection and that is Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) (*Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1217).

The verse indicates that those who want to see great things must endure patience. Nothing awaits the impatient. Students must always adopt patience.

Shaykh Madanī Ashrafī writes that from this story, it is clear there are two types of pupils. The first is one who has no prior subject knowledge. He should listen attentively and should not raise objections at all in front of the teacher. The second is one who does have some prior subject knowledge. He comes to the teacher with conviction and faith in his previous education, as well as dependence on the new teacher. Whenever he learns something new from the new teacher that does not comply with what he studied earlier, he will contemplate more carefully and (perhaps rightly so) he will raise questions (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, IV: 11)

After that both of them proceeded along the seacoast, till a boat passed by and they requested the crew to let them board. The crew recognised al-Khidr and allowed them to board free of charge. When they got on board suddenly Mūsā saw that al-Khidr had pulled out on the planks of the boat with an adze. Mūsā said to him, 'These people gave us a free lift, yet you have scuffed their boat so as to drown its people! Truly you have done a dreadful thing! (18: 71). Al-Khidr said, 'Did I not say that you can have no patience with me?' (18: 72) Mūsā said, 'Call me not to account for what I have forgot and be not hard upon me for my affair with you' (18: 73). Allāh's Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said, 'The first excuse given by Mūsā, was that he had forgotten. Then a sparrow came and sat over the edge of the boat and dipped its beak once back in the sea. Al-Khidr said to Mūsā, 'My knowledge and your knowledge, compared to Allāh's knowledge, is like what this sparrow has taken out of the sea.'

Only Mūsā saw him damage the planks of the boat. If anyone else had seen it, they too would have objected (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 14).

The questioning from Mūsā proves one thing; that nothing illegal or unsavoury occurs in the presence of a prophet, except he will speak up. From this, we can appreciate why *Hadīth Taqrīrī* is part of Sharī'ah too. This is called the Prophet's silent affirmation. If something is done in the presence of the Prophet and he does not speak up against it, then his silence is proof that this act is permissible (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 13).

Then they both got out of the boat and while they were walking on the seashore, al-Khidr saw a boy playing with other boys. Al-Khidr got hold of the boy's head, pulled it out and killed him. Mūsā said, 'Have you killed an innocent soul who has killed nobody?! Truly, you have done an illegal thing' (18: 74). Al-Khidr replied, 'Didn't I tell you that you can have no patience with me?' (18: 75). Mūsā said, 'If I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company, you have received an excuse from me' (18: 76).

Again, only Mūsā saw this act, otherwise everyone would have objected (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 15).

There is a scholarly debate as to whether the boy that al-Khidr killed had reached the age of puberty or not. Al-Kalbī said that his name was Sham'ūn and he was mature; he was a highway robber between two villages. His father was an important figure in one of the villages and his mother was an important figure in the other. However, the majority of the scholars states that he was not of mature age.

Then they both proceeded until they came to the inhabitants of a town. They asked them about food but they refused. (In that town) they found there a wall on the verge of falling down (18:77). Al-Khidr set it up straight with his own hands. Mūsā said, 'These are people to whom we came, but they neither fed us nor received us as guests. If you had wished, you could surely have exacted some reward.'

Under this verse, Qatāda commented that 'the worse village is one that does not express hospitality to its guests and does not know the rights of the traveller' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 18).

Sa'īd ibn Jubayr said that al-Khidr merely wiped his hand on the wall and it became erect again (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 20).

We learn from this verse that if a person is hungry and needy, then he is required to ask for food. Piety, like some Sufis may think, is not refraining from asking (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 18).

Both al-Khidr and Mūsā asked for food. This indicates that al-Khidr could not have been an angel, like some Muslims have erroneously suggested (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, IV: 12).

Al-Khidr said, 'This is the parting between me and you. I will now tell you the interpretation of those things about which you were unable to hold patience.'

The Sufiya say that when the issue of money came up (taking it for re-building the wall), it is at that point that al-Khidr's patience met an end and he said, 'This is the parting between me and you.'

Some have said that the three actions that al-Khidr undertook were in essence no different to what Mūsā (peace be upon him) had done before as a Prophet. When al-Khidr damaged the boat, it was said 'O Mūsā! Where was your planning when you were in a box thrown into the river?' When he objected to the killing of a child, it was said 'O Mūsā! Where was your objection when you committed manslaughter? Finally, when al-Khidr rebuilt the wall without payment, it was

said 'O Mūsā! How is this different to when you lifted the stones from the well for the two women?' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 23).

'As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working in the sea. So I wished to make a defective damage in it, as there was a king behind them who seized every ship by force.

And as for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief. So we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in righteousness and nearer to mercy.

Imām al-Qurtubī cites a report from the book *al-Arā'ish* that when Mūsā asked why he had killed an innocent child, al-Khidr became angry. So he dissected his body near the shoulders, removed the flesh and showed Mūsā a bone, upon which it was written 'Kāfir: he will never believe in Allāh' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 16).

And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphans in the town; and there was under it a treasure belonging to them; and their father was a righteous man. And your Lord intended that they should attain full age of strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from their Lord. And I did these acts not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of those things which you could not hold patience.'

What was the treasure under the wall? Ibn Abbās (may Allāh be pleased with him) said that the treasure in question was knowledge in the form of scriptures.

Muhammad ibn Munkadir reports that when a person full of piety and Taqwā appears, then as a result Allāh not only protects him but his offspring too. (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 38).

The verse also indicates that we should all except the fate of Allāh. Only Allāh knows the rightful outcome. The parents were grieved when they lost their child, but in reality, it was for their betterment (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 26). Imām al-Qurtubī writes that,

The fate of Allāh for the believer in that which he dislikes is better than the fate of Allāh in that which he loves (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 26).

Qatāda said,

His parents rejoiced when he was born and grieved for him when he was killed. If he had stayed alive, he would have been the cause of their doom. So let a man be content with the decree of Allāh. For the decree of Allāh for a believer, if he dislikes it, it is better for him than if He were to decree something that he likes for him (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 198).

It is said the parents later gave birth to a girl, who married a prophet. Later, from her children, seventy prophets appeared (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, IV: 14)

Allāh's Messenger said, 'We wished that Moses could have been more patient so that Allāh might have described to us more about their story.'

## Other important discussions

### Where was Mūsā's servant in the rest of the story?

Imām al-Qurtubī writes that once Mūsā met al-Khidr, he instructed his servant to return home (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 27).

### Sharī'ah and Tariqa

This story certainly highlights the importance of *Tasawwuf* in Islam. As Shaykh Muhammad Nāzim al-Haqqānī al-Naqshbandī explained, for everything that there is an outer, there is also an inner. The same applies to knowledge too. Mūsā had the outer knowledge, whereas al-Khidr had the inner. This is not in anyway an insult to Mūsā. After all, he talked to Allāh directly. It is just the case that some represent the apparent and some represent the hidden. Allāh made a palace called Sharī'ah and the inners of it is Tariqa. For example, the Sharī'ah of Zakāh is a knowledge that deals with how much a Muslim has to give, how frequently it has to be given hand where the funds are spent. The Tariqa of Zakāh asks a Muslim to reflect why he/she gives Zakāh. Like Imām al-Ghazālī said, 'When a Muslim gives Zakāh, they are saying 'O Allāh! I love my wealth, but I love you more.'

### Was Khidr a Prophet or *Walī* (friend of Allāh)?

#### **a. He was a Walī.**

There is no mention of his Ummah, which is a prerequisite for being a prophet.

#### **b. He was a Prophet.**

- i. Al-Khattābī and others have said al-Khidr was a prophet (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12)
- ii. It is inconceivable that a more learned person can exist in the time of a prophet, unless he is a prophet himself of course. So Mūsā learned from his likes, not from someone lesser in status than him (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12).
- iii. In *al-Bahr al-Muhīt*, Allāma Abū Hayan Andalusī writes that according to the majority of the scholars, al-Khidr was indeed a prophet (*Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1215).
- iv. Allāma Pānipattī writes that the *Ilhām* for a Walī is Zannī, meaning there is a possibility it can be wrong too. One cannot kill someone on the instructions of

such *Ilhām*. Therefore we must accept he was a Prophet because their *Ilhām* are always *Yaqīnī* (definitive) with no room for doubt (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 38). Imām al-Qurtubī indicates the same opinion when he writes, 'the verses indicate that he is a prophet, because such actions do not emit from someone except through *Wahy*' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 12).

v. Imām al-Qurtubī writes that '*Rahma*' in the verse 'And We gave him *Rahma* from us' refers to *Nabuwwa*.

vi. When al-Khidr said 'And I did these acts not of my own accord' (verse 82) at the end of the story, then what he meant that his actions were a result from revelation, as given to him by Allāh (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 20).

### Is al-Khidr still alive?

Imām Nawawī writes,

According to the vast majority of the scholars al-Khidr is alive and is present amongst us. This issue is agreed upon amongst the Sufiya, the Gnostics and the Awliyā. Their stories about meeting him, taking knowledge from him and his presence in noble places are numerous...only a handful of hadith scholars have denied this' (*Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, XV: 147)

The 'hadīth scholars' in question are the likes of Imām al-Bukhārī, as well as other scholars like al-Qādī Abū Bakr ibn al-Arabī. The evidence they present is the following hadith:

Imām Muslim reports in his *Sahīh* from Abd Allāh ibn Umar (may Allāh be pleased with him) said that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) led *Ishā* prayers one night, near the end of his life. After completing the prayer, he said, 'Do you see this night? In exactly one hundred years from now, no one on the earth currently alive now will be here.' (cited in *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 29). So this means that even if he was alive till the time of the Prophet, he must have died within a hundred years. The Prophet uttered these words about a month before he left this world.

In answer to this, Imām al-Qurtubī writes that the hadīth does obviously have exceptions. It does not include *Īsā* (peace be upon him), for he did not die and is still alive. It does not include *Dajjāl*, who is alive according to the hadīth of *Jassāsa*. So therefore, al-Khidr can also be one of these exceptions (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 29). He proceeds to write that 'the correct opinion is that al-Khidr is a prophet who has been blessed with longevity, and he is mostly hidden from the sights of people' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 29-30).

Muhammad ibn al-Mutawakkil reports from *Damura ibn Rabī'a*, from Abd Allāh ibn *Shawzab* that:

‘Al-Khidr (peace be upon him) is from the children of Fārs and Ilyās is from Banū Isrā’īl; they both meet each year at the Hajj’ (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 30)

Amr ibn Dīnār said that ‘al-Khidr and Ilyās remain alive on earth and will continue to do so, so long as the Qur’ān is present. When the Qur’ān is lifted [nearer the end of time], they will die’ (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 30).

Imām al-Qurtubī said that he is alive because he drank from *Ayn al-Hayāt*, and that he is still present on earth, and that he performs Hajj [annually]’ (XI, 29).

Imām Abū Muhammad Abd al-Mu’tī ibn Mahmūd ibn Abd al-Mu’tī al-Lahmī mentions in the commentary of the *Risāla* of al-Qushayrī many stories from the pious men and women who assert that they have seen al-Khidr (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 30). It is reported that Alī (may Allāh be pleased with him) met al-Khidr and was taught a Du’ā by him (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XI: 30).

Hazrat Mujaddid Alf Thānī was asked this question. As he was asked, al-Khidr was made apparent to him and so he asked him about his state. The answer al-Khidr gave was as follows:

‘Myself and Ilyās are not alive but Allāh has given our souls a power by which we can take on bodily form and do what the living can do, such as guiding the lost, helping the oppressed when Allāh wills, providing *Ilm Ladunī* and giving a close [spiritual] link to whomever Allāh wills. He has made us the helper of the *Qutb* [of the time] from the Awliyā of Allāh...’ (*Ziā al-Qur’ān*, III: 38).

### ‘Allāh knows, we do not’

Imām Nawawi writes:

This story explains an important theme from the roots of Islam; and that is to accept whatever Allāh decrees for us, even though the wisdom might escape even the most intelligent of us. (*Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, XV: 155).

### ‘I intended’, ‘Your Lord intended’ & ‘We intended’

The scholars have brought to exact wording of al-Khidr to attention when he was asked to explain the three acts:

- i. The boat incident: ‘*I intended* to defect it.’
- ii. The child incident: ‘*We intended* to change him.’
- iii. The wall incident: ‘*Your Lord intended*.’

Though everything comes from Allāh – good and bad, benefit and harm – it has been the method of the pious to ascribe all good to Allāh and ascribe bad to their own actions. When describing Allāh, Ibrahim affirmed that Allāh is the one who gives guidance, food and water. But then he went on to say ‘and when I am ill, he gives me cure.’ He did not say – out of respect – ‘when Allāh makes me ill’. He ascribed illness to himself and cure to Allāh.

Because breaking a boat is a bad act, Khidr ascribed it to himself (*‘I intended to defect it’*). When referring to re-building a wall – a purely good act – Khidr ascribed it to Allāh (*‘Your Lord intended’*). As for the killing of the child, there are two aspects of this; one is that the parents would get a pious children in exchange of the disobedient one and the other is that at least apparently, killing a child was bad. Therefore the verse reads *‘We intended’* (Ziā al-Qur’ān, III: 45, Tafsīr al-Qurtubī, XI: 27-8).

### The verses from Sūrah al-Kahf

60. And (O Messenger!) Remember when Mūsā said to his servant ‘I will not give up travelling until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travelling.

61. But when they reached the junction of the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way through the sea as in a tunnel.

62. So when they had passed further on, Mūsā said to his servant ‘Bring us our morning meal; truly we have suffered much fatigue in this, our journey.’

63. He said, ‘Do you remember when we betook ourselves to the rock? I indeed forgot the fish, none but Shaytan made me forget to remember. It took its course into the sea in a strange way!

64. Mūsā said, ‘That is what we have been seeking.’ So they went back retracing their footsteps.

65. Then they found one of Our slaves, on whom We had bestowed mercy from us and whom We had taught knowledge from us.

66. Mūsā said to Khidr, May I follow you so that you teach me something of that knowledge which you have been taught?’

67. Khidr said, ‘Verily! You will not be able to have patience with me!’

68. ‘And how can you have patience about a thing which you know not?’

69. Mūsā said, ‘If Allāh wills, you will find me patient and I will not disobey in aught.’

70. Khidr said, ‘Then, if you follow me, ask me not about anything till I myself mention of it to you.’

71. So they both proceeded, till, when they embarked the ship, Khidr scuttled it. Mūsā said ‘Verily you have committed a dreadful thing!’

72. Khidr said, ‘Did I not tell you that you would not be able to have patience with me?’

73. Mūsā said, ‘Call me not to account for what I have forgot, and be not hard upon me for my affair.’

74. Then they both proceeded, till they met a boy, Khidr killed him. Mūsā said, ‘Have you killed an innocent person who had killed none? Verily you have committed a dreadful thing!’

75. Khidr said, Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?’
76. Mūsā said, ‘If I ask you anything after this, keep me not in your company, you have received an excuse from me.’
77. 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. Then they found therein a wall about to collapse and Khidr set it up straight. Mūsā said, ‘If you had wished, you could have taken wages for it.’
78. Khidr said, ‘This is the parting between you and me. I will tell you the interpretation of those things over which you were unable to hold patience.
79. As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working in the sea. So I wished to make a defective damage in it, as there was a king behind them who seized every [good] ship by force.
80. And as for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief.
81. So we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in righteousness and nearer to mercy.
82. And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphans in the town; and there was under it a treasure belonging to them; and their father was a righteous man, and your Lord intended that they should attain their age of full strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. And I did them not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of those things over which you could not hold patience.’

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