

Alisher Navoi's Kydyr-Messiah

By Richard Hewitt

A paradoxical bridge spans east and west through the most unlikely of characters, Central Asia's Kydyr and the Messiah of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Many Kyrgyz legends and modern stories in Central Asia pay homage to "Kydyr," a wandering prophet who lives from generation to generation.^[1] The Kydyr, called Kyzyr in Kyrgyzstan's south, is a popular legendary saint who makes his way into Persian and Turkish religion, poetry and legends, often accompanied by 40 angels known as Chiltan. This same tradition has passed into the Arabic world where the immortal persona is known as al-Khizr, the Green Prophet.^[2] Alice E. Lasaster and other scholars believe Kydyr could be associated with the Green Man or Green Knight in northern European legends,^[3] while others compare him with the Hebrew Elijah,^[4] or Europe's controversial "Wandering Jew."^[5] One might wonder, "Does Central Asia's Kydyr have a connection with the prophets of the holy books?"

Kyrgyz oral tradition claims the Kydyr is a Hebrew saint, like the prophets of old.^[6] This belief can be traced back to the 12th century when a famous poet, Nizami-ye Ganjavi, also grouped Kydyr (Khizr) with the prophets:

"Khizr (confounded with the prophet Elias), the general of the monarch Zu-l-arnain, was Abraham's nephew, and the guide to Moses and the children of Israel in their passage of the Red Sea and the desert. Having drunk of the water of life, he is not to die until the Day of Judgment. It is said that wherever he planted his foot, the spot became green. Hence his name, Khizr."^[7]

In this discussion we will keep a narrow focus on local beliefs and on the Manas Epic's portrayal of the Kydyr. Then we will compare this Central Asian diviner with similar biblical figures.

Kyrgyz View

Common Kyrgyz beliefs claim the Kydyr will visit everyone in their life time, usually entering a village from the east before sunrise, riding a donkey. Often his visitation is around the time of holy holidays like Nooruz or Kurman Ait. He may appear as a poor beggar, old man, weary traveler, or some other undesirable, but he

also has the ability to adorn himself in light. Those who recognize him should hold him until they get his blessing. Those who do not greet him well lose their happiness.

Kyrgyz say, “Kydyr is one of seven.” In other words, he could be anyone, which explains Kyrgyz hospitality.^[8] His only identifying mark is the soft spot or hole in his hand. He often accompanies those who travel. After blessing, he usually vanishes. We will see if these oral traditions also match biblical narratives. But first, let's examine the Manas Epic:

Manas

Sayakbai Karalaev's version of the Manas Epic opens announcing that Manas' ancestors were blessed by the Kydyr:

His forefathers were all khans,
Blessed by Kidır from the beginning,
His ancestors were all khans,
Blessed by Kidır from the beginning.
In places where they had stayed overnight
Sacred shrines were built, for
God had blessed them from the beginning.^[9]

Patrick Franke, in his book “Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam,” suggests that storytellers, like Karalaev, include the Kydyr's blessing to show God's endorsement of a character.^[10] Ashim Jakypbek's retelling also enforces this procedure:

Jakyb excitedly said, “Oh my son, your Lord is the sky (god), your ancestor is Kyrgyz, the sun - your partner, the earth - your pillar, water is your life, fire - your breath, the blue-mane wolf is your escort, and the Kydyr is your protector.”^[11]

The Qur'an

A “Servant of God,” generally accepted as the Quran's Kydyr, is presented as greater than the great prophet Moses (Musa):

[18.65] Then they found one from among Our servants whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves.
[18.66] Musa said to him: Shall I follow you on condition that you should teach me right knowledge of what you have been taught...^[12]

Islamic scholars have several interesting comments on this passage, but those views are beyond the scope of this research. Later we will comment on Musa's guide and his interfaith role.

Prototype or Portrayal?

Kyrgyz children are told to hold on to the Kydyr until they get his blessing. This Kyrgyz belief is expressed in the Torah when Jacob tells an angelic being, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!"^[13] Jacob eventually got his blessing. Jacob's archaic story depicts modern Kyrgyz beliefs so precisely that it is not a prototype but an excellent portrayal of Kyrgyz faith.

Name Changer

In the Manas Epic, the Kydyr's Chiltan, or angels, changed the name of Manas' friend, Chegebai to Kutubiy:

"... The boy who entered running is Chegebai. When he becomes one of your warriors his name will be improved to Kutubiy."^[14]

The biblical angel whom Jacob held on to was also a name-changer:

"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."^[15]

The name-changer in both accounts is hard to define. Is he a holy man, an angel, a god, or the Creator in human form? To this day Kyrgyz likewise have difficulty defining the Kydyr's essence.

There are several other appearances of a special being in the holy books that match Central Asian perceptions of the Kydyr: the God who walked with Adam, Abraham's god-guest, the man Joseph met while searching for his brothers, the angelic general that would not align himself with Joshua or Joshua's enemy, and many more beyond the range of this brief research.^[16] I will, however, take time to focus on one biblical character who has striking similarities to Central Asia's Kydyr.

Xizru Masih?

Alisher Navoi, the great Central Asian poet (1441 - 1501), often referred to the Kydyr (Xzir) in his poetry. Navoi, an educated Muslim, was aware of the Quranic title Messiah:

“... O Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter...[\[17\]](#)

In the following section, spelled out in the extinct Chagatai language, Navoi restates the Qur’anic title “*Masih*” (Messiah), a title only given to Jesus (Isa) in Islamic literature:

Ey xatu jonbaxsh la’lingdin nishon Xizru Masih,
Balkibu ikki uyotidin nihon Xizru Mashi. [\[18\]](#)

Muslim readers/listeners would assume Navoi was referencing Isa (Jesus) when mentioning the “*Xizru Masih*,” the Kydyr-Messiah. We should discuss why Navoi made this audacious proclamation, linking the messiah and Kydyr. First, Judeo-Christian theology only accepts one Messiah, the ultimate human. And, as mentioned, the Islamic Qur’an also gives the title only to Isa.[\[19\]](#) If Navoi was operating within the boundaries of these three monotheistic religions it would not be kosher (or hadal) to count additional messiahs, as we might count prophets, saints, or angels.

So Navoi’s messiah, “*Xizru Masih*,” would represent the Quran’s “Messiah Jesus” (Isa *Mesix*). But Kyrgyz spirituality does not always fit neatly into monotheistic definitions. There is a local belief in spiritual beings who protect holy sites (*mazars*). These spiritual powers are often called protectors, rulers, or messiahs (*mashayaks*) – plural. In such a context Navoi may have been referring to some power or person beside Isa when he used the term *Xizru Masih*. On the other hand, various Kyrgyz linguists validate the singular definition of *mashayak*, meaning “toughest of the tough” or “highest of the high,” as depicted by their rebuke “Who do you think you are, God? Have you become the *mashayak*?” a title given to one person, not many. Most likely Navoi endorsed this prevailing Kyrgyz/monotheistic position.[\[20\]](#)

We should now consider Navoi’s comparative analysis and his conclusions about the messiah and Kydyr. But first, let us recall the historical belief Christians have regarding Isa’s fulfillment of the ancient Hebrew notion about messiah. Muslims and the Qur’an also confirm Isa is messiah. Now our research hypothesizes that Isa also fulfills Central Asia’s Kydyr role. This transnational adoption of Isa as supreme human is consistent with any such epitome. The Messiah/Christ/Kydyr by mere definition must be a trans-religious, international saint, with worldwide appeal bridging East and West; someone who stands above lesser regional spirits,

local rulers, patron saints, religious leaders, and national prophets. A supreme-human would be ordained to conquer the devil or global evil; or perhaps heal the planet. These concepts are consistent with Christian and Sunni Muslim theology regarding Isa, and with Jewish theology regarding the messiah.[\[21\]](#) Shiite Muslims, on the other hand, give the Mahdi a higher rank than Isa, but Shiites still concede Isa will be with the Mahdi working together to destroy the anti-Christ or false messiah (Dajjal) and restore humanity to Allah. And, as mentioned earlier, Kyrgyz recognize the *mashayak* as the “highest of the high”; consistent with our super-human paradigm.

The Kydyr and Isa

A general overview shows us that both Isa and Kydyr have a reputation for traveling from city to city; blessing, healing, and helping people. Both are believed to live forever,[\[22\]](#) and each has a connection to the source of “living water.” Both Kydyr and Isa provide a foundational model for the passionate and ascetic lifestyle of Sufi Muslims.[\[23\]](#) They can both change their forms or be veiled from human eyes. Often they both rise before the sun and reveal themselves coming from the east. And Kyrgyz in Naryn claim only the Kydyr can walk across the Naryn river, similar to Isa’s stroll on the Sea of Galilee. A astute scholar like Navoi certainly recognized such parallels.

An Appetite for Fish

Another odd parallel from the Qur’an and Bible, but not confirmed in the Manas Epic, centers around fish. Moses found the Kydyr at a place where his fish-lunch was left. We can not say from that short passage that the Kydyr likes fish, but this is interesting, because the Bible describes Isa’s meals on a few occasions. Most often, he seems to eat fish and give fish to his guests.[\[24\]](#) Additionally, Isa’s friends or disciples were often fishermen. It is quite fascinating that the resurrected Isa and the Quranic Kydyr both seem to have an “appetite” for fish:

“...they went out and got into the boat but didn’t catch a thing that night. Just as dawn was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore. The disciples didn’t realize it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?” They answered him, “No.” He told them, “Throw the net on the right hand side of the boat, and you’ll catch some.” So they threw it out and were unable to haul it in because it was so full of fish... When they arrived at the shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish lying on it, and some bread... Jesus went and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus revealed himself to the disciples after being raised from the dead.”[\[25\]](#)

Isa also performs some of his greatest miracles with fish. This is important, because of the Kydyr's Quranic miracle opens with Moses' (Musa's) fish coming to life:

“So when they had reached the junction of the two (rivers) they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea, going away.”[\[26\]](#)

Musa knew he would find the Kydyr at the spot where his fish came to life.

Donkey Rider

Many Kyrgyz say the Kydyr rides a donkey from the east when he comes into town. Isa, keeping within the framework of Kyrgyz beliefs and legends, rode a donkey from the eastern Mt. of Olives into Jerusalem. This passage is also worth showing because it perfectly portrays what Kyrgyz expect of those who do not welcome the Kydyr:

...they threw their own clothes on the (donkey) colt, and they set Jesus on him... Then, as he was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives... he saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you... because you did not know the time of your visitation.”[\[27\]](#)

Isa's pronouncement came to fruition when the Roman general, Titus, brutally destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Obviously, such cause-effect logic is controversial in academics, but it fits Kyrgyz beliefs about the Kydyr.

From the East

There are still many Kyrgyz who remember being wakened early, before any sign of light, to pray toward the east, waiting for the day's blessings or for the Kydyr's visitation.

Kyrgyz yurts face east, as if waiting for a god-guest to come with the rising sun. Jerusalem's Lion Gate, facing east, is the gate Jews, Muslims, and Christians believe the messiah will use to enter when he returns. The gate has been blocked to keep it protected from use by common folk. Tourists still find Muslim and Christian graves in front of the eastern gate, where many hope to be resurrected when Isa Mesikh comes to destroy the Dajjal.[\[28\]](#) Isa himself said he would return

like lightening flashing from the east...[29] The tent of Musa and the temple of Sulaiman (Solomon) also faced east[30] as if waiting for a messenger from paradise, which the Torah points out was located... you guessed it, in the East.[31]

Transfiguration

Kyrgyz say the Kydyr can change his form from weary traveler or undesirable poor person to a holy man shining in light.[32] Likewise, in the Gospel (Injil) the itinerate Isa transforms into a holy man, dressed in light:

“Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.[33]”

The Manas Epic eludes to Kydyr's transformation into forms reminiscent of Kyrgyz patron animals. In Ashim Jakypbekov's Теңири Манас the Kydyr appears as a wolf.[34] The Injil's messiah also matches Kyrgyz beliefs when he appears as a lion to some, but as a lamb to John in this revelation:

“...the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.” And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain...[35]”

Two great narratives each portray their respective supreme-beings transforming into shining light while also capable of appearing as an animal.

Disappears

Like Isa, the Kydyr often disappears suddenly after he has blessed someone or accomplished his task. Of course this would be common of anyone who travels between the seen and unseen worlds.

That very Kydyr, who had done it,
Suddenly vanished from sight.[36]

And:

“Now it came to pass, as he (Isa) sat at the table with them, that he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew him; and he vanished from their sight.”[37]

A surface examination of the Kydyr and Isa reveals many connections between the beliefs which developed among Kyrgyz and Jacob's tribes, and specific reasons why Alisher Navoi may have concluded that the resurrected Isa and Kydyr were one person. Some dated sociologists might conclude the messiah and Kydyr are simple archetypes, but genetic mapping and modern comparative analysis have shown that ancient migrations, not universal consciousness, are the reasons for our interconnected beliefs.[\[38\]](#) Additionally, Kyrgyz identification markers are not based on vague archetypes, but on distinctive ethnographic parallels.

I.D.

Kyrgyz say the Kydyr's hand is wounded or has a soft spot. This "hole" is the Kydyr's particular identification; he can change his appearance, but he's always stuck with that recognizable mark. Most Kyrgyz say the soft place is because a bone is missing in the lower thumb. A few people from Naryn (2003) told me it is a literal hole, saying light can pass through his hand. Twice I have been told that sunlight passes through Kydyr's hand like light passing through the punched center of *tandir* bread.[\[39\]](#) The resurrected Isa, like the Kydyr, was also recognized by the same distinguishing feature:

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."[\[40\]](#)

Thomas would not believe until Isa's I.D. had been confirmed by the only means available – the hole in his hand.[\[41\]](#) How did this form of verification pass from the Middle East's messiah to Central Asia's Kydyr? That is another article.

Conclusion

The Kyrgyz Kydyr mirrors biblical characters, including the biblical and Quranic Isa. Alisher Navoi, the famous 15th century poet picked up on these similarities. Since his time, 500 years of silence and misunderstanding cover the topic. Now a bridge has been re-established. This connection does not exalt one religion above another or push anyone to change religious affiliation. Instead we are forced to open our minds to the beauty and breadth that links all faiths.

[\[1\]](#) Also known as the Kidir, Kidr, Xizir, Khizr, Qydyr, Qidir, Gydry and other variations.

[\[2\]](#) Manas Encyclopedia, (Bishkek, 1995) vol. 1 p. 368. A story that many Qur'anic scholars attribute to the Kydyr is found in the Qur'an's 18th surah.

- [3] Lasater, Alice E.; Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages. (University Press of Mississippi, 1974). Lasater suggests the Kydyr is represented as the Green Knight in the Arthurian story, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Note also that some literary critics refer to the Green Man as an allusion to Jesus (Besserman, Lawrence "The Idea of the Green Knight"(1986)) For more about the Khidr/Green Man link read: Tom Cheetham; Green Man, Earth Angel (2004), and William Anderson; Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth (1990)
- [4] Some Central Asians will leave an empty seat at feasts for the Kydyr like Jews do for Elijah. On occasion Kyrgyz told me Kydyr is called "Elijah-Kydyr" (Manas Encyclopedia, 1995, vol. 1, p. 368).
- [5] The Wandering Jew is a mythological Jew who supposedly wanders eternally. Some consider his wandering a curse for killing Isa. Others put him more in the saint category – a traveling holy man who helps people in need. Still others would say his help to humanity is part of his penance.
- [6] Personal recorded interviews Bishkek, 2005
- [7] Nizami "Sikandar-Nama, the Instructions Given by the Prophet Khizr (peace be upon him) to the Poet Nizami Regarding the Writing of the "Sharaf-Nama,E Khusravan," or "Sikandar-Nama."" Canto X, couplet 2, translated by H. Wilberforce Clarke (1881).
- [8] This "one of seven" concept is caught in Isa's teaching about the sheep and goats in Matthew 25.
- [9] Karalaev, Saiakbai; Manas; Translated by Elmira Kochumkulkizi, Ph.D. Candidate in Near and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Washington (Seattle) lines 1-9. Emphasis added by author.
- [10] Franke, Patrick. Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam, Part IV. Beirut Texte und Studien 82. Beirut-Stuttgart 2000
- [11] Jakypbek, Ashim; "Tengiri Manas" p. 59 ("Kyrgyzstan" Bishkek, 1995). Translated by the author. Author's emphasis added.
- [12] Qur'an 18:60-82 (This is an electronic version of The Holy Qur'an, translated by M.H. Shakir and published by Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., in 1983). Parenthesis added for understanding.
- [13] Genesis 32:27,28
- [14] Jakypbek, Ashim "Tengiri Manas" p. 55 ("Kyrgyzstan" Bishkek, 1995)
- [15] Genesis 32:27, 28
- [16] Genesis 3:8, Genesis 18:1 (comparing this story with Kyrgyz ethnology could be its own dissertation), Genesis 37:15, Joshua 5:13-15.
- [17] Qur'an 3:45 (Pickthall)
- [18] Navoi, Alisher, "Hazoyinul-maoniy Badoe'ul-vasat" Volume III or Bada'i' al-Wasat ("Marvels of Middle Age") 53-57
- [19] I recommend Geoffrey Parrinder's "Jesus in the Qur'an (1995) for more information about the unique titles and pronouncements about Isa from the Qur'an.
- [20] Personal Interviews (Bishkek 1997, 1998 and confirmed again in 2008). Navoi's education from Samarkand and Herat would have promoted the literary position - only Isa is Messiah
- [21] Shiite Muslims believe Isa's role is significant on Judgment Day, but claim the Mahdi has a higher rank than Isa. Sunni Muslims believe Isa is higher than Mahdi and will be the one who conquers the devil or anti-Christ. For more information read Encyclopedia of Islam's reference to "Isa." I could not find the following, but these were recommended in The Muslim Isa (Khalidi, 2001): Abdullah Ibn al-Mubarak, Zuhd, (Asceticism) p. 77 and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Zuhd, (Asceticism) p. 97
- [22] From the Gospel, 1 Timothy 6:14-16. From the Qur'an, 3:45, 55.
- [23] Khalidi, Jarif "The Muslim Jesus, Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature" p. 74 (Harvard University Press, 2001)
- [24] Biblical books: John 6:9-11, Luke 24:42, Luke 5:1-9
- [25] John 21:1-14. Author's emphasis added.
- [26] Qur'an, Surah 18:61 (Pickthall)
- [27] Luke 19:35-44 (New King James Version) Emphasis added by author.
- [28] Muslims also believe the Mahdi will come from the east with Isa.
- [29] Matthew 24

- [30] The Kyrgyz yurt, Altai *ayil*, and Navajo *hogan* also face toward the east.
- [31] From the first book of the Torah: Genesis chapters 2 and 3.
- [32] Kyrgyz use this belief and a concept that the Kydyr could be “one of seven people” to teach their children to welcome all without showing favoritism. This Kyrgyz belief is similar to Isa’s teaching in Mathew 25:31-45. Isa, like the Kydyr, is also associated with the number seven (Revelation 1).
- [33] Matthew 17:1,2
- [34] Jakypbek, Ashim; “Tengiri Manas” p. 54 (“Kyrgyzstan,” Bishkek, 1995)
- [35] Revelation 5:5,6. Emphasis added by author.
- [36] Orozbekov, Sagymbai; “Manas” Vol. 1, verse 2636, 2637. Author’s translation.
- [37] Luke 24:30,31. Emphasis added by author.
- [38] Hewitt, American Studies in Central Asia: theory & practice, 2007. page 51
- [39] Both interviewees came from Naryn. *Tandir nan* is flat bread baked on the walls of a clay oven.
- [40] John 20:24, 24 (English Standard Version). Emphasis added by author.
- [41] The Kydyr’s hand is an amazing detail found in a culture that presently ostracizes those who believe in Isa’s resurrection. Many modern religious teachers use only one interpretation of the Quranic verse 4:157 as a means to denounce Isa’s physical death (denoted by his wounded hand) and promote a rift between monotheistic religions, but they are then stuck to reinterpret or delete the Arabic ‘mutawaffika’ (‘to kill’ or ‘to cause to die’) in Qur’an 3:55. Alauddin Mansur removed this announcement of Isa’s death in his 2004 version of the Kyrgyz Qur’an. Mansur’s 1999 version had the announcement as it is in Arabic. His intentional deletion in 2004 not only misrepresents the original, but also promotes a schism between east and west and upholds extremism in the very heartland of Navoi’s inclusive tolerance. Properly translated versions of the Qur’an give a view of Isa’s death that is consistent with “Allah’s earlier books” and harmonizing with other faiths. Divisive scholars may have been more influenced by Gnostic and Docetic theology than the Qur’an. For more information on this topic look at Tarif Khalidi’s excellent translation of the Qur’an (Viking, 2008), Qur’an 2:154, 3:55, 5:17, 6:22, 8:17 and G. Parrinder’s “Jesus in the Qur’an” (Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1995).