



ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

# An Analysis and Comparative Study of the Foundations of the Ashâb al-Kahf Narrative in the Qur'ân and Christian Sources

Ashâb-ı Kehf Hikâyesinin Kur'ân ve Hristiyan Kaynaklarındaki Temellerinin Analizi ve Karşılaştırılması

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## An Analysis and Comparative Study of the Foundations of the Ashâb al-Kahf Narrative in the Qur'ân and Christian Sources

### Ashâb-ı Kehf Hikâyesinin Kur'ân ve Hristiyan Kaynaklarındaki Temellerinin Analizi ve Karşılaştırılması

**Abstract:** The Qur'anic narrative of the People of the Cave (Ashâb al-Kahf) is a subject that has garnered significant interest in both the Islamic world and in Western Qur'anic studies. This study moves beyond conventional perspectives on the Ashâb al-Kahf parable, offering a deeper analysis by drawing upon the Arabic text of the Qur'ân and early Christian sources. Particular emphasis is placed on how the Qur'ân reconstructs, reinterprets, and imbues this parable with new significance within the framework of Islamic culture, while simultaneously addressing and rectifying certain omissions or inconsistencies found in the Christian narrative. The findings aim to contribute to a better understanding of the narrative similarities and differences between the two traditions, reevaluating the Qur'ân's engagement with Christianity. In this context, the aim of this paper is to examine the story of Ashâb al-Kahf in the Qur'ân in detail, uncovering its relationship with similar stories in Christian sources and highlighting the differences between them. Our research demonstrates that the Qur'anic account of the Ashâb al-Kahf contains distinctive elements absent in Christian sources and is presented in a wholly original style. In this context, our study supports the thesis that the Qur'anic narrative of Ashâb al-Kahf was not derived from Christian sources but instead represents an independent treatment marked by its unique style. By highlighting the differences between the two narratives, this study seeks to demonstrate that the Qur'ân offers an original text in this regard. Indeed, while the Qur'ân shares certain similarities with existing Christian narratives, it reveals these accounts within an Islamic framework, presenting a unique theological perspective. Additionally, this study aims to show that the story of Ashâb al-Kahf carries an important message that emphasizes the Islamic understanding of monotheism and God's omnipotence.

**Keywords:** Tafsir, The Story of Ashâb al-Kahf, Christian Hagiographic Literature, Holy Scriptures, Intertextuality.

**Özet:** Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssası, hem İslam dünyasında hem de Batı'daki Kur'ân araştırmalarında geniş bir ilgi alanına sahip olan bir kıssadır. Bu çalışma, *Ashâb-ı Kehf* kıssasının, mevcut bakış açısıyla ele alınmasının ötesine geçerek, Kur'ân'ın Arapça metninden ve erken dönem Hristiyan kaynaklarından yola çıkarak daha derinlemesine bir inceleme sunmaktadır. Özellikle, Kur'ân'ın bu kıssayı nasıl yeniden yapılandığı, yorumladığı, ona İslami kültüre uygun yeni bir anlam verdiği ve Hristiyan anlatısındaki bazı eksik noktaları ele aldığı ve tashih ettiği üzerinde durmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, Kur'ân'ın Hristiyanlıkla olan etkileşimini yeniden değerlendirerek, iki gelenek arasındaki anlatı farklılıklarının ve benzerliklerinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin amacı, Kur'ânda yer alan Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasını detaylı bir şekilde inceleyerek, Hristiyan kaynaklarındaki benzer anlatılarla olan ilişkisini açığa çıkarmak ve

aralarındaki farklılıkları vurgulamaktır. Araştırmamız, Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf anlatısının Hristiyan kaynaklarından farklı bir şekilde kendine özgü bilgiler içerdiğini ve tamamen orijinal bir üslupla sunulduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasının Hristiyan kaynaklarına dayanarak türetilmediği, aksine özgün bir üslupla ele alındığı tezini destekleyen çalışmamız iki anlatı arasındaki farklılıkları öne çıkararak, bu konuda Kur'ân'ın orijinal bir metin sunduğunu göstermeye çalışır. Nitekim Kur'ân, mevcut Hristiyan anlatılarıyla benzerlik taşısa dahi, bu anlatıları İslami bir bağlamda yeniden şekillendirerek özgün bir teolojik çerçeve sunmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasının, İslam'ın tevhit anlayışını ve Allah'ın mutlak kudretini vurgulayan önemli bir teolojik mesaj içerdiğini de göstermeyi hedeflemektedir. Makalenin orijinalliğine ve literatürde yapılan benzer çalışmalardan farklılığına gelince; bu makale daha önceki çalışmaların aksine, Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasını sadece Hristiyan kaynaklarıyla kıyaslamakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda bu kıssanın Kur'ân'ın ana mesajı olan tevhit anlayışını nasıl güçlendirdiğine de odaklanmaktadır. Batılı akademisyenlerin genellikle kıssanın Hristiyan kökenlerine yoğunlaştığı yerlerde, bu çalışma kıssanın İslami perspektifteki anlamını da derinlemesine ele almakta ve Kur'ân'ın bu anlatıyı özgün kılma sürecini irdelemektedir. Benzer çalışmalarda sıklıkla göz ardı edilen, Kur'ân'ın söz konusu kıssanın kurgusunu kendine has retorikliği ile yorumlamasına dair değerlendirmeler, bu makalenin farklı bir yaklaşım sunduğunu göstermektedir. Makale, sadece kıssanın kökenlerini tartışmak yerine, İslam ve Hristiyanlık arasında oluşan teolojik farkların da altını çizmekte ve bu hikâyenin İslami bir bakış açısıyla yeniden yorumlanmasının önemine vurgu yapmaktadır. Araştırmanın metodolojisine ve yöntemine bakıldığında, çalışmada hem metin temelli hem de tarihsel analiz yöntemlerinin bir arada kullanıldığı görülmektedir. Bu kapsamda, Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf anlatısı, Arapça metin üzerinden incelenerek erken dönem Hristiyan yazırlarındaki benzer anlatılarla karşılaştırılması yapılmıştır. Metodolojik olarak, Kur'ân'ın bu kıssayı nasıl şekillendirdiğini analiz etmek amacıyla dilbilimsel ve tefsiri yaklaşımlar uygulanmıştır. Tarihsel veriler ve Hristiyan literatüründeki paralellikler araştırılırken, modern akademik çalışmalar ve erken dönem İslami kaynaklar da göz önünde bulundurulmuştur. Ayrıca, kıssanın tarihsel arka planı ve dini bağlamları detaylı bir şekilde ele alınarak, konunun daha geniş bir perspektifte değerlendirilmesi hedeflenmiştir. Makalenin kapsamına gelince; çalışmamız hem Kur'ândaki Ashâb-ı Kehf anlatısının tefsirini hem de Hristiyan kaynaklarındaki paralel anlatıları kapsamlı bir şekilde ele alır. Hristiyanlık ve İslam arasındaki dini ve kültürel etkileşimleri araştırarak, bu anlatının İslam dünyasında ve Batı'daki akademik çevrelerde nasıl anlaşıldığını tartışır. Ayrıca, kıssanın tarihsel arka planını ve Kur'ândaki kullanımını geniş bir şekilde inceleyerek, kıssanın İslam'daki yerini ve dinler arası bağlantılarını aydınlatır. Son olarak ulaşılan sonuç ve bulgulara gelince; makalede Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasının Kur'ânda sadece bir ibret hikâyesi olarak değil, Hristiyan kaynaklarındaki eksikliklere dikkat çekmek ve onları tamamlamak amacıyla da kullanıldığı anlaşılmıştır. Kur'ân'ın bu kıssayı, Allah'ın hükümrancılığının tevhit inancına dayandığını ve başka bir ilahın kabul edilemeyeceğini vurgulamak için kullandığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca, gençlerin mağarada korunup mucizevi bir şekilde uyanmalarının, Kur'ândaki anlatıda *God*'ün gücünü ve rahmetini göstermek için önemli bir örnek olduğu görülmüştür. Kur'ândaki versiyonun, Hristiyan efsanesine benzer olsa da İslami inançlar doğrultusunda şekillendiği ve yeni bir anlam kazandığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, Ashâb-ı Kehf kıssasının hem Hristiyan hem de İslami kaynaklarda önemli bir yer tuttuğu ve iki anlatı arasında bazı temel farklılıkların bulunduğu görülmüştür. Neticede, kıssanın Kur'ândaki versiyonunun, gençlerin Allah'a olan inancı ve tevhit vurgusu etrafında şekillendiği ve Hristiyan kaynaklarından farklı olarak daha net bir mesaj içerdiği anlaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tefsir, Ashâb-ı Kehf Kıssası, Hristiyan Hagiografik Literatürü, Kutusal Kitaplar, Metinlerarasıcılık.

## Introduction

The story of Ashāb al-Kahf in the Qur'ān is a narrative rich with deep layers of meaning and explicitly stated points of contention, inviting a range of interpretations. This interpretive challenge stems from the Qur'ān's unique method of presentation, which skillfully blends subtle hints with clear articulation. In essence, it is this dual nature—balancing implicit suggestions with explicit clarity—that underpins the complexity of the narrative. Early Islamic tradition and exegetical literature have created a demand for additional information to fully comprehend the text; in this context, the Christian parable of the Seven Sleepers has played an important role in almost all Islamic narratives and interpretations.<sup>1</sup> From the early 20th century, this parable has garnered considerable attention not only in the Islamic world but also among Western researchers.<sup>2</sup> These studies have sought to explore the historical origins, geographical location, and the processes of mutual influence between Christian and Islamic motifs.<sup>3</sup>

However, many of these academic works due to the prevailing intellectual atmosphere of the time, has focused only on the assumed origins of the parable without adequately addressing how these motifs and traditions developed uniquely in other cultures, particularly in Islam. Later academic inquiries, adopting a perspective from the history of religions, have tended to focus more on Islamic exegetical literature, often relegating the Qur'ānic text itself to a secondary role.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, they have fallen short of fully revealing the depth and originality within the Qur'ān.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, however, significant works have emerged advocating for a reassessment of this perspective.

For example, Sidney Griffith, rather than merely exploring the simple relationship of influence between the Qur'ānic verses and Christian texts, has examined how the Qur'ān refers to Christian sources and how these references are reinterpreted. According to Griffith, the Qur'ānic verses may adopt certain elements from Christian tradition; however, these elements are reinterpreted within the Qur'ān and transformed into a religious critique.<sup>6</sup> As Griffith developed arguments based on intertextual comparisons, Archer built upon Griffith's findings, offering broader theological perspectives.<sup>7</sup> In this context, Gabriel S.

1 See Renate Pillinger, "Siebenschläfer", 1305-1309; Pieter W. van der Horst, "Pious Long-Sleepers in Antiquity: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian", 14-15.

2 Refiye Şenesen, "Pagandan Hristiyan ve Müslümanlığa Bir İnanç Merkezi: Ashab-ı Kef", 1023-1040.

3 Bartłomiej Grysa, "The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Syriac and Arab sources – a comparative study", 45-59.

4 Anne-Marie Rozelet, *Louis Massignon et la symbolique "des Sept Dormants"* 240-251; Shawkat M. Toorawa, "A Translation of Sūrat al-Kahf (Q. 18) 'The Cave'", 109-127; James A. Bellamy, "Al-Raqim or al-Ruqūd? A Note on Sūrah 18:9", 115-17.

5 Şenesen, "Pagandan Hristiyan ve Müslümanlığa Bir İnanç Merkezi: Ashab-ı Kef", 1023-1040; Ove Ullestad, *La légende des sept dormants les gens de la caverne*, 44-89.

6 Manoël Pénicaud, "Nouveaux Réveils Des Sept Dormants", 1-11; Nancy N. Roberts, "A Parable of Blessing: The Significance and Message of the Qur'anic Account of 'The Companions of the Cave'", 295-317.

7 Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an: The Companions of the Cave in Surat al-Kahf and in Syriac

Reynolds, in his work *The Qur'ān and the Bible's Subtext*, discussed Griffith's conclusions and expanded upon them, arguing that the depiction of death as a state of sleep is actually rooted in the Bible. While Reynolds sought to link the theological connections between the Qur'ān and Christianity through various historical sources, he suggested that the internal meaning of the Qur'ānic text has often been overshadowed by other religious texts.<sup>8</sup>

This study aims to examine how traditional Christian motifs are addressed or omitted in the Qur'ān. Furthermore, it will compare the Qur'ānic commentary with the interpretations found in the Christian tradition, exploring how both sides ascribe different meanings to the same event and the theological and historical processes underlying these differences.

### 1. Historical Written Records Regarding the Companions of the Cave (Ashāb al-Kahf)

The earliest extant texts concerning the event of the Seven Sleepers are two brief Syriac sermons, based on the analysis of their structure and content. These sermons are attributed to Jacob of Serugh (AD 521), a Syriac bishop and ecclesiastical writer.<sup>9</sup> Given that these texts are poetic in form, it is plausible to assume that they were part of an earlier oral or written tradition.<sup>10</sup> However, no academic consensus has yet been reached regarding the original form and language of these texts. There are varying views on the emergence and spread of the Seven Sleepers' parable.<sup>11</sup> Scholars like Allgeier and Huber argue that this parable derives from a literary tradition rooted in antiquity and late antiquity and that it developed during theological discussions in the Syriac Church concerning the resurrection of the dead.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, Honigmann posits that the Bishop of Ephesus, Stephen, wrote about a historical event during the reign of Theodosius II (AD 450), in the context of debates on the resurrection of the dead with Theodore, Bishop of Aegae, and this text was later translated into Syriac.<sup>13</sup>

In light of these studies and the gathered sources, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the origin and early diffusion of the event of the Seven Sleepers. Although the historical veracity of the event cannot be definitively proven, it is evident that by the 5th century, the story had rapidly gained acceptance and spread in both Eastern and Western churches. The earliest written versions appear in works following the sermons of Jacob of

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Christian Tradition", 109-137.

8 Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Quran and Its Biblical Subtext*, 167-185.

9 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 398-410.

10 Huber, *Die Wanderlegende*, 155-214.

11 Şenesen, "Pagandan Hristiyan ve Müslümanlığa Bir İnanc Merkezi: Ashab-ı Kef", 1023-1040; Arthur Allgeier, "Die älteste Gestalt der Siebenschläferlegende", 33-87; E. Honigmann, "Stephen of Ephesus and the Legend of the Seven Sleepers", 123-168.

12 Faraz Masood Sheikh, "Open-Mindedness and the Companions of the Cave: Qur'an and the Temporal Elaboration of Muslim Subjectivity", 167-190.

13 Pillinger, "Siebenschläfer", 1306; Horst, "Pious Long-Sleepers in Antiquity: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian", 14-15.

Serugh, such as Gregory of Tours' works (d. AD 594), who developed a Latin version of the story based on a Syriac source (*Passio Sanctorum Septem Dormientium apud Ephesum*). Additionally, the story of the Seven Sleepers is also found in texts from the 6th century, such as Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor's works, which are based on Greek church history translated into Syriac. Dionysius of Tell Mahre's (d. AD 845) Syriac chronicle suggests that the event is based on the Greek text of John of Ephesus (d. AD 585). These documents indicate that the parable of the Seven Sleepers was widely circulated in both the Western Syriac Jacobite churches and the Eastern Syriac Nestorian church.<sup>14</sup>

As Sidney Griffith noted, the parable circulating among Western Syriac Jacobite communities was also known in the Eastern Syriac Nestorian church. The story of the Seven Sleepers, with its theological richness and its dimensions of martyrdom and miracle, had a profound impact across various churches. As for how the story became known among Arabs, particularly in the Hejaz region, this can only be speculated. Griffith suggests that the parable reached the Arab world through Northern Arab tribes and Western Syriac Jacobite Christians in Najran. However, it is also possible that the story reached Mecca via the Persian Empire through Eastern Syriac Christians. Nevertheless, in line with Griffith, it is plausible to consider that the narrative encountered in Jacob of Serugh's homilies was a circulating oral or written story that is addressed in the Qur'ân's Sura al-Kahf.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this narrative should be regarded as a primary source when comparing it with the account found in the Qur'ân. The debates concerning how this narrative was incorporated into the Qur'ân, as viewed by some Christian scholars, focus on how the parable of the Seven Sleepers was recontextualized within an Islamic framework, and which elements were adopted or omitted in this process.

## **2. The Parable of the Companions of the Cave (Seven Sleepers) in Christian Tradition**

The parable of the Seven Sleepers holds a significant place in Christian belief, presenting a rich narrative that blends various literary and theological elements. This parable demonstrates a clear affinity with the martyrdom narratives that are a hallmark of early Christian writings. From the second half of the second century, this genre of literature developed into narratives where the sufferings and sacrifices endured by Christians for their faith were depicted in an exaggerated manner. These narratives used the trials and deaths of Christians to demonstrate the strength of their faith. In this context, the parable of the Seven Sleepers also evolved as a narrative of this kind, depicting the resistance and courage of several young men in the face of persecution for their faith. The events in the story, generally

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14 Hermann Kandler, *Die Bedeutung der Siebenschläfer (Aṣḥāb al-Kahf) im Islam*, 38-45.

15 Griffith, "Christian Lore And The Arabic Qur'an", 109-137; Arthur Allgeier, *Die westsyrische Überlieferung der Siebenschläferlegende*, 21, 30-49; Theresia Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor Dem Islam*, 70-85; Griffith, "Christian Lore And The Arabic Qur'an", 109-137.

follow the structure of a typical martyrdom narrative: a confrontation with a force opposing the faith, suffering for one's belief, and ultimately achieving victory.<sup>16</sup>

The events of the parable take place during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Decius (249-251). Decius commanded all Roman citizens to sacrifice to idols. In this context, the young men, later known as the Seven Sleepers, refused to obey the Emperor's command and chose to maintain their faith. This portion of the parable mirrors a typical martyrdom account. The young men defied Decius' order to sacrifice, courageously standing before the Emperor and refusing to abandon their Christian faith. However, their defiance was exposed by traitors, and they were subsequently captured and brought before Emperor Decius. This scene recalls the speeches in martyrdom narratives, where Christians boldly defend their faith before emperors or pagan officials, taking the opportunity to articulate their beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

The young men's retreat to the cave in the story leads those around them to perceive them as martyrs. As the young men are sealed inside the cave, they are considered martyrs by the people witnessing this event, believing they sacrificed themselves for their faith. At this point, the concept of martyrdom is once again invoked. Martyrdom, in this context, does not solely refer to physical death for the Christian faith but also encompasses the act of making sacrifices to preserve one's faith. As they were sealed inside the cave, lead tablets were placed at the entrance to document the event. These tablets served as a kind of historical record meant to convey the young men's story to future generations. The addition of these tablets not only set the narrative as a martyrdom narrative but also as a historical record. The tablets became symbols verifying the truth of the young men's experiences and elements enhancing the reliability of the narrative.<sup>18</sup>

The presence of the lead tablets also serves as a method for preserving the martyrdom event for future generations. In Christian history, the lives and faith of martyrs were immortalized through written documents, ensuring their sacrifices would be remembered. In this parable, the recording of the young men's experiences serves the same purpose. Thus, their sacrifices and faith carried a message not only for their contemporaries but also for future Christian communities. The structure of this parable exemplifies the typical use of martyrdom narratives in Christian tradition as tools for strengthening the faith of believers. In this respect, the parable of the Seven Sleepers holds a prominent place in Christian literature, combining both martyrdom and miraculous deliverance themes.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Süleyman Karacelil, "Ashab-ı Keff Kıssası Bağlamında Gençlik ve Değerler", 203-233; Ali Osman Ateş, "Ashâb-ı Keff Kıssası'nın Düşündürdükleri", 105-117; Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Lehrbuch der Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte*, 120-129.

17 Karacelil, "Ashab-ı Keff Kıssası Bağlamında Gençlik ve Değerler", 203-233; İsmail Muhtaroğlu Haviyev, "Nahçıvan'da Eshab'ül Keff Abidesi ve Halk İnançları", 139-141.

18 Wolfgang Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike*, 78-99; Ateş, "Ashâb-ı Keff Kıssası'nın Düşündürdükleri", 105-117.

19 Hamza Karaođlan, "Hristiyanlık'ta Yedi Uyurlar", 1696-1707.

At a certain point, the journey of martyrdom in the Christian parable of the Seven Sleepers undergoes a distinct transformation. Initially, the narrative focuses on the young men's flight from Emperor Decius' persecution and their divine deliverance from this persecution. However, the story later shifts into a miraculous narrative, devoid of bloodshed. This miraculous element is the young men's prolonged sleep in the cave, which serves as the central motif of the parable. Here, we see how the theme of prolonged sleep, often encountered in mythological narratives, is reinterpreted within a Christian context. This sleep is not merely a physical rest but a narrative symbolizing the young men's salvation from death by the grace of God. As they fled Decius' persecution, they were miraculously preserved through the strength of their faith.<sup>20</sup>

The escape and long stay in the cave showcase the strength of the young men's faith. Another important aspect of the narrative is their resurrection from this long sleep, symbolizing God's power over bodily resurrection. Particularly, the resurrection of the young men after centuries serves as a powerful defense of the belief in bodily resurrection. In this context, bodily resurrection is not merely a theological concept but a reality made concrete through the miraculous reawakening of the young men. The parable, therefore, holds significance not only as a martyrdom account but also as evidence of bodily resurrection. Such a narrative was a crucial tool for reinforcing belief in bodily resurrection within early Christian communities and spreading this belief.

The idea of bodily resurrection appears in other martyrdom accounts as well. For instance, in the martyrdom of Pionius and his companions, it is mentioned that their bodies remained incorrupt after death. However, instances where bodily resurrection is explicitly emphasized for apologetic purposes and the martyrs are portrayed in this way are rare. Apart from the account of Pionius and his companions, this theme seems to receive limited attention in other martyrdom narratives. In the parable of the Seven Sleepers, however, bodily resurrection occupies a central role, with the miraculous resurrection of the young men being used to demonstrate the strength of their faith. This shows how the parable was skillfully integrated into both theological and hagiographic traditions. The young men were seen not only as heroes who defended their faith within Christian communities but also as living proof of bodily resurrection. Through these characteristics, the parable served both as an element of Christian theology and as a cult uniting Christian communities. The miraculous deliverance and resurrection of the young men were used as evidence in church debates and contributed to the unification of Christian communities.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, the parable of the Seven Sleepers creates a new type of Christian narrative by combining various literary and theological elements. This narrative masterfully merges real events with mythological themes while emphasizing the core beliefs of Christian theology.

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20 Anna Tozzi Di Marco, "The Seven Sleepers Tradition (Ashab-ı Khef) in Afşin", 55-66.

21 Gürdal Aksoy, "Erken Hristiyanlığın Hagiografik Bir Kurgusu Olarak Yedi Uyurlar ya da Ashab ul-Kehf", 189, 209-223; Ateş, "Ashâb-ı Khef Kıssası'nın Düşündürdükleri", 105-117.



### 3. The Narrative of the Companions of the Cave in the Qur'ān

The story of the “Companions of the Cave” (Ashāb al-Kahf) has garnered significant attention not only in Islamic scholarship but also in Western studies of the Qur'ān. Commentators, both Islamic and Western, often approach the Qur'ānic text with either a well-established or evolving Islamic perspective, seeking to interpret this narrative within an Islamic framework. Meanwhile, some Western scholars have attempted to trace the origins of this story to earlier Christian sources, analyzing the extent to which the Qur'ān adheres to or diverges from these antecedent narratives. However, the perspective presented here differs from traditional interpretations by offering a reverse viewpoint. Modern scholars have identified some of the earliest written accounts of the “Companions of the Cave” among texts written by Syriac-speaking Christians. These texts, in their form known among Arabic-speaking Christians, are believed to have been familiar to the Qur'ān's audience. This assumption is based on the idea that when the Prophet Muhammad delivered the divine revelation, this parable would have been known to Arabic-speaking Christians.<sup>22</sup>

In the Qur'ān, the narrative of the “Companions of the Cave” is presented at the beginning of the Surat al-Kahf.<sup>23</sup> God begins the narrative with the question: “Or have you thought that the companions of the cave and al-Raqīm were among Our signs, a wonder?”<sup>24</sup> This narrative serves to remind the Prophet Muhammad of the purpose of revelation, which is to warn those who claim “God has taken a son”. More specifically, while the story of the Companions of the Cave is often interpreted as addressing the denial of bodily resurrection, this is only one dimension of its message. The narrative's central theological objective is broader, as suggested by verse 4 of Surat al-Kahf: “And to warn those who say: Allah has taken a son.”<sup>25</sup> This verse warns against attributing a biological son to Allah, thereby elevating a created being (Jesus) to divine status. The Qur'ān conveys this warning indirectly through the narrative of the Companions of the Cave. The young men in the story abandoned idolatry and embraced belief in the one true God, to whom Jesus himself called people. This is explicitly affirmed in verse 14, where they proclaim: “Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We shall call upon no god besides Him.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in verse 15, they critique their community, stating: “These, our people, have taken for worship gods other than Him.”<sup>27</sup> These verses underscore their rejection of all entities other than the Creator as objects of worship.

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22 Ian Richard Netton, “Towards a Modern Tafsīr of Sūrat al-Kahf: Structure and Semiotics”, 67-87; Mustafa Şentürk, “Kur'ānda Bir Pasif Direniş Öyküsü: Ashāb-ı Kef", 224-237; Yunus Emre Gördük, *Klasik İslami Kaynaklar Işığında Eshab-ı Kef'in Yaşadığı Bölgenin Muhtemel Koordinatları*, 118-119.

23 al-Kahf, 18/9-26.

24 al-Kahf, 18/9.

25 al-Kahf, 18/9.

26 al-Kahf, 18/14.

27 al-Kahf, 18/15.

Implicit in the narrative is a subtle critique: among the entities unworthy of worship (āliha), Jesus, often described as the “son of God” and attributed divine status, is included. The term (ilāh or āliha) in verses 14 and 15 refers not only to idols but also to human figures deified alongside God. The Qur’ān tactfully and implicitly highlights that attributing divinity to Jesus—even indirectly, as was done by certain Christians—constitutes shirk (associating partners with Allah). This indirect approach reflects the nuanced nature of Christian theology concerning Jesus’ divinity. Christians often portray Jesus not as a fully independent deity but as a divine attribute or intermediary, thereby assigning him a partial or semi-divine status. The Qur’ān subtly and allusively addresses this perspective, likening it to idolatrous practices. Furthermore, if Jesus truly held divine status, the young men seeking refuge in the cave would have worshipped him directly rather than the one God to whom Jesus called humanity. Instead, they recognized Jesus as a messenger who affirmed the oneness of God and chose to worship only the Creator of the heavens and the earth. At the end of the narrative, the concept of God’s oneness is reaffirmed, with God highlighting that the youths had no protector but Him and that His sovereignty is exclusive.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it can be concluded that the central theme of the parable of the Companions of the Cave focuses more on the uniqueness and oneness of God than on responding to the denial of resurrection.

It seems that God is reminding the Prophet Muhammad of the story of the “youths who sought refuge in the cave,” implying that this narrative, like the verses of the Qur’ān, is one of “God’s signs.” The possibility that this story could be presented as an example pointing to God’s signs is worth noting. The Qur’ān’s primary objective in this context is to warn those who claim that “God has taken a son,” making the martyrdom and miraculous aspects of the story of the Companions of the Cave familiar in Christian circles. At the end of the passage, the key lesson emphasized is that God shares His sovereignty with no one and that only He should be sought for refuge.<sup>29</sup> Hence, it is plausible to argue that the Qur’ān employs this narrative to reinforce the meaning of “God’s signs.” *Furthermore, the Qur’ān presents this narrative to correct a theological error within Christian belief—namely, the belief that “God has a son,” and that this son is Jesus, the Messiah.*

However, linking the Qur’ānic parable of the Companions of the Cave to a Christian parable brings with it certain interpretive challenges. First, both Islamic scholars and Western researchers largely agree that the sura containing this narrative is predominantly Meccan, with only a few exceptions.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is generally accepted that the polytheistic opponents in Mecca largely believed in lesser gods and angels as children of God. Therefore, it is thought that the warning directed toward those who claim “God has taken a son” was primarily aimed at the polytheists of Mecca, rather than Christians. Similarly, it is widely believed that Muhammad’s antagonistic

28 al-Kahf, 18/26.

29 al-Kahf, 18/26-27; Netton, “Towards a Modern Tafsīr of Sūrat al-Kahf: Structure and Semiotics”, 67-87; Selçuk, “Ashābu’l Kēhf”, 74-79; Gördük, *Klasik İslami Kaynaklar Işığında Eshab-ı Kēhf*, 118-119.

30 Netton, “Towards a Modern Tafsīr of Sūrat al-Kahf: Structure and Semiotics”, 67-87; al-Kahf, 18:9.

encounters with Jews and Christians occurred primarily during the Medinan period, whereas he maintained more favorable relations with them in Mecca. Nevertheless, this predominantly Meccan sura does reference the “Companions of the Cave” narrative, suggesting that the Qurʾān assumes that this Christian story was already familiar to the Prophet Muhammad and possibly to a portion of the Qurʾān’s audience. In addition to recalling the details of this parable, it can also be observed that the Qurʾān incorporates many elements from Christian writings, teachings, and church tradition. These elements not only appear in the Qurʾān but are often presented with the assumption that the audience is already familiar with them.

This discussion hinges on two main points: first, whether Surah al-Kahf is of Meccan or Medinan origin; and second, if it is Meccan, how the people of Mecca became acquainted with these narratives. Regarding the first point, while Surah al-Kahf shares certain characteristics with Medinan surahs due to its length and the claim that some of its verses were revealed in Medina, an analysis of the narratives contained within the surah suggests that it is more appropriately classified as Meccan, as supported by the majority of scholars.<sup>31</sup>

As for the second point, if we adhere to the prevailing opinion that the surah is Meccan, we must address how the Meccan populace was familiar with the story of the Companions of the Cave and other Christian and Jewish traditions. Two possibilities emerge in this context. The first possibility lies in the historical context of the early revelations. After receiving the first revelation in the Cave of Hira, Prophet Muhammad sought guidance from Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian monk, about the nature of his experience. This interaction demonstrates that Christians were present in Mecca. Furthermore, as a significant trade center, Mecca likely encountered various cultural and religious influences, including Christianity. Indeed, historical accounts note the presence of a small number of Christians and Hanifs—monotheists adhering to the Abrahamic tradition—amid the polytheistic majority in Mecca.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, the inclusion of this story in a Meccan surah could be attributed to the polytheists, who, having heard it from the few Christians in their vicinity, posed it to Prophet Muhammad as a means of testing the authenticity of his prophetic message, which was grounded in Abrahamic monotheism. As for the second possibility, it is that the polytheists encountered this story through Christians in Medina and subsequently presented it to Prophet Muhammad as a challenge to verify his prophethood. This latter explanation is the most widely accepted, as both Ibn Ishāq and al-Tabarī report narrations supporting this view.<sup>33</sup>

At the beginning of the Qurʾānic narrative, God poses rhetorical questions to the Prophet Muhammad regarding the true interpretation of this story: “Do you think that the companions of the cave and al-Raqīm were among Our signs, a wonder?”<sup>34</sup> As the narrative

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31 Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, 17/592-593.

32 See, Nebi Bozkurt & Mustafa Sabri Küçükaşçı, “Mekke”, *DİA*, 28: 555-563.

33 Tabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān*, 17/592-593.

34 al-Kahf, 18/9.

progresses, it can be seen to develop in two distinct sections: the first from 18:10-20, and the second from 18:21-26. In the first section, God reminds the Prophet Muhammad of the fundamental elements of the narrative, blending them with specific phrases borrowed from other parts to reveal the correct, that is, Qur'anic interpretation of the story. In the second section, God addresses the debates surrounding the details of the story and gives the Prophet Muhammad direct instructions on how to deal with these issues.<sup>35</sup> The key messages God conveys in this story are as follows: the youths sought refuge in the cave and asked their Lord for mercy and guidance, God sealed their ears for many years and then awakened them so that they would know how long they had stayed.<sup>36</sup>

By interpreting the real story of the Companions of the Cave, God presents the youths' experiences as a narrative often found in the Qur'ân about righteous individuals who believe in God. In verse 13, it is explicitly stated that these youths believed in their Lord. And in verse 14, it is affirmed that they worshipped no other god. It is also mentioned in verse 15 that their people adopted other gods without offering any convincing proof. With God's guidance, the youths advise each other to seek refuge in the cave, where they believe their Lord will show them mercy and rescue them from their dire situation,<sup>37</sup> echoing the similar sentiment expressed earlier in verse 10. God then informs the Prophet Muhammad about the miracle experienced by these youths, as the sun shifted slightly south of the cave's entrance at sunrise and northward at sunset, protecting them. This event is described as one of God's signs. God further tells the Prophet Muhammad that although the youths appeared to be awake, they were asleep in reality and that He was turning them from side to side. Their dog is also mentioned as lying at the cave's entrance. God then emphasizes that if the Prophet Muhammad had been present at that moment, he would have been struck with great fear and fled in dread.<sup>38</sup>

After awakening the youths, God presents their discussion about how long they had stayed. Some speculate a day or less, while others respond, "Our Lord knows best." God then recounts their dialogue: one of them is instructed to go to the city to buy pure food but must do so cautiously to avoid revealing their location. Otherwise, they fear being stoned or forced to renounce their faith. If not, they would never succeed.<sup>39</sup>

In the second section of the narrative, God clarifies the disputes surrounding the story's details and instructs the Prophet Muhammad on how to handle them. Firstly, God takes responsibility for reminding the listeners of the story, so that they may understand

35 Marianna Klar, "Re-examining Textual Boundaries: Towards a Form-Critical Sûrat al-Kahf", 215-238.

36 al-Kahf, 18:10-12; Klar, "Re-examining Textual Boundaries: Towards a Form-Critical Sûrat al-Kahf", 215-238; Şentürk, "Kur'ân'da Bir Pasif Direniş Öyküsü: Ashâb-ı Kef", 224-237.

37 al-Kahf, 18/16.

38 Michelangelo Chasseur, "Oriental Elements in Surat al-Kahf", 255-289; Şentürk, "Kur'ân'da Bir Pasif Direniş Öyküsü: Ashâb-ı Kef", 224-237; Selçuk, "Ashâbu'l Kef", 74-79.

39 Angga Mulyana, *Kisah-Kisah dalam Surah al-Kahf*, 1-7; Ateş, "Ashâb-ı Kef Kısası'nın Düşündürdükleri", 105-117; Selçuk, "Ashâbu'l Kef", 74-79.

that His promises are true. He notes that the event is a sign of the apocalypse (al-sā'ah) and that people disagreed on the specifics of the narrative.<sup>40</sup> Some people wanted to build a structure over the youths' resting place, but ultimately, the prevailing opinion was to build a place of worship there.<sup>41</sup> There were also disagreements about the number of the youths. God instructs the Prophet Muhammad to respond, "My Lord knows best," and neither to engage in disputes over the matter nor seek the opinions of others.<sup>42</sup> The Qur'ān concludes with God's advice to the Prophet Muhammad about not to say "I will do this tomorrow" without invoking God's guidance. Furthermore, the Qur'ān adds that "some people believed that the youths remained in the cave for 300 years and an extensional nine years". Finally, God commands the Prophet Muhammad to declare that "God knows best how long they remained. The knowledge of the unseen (ghayb) belongs to Him" and that "they had not any protector besides Him, and He does not share His command with anyone."<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Interpretations of the Companions of the Cave in Tafsir

Before delving into the information provided in the tafsirs regarding this story, it is beneficial to first address briefly whether the People of the Cave (Ashāb al-Kahf) and the People of al-Raqīm are the same group or two distinct groups. There is no definitive clarification on this matter in the authentic hadiths; however, Imam al-Bukhari, in his *Sahīh*, presents two separate chapter headings: "Ashāb al-Kahf" and "Ashāb al-Raqīm." He then narrates the well-known story of the three men trapped in a cave under the heading of "Ashāb al-Raqīm." After being trapped inside due to a rock blocking the cave's entrance, these three men prayed, and as a result of their prayers, they were saved from the cave. Based on Bukhari's creative interpretation of this story, some scholars conclude that the People of the Cave were one group, while the People of al-Raqīm were the three individuals who had previously sought refuge in the cave and were known by this name.<sup>44</sup>

However, Ibn Hajar, in his commentary (sharḥ) on Bukhari, notes that there is no definitive hadith evidence identifying the People of al-Raqīm as the three trapped men. What occurred is that the narrators of the cave story seemingly added a reference from a narration, in which the Prophet mentioned al-Raqīm and told the story of the three men, attributed to Nu'man ibn Bashir. Yet, this statement does not appear in the *Kutub al-Sittah* or

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40 Klar, "Re-examining Textual Boundaries: Towards a Form-Critical Sūrat al-Kahf", 215-238; Chasseur, "Oriental Elements in Surat al-Kahf", 255-289; Şentürk, "Kur'anda Bir Pasif Direniş Öyküsü: Ashāb-ı Kef", 224-237; Selçuk, "Ashābu'l Kef", 74-79.

41 al-Kahf, 18/21.

42 al-Kahf, 18/22.

43 Chasseur, "Oriental Elements in Surat al-Kahf", 255-289; Ateş, "Ashāb-ı Kef Kıssası'nın Düşündürdükleri", 105-117; Selçuk, "Ashābu'l Kef", 74-79.

44 Bukhārī, "al-Anbiyā'"; *al-Jāmi' al-Şāhīh*, 52.

other hadith collections. Thus, it is not certain that the Prophet referred to these three men as the People of al-Raqīm.<sup>45</sup>

Tafsirs provide varying explanations, regarding the nature and location of al-Raqīm. For instance, in his famous tafsir *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922) records multiple opinions and narrations regarding the “Aṣḥāb al-Kahf” and “al-Raqīm” mentioned in Surah al-Kahf. Some commentators suggest that al-Raqīm is the name of a place, while others describe it as a tablet, on which the names of the People of the Cave were inscribed. According to the majority of those who adopt the former view, al-Raqīm refers to the valley where the People of the Cave sought refuge. Some people claim that this valley is located between ‘*Uṣfān and ‘Ayla*, in the southern region of Palestine. A narration coming from Ibn Abbās suggests that al-Raqīm is the name of the mountain where the cave of the People of the Cave was located, and this mountain is called “Banjelus” or “Banjalus,” while the cave is known as “Hizam.” The city, from which the People of the Cave fled to escape the oppression of the tyrant Daqyanus (Decius), is named “Afmus” or “Afsus” in these accounts. Samarqandī (d. 373/973) also confirms in a narration coming from Ibn Abbās that the city of the People of the Cave was called “Afsus.” Similarly, al-Māwardī (d. 450/1059) and al-Khāzin (d. 741/1340) state that the city was known as “Afsus.” Tha‘labī (d. 427/1036), like other authors, refers to the city of the People of the Cave as “Afsus,” the mountain where the cave was located as “Banjalus,” and the cave itself as “Hiram.”<sup>46</sup>

In his *Tārīh*, al-Ṭabarī refers to this city as “Defsus.”<sup>47</sup> Many later commentators repeat these reports about al-Kahf and al-Raqīm. In addition to al-Ṭabarī’s details, Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/939) states that the cave was located between two mountains.<sup>48</sup> Tha‘labī adds that in some reports, the city is named “Defsus.” He also cites a narration from Ibn Abbās, indicating that al-Raqīm was a valley between Gatafan and ‘Ayla, where the People of the Cave were located. Ka‘b al-Aḥbār, however, suggests that al-Raqīm was their village. Ibn ‘Aṭīyya (d. 542/1147) mentions that in 504 AH, he visited a village near Granada called “Lusha” and observed various signs related to the People of the Cave.<sup>49</sup> This village also contained remnants of an ancient city known as “Dikyus.”<sup>50</sup> It is also mentioned that a similar site exists in the region of Sham.

Another issue is related to the details of the story itself. The Qur’ān, omitting historical and geographical details, recounts only necessary elements of the story for guidance and

45 Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, 6/503.

46 Abū Ishāq al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān*, 6/144-159; Hugh Nibley, “Qumran and ‘The Companions of the Cave,’” 177-198; Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 17/600-647; Gördük, *Klasik İslami Kaynaklar Işığında Eshab-ı Kehf*, 118-119; Abū Lays al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-‘Ulūm*, 2/335-342; Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-‘Uyūn*, 3/286-299.

47 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 17/600-647; Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Muqātil*, 2/280.

48 Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim*, 7/346-349.

49 Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 3/496-509.

50 Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān*, 6/144-159.

lessons. Issues, such as “when and where the event occurred”, “the identity of the unbelieving king”, “the number of people involved” and “the duration of their sleep” are not addressed in detail. They are explored more extensively by commentators, who provide a wide range of information in their tafsir works.

For instance, in his Tafsir, al-Qurṭubī narrates several events, some of which he personally witnessed or heard about, offering various reports related to different cities. Initially, he cites Ḍaḥḥāk, who states that al-Raqīm was a town in Roman territory where twenty-one men lay asleep. Then, he refers to Ibn ‘Aṭiyya’s account narration, which mentions a cave in the Sham region containing some dead bodies, and these individuals were known as the People of the Cave. It is said that a mosque and a residential structure named “al-Raqīm” were located near the cave and a dog’s skeleton was also present.<sup>51</sup>

By citing Ibn ‘Aṭiyya, who describes a cave containing corpses, some of which had decayed to skeletons, while others still showed traces of flesh and skin, al-Qurṭubī, also relates a story from Granada in Andalusia. Though some people claim that they belonged to the People of the Cave, despite the passage of centuries, there is no definitive knowledge about these bodies. When Ibn ‘Aṭiyya visited the site in 504 AH, he found the corpses in the same condition and observed the ruins of a Roman-era structure near the cave, known as al-Raqīm. Additionally, he mentions the ruins of an ancient city, named “Raquyus” located on a high area overlooking Granada.<sup>52</sup> Despite living in Andalusia, al-Qurṭubī avoids definitively identifying these remains as belonging to the People of the Cave. Similarly, despite his personal observations, Ibn ‘Aṭiyya does not claim that these bodies were those of the People of the Cave, but merely reports the popular beliefs of the locals.

The tafsir authorities, Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Ḥātim mention that in a narration coming from Awfī, Raqīm is a valley near ‘Aqabah, located in the south of Palestine. Additionally, they report another narration coming from Ibn Abbās, stating that Raqīm was the place where the People of the Cave (Ashāb al-Kahf) lived before they entered the cave. Ibn Abbās narrates that during a jihad campaign against Byzantine forces with Mu‘āwiyah, they passed by the cave of the “People of the Cave”. When they wanted to enter to see their bodies, God sent a punishing wind, forcing them all away from the cave.<sup>53</sup>

These reports indicate that tafsir authorities identified three different locations for the cave of the People of the Cave. The first location is ‘Ayla, on the coast near ‘Aqabah, and this view is supported by narrations from Ibn ‘Abbās. The Second one is a cave in al-Ghiarnatah

51 Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 10/356-386; Ibn ‘Aṭiyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 3/496-509.

52 al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur‘ān*, 10/356-386; Ibn ‘Aṭiyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, 3/496-509; Gördük, *Klasik İslami Kaynaklar Işığında Eshab-ı Kehf*, 118-119; Haviyev, “Nahçıvan’da Eshabü’l Kehf Abidesi ve Halk İnançları”, 139-141; Abū al-Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 7/130-170.

53 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 17/600-647; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Tafsīr Ibn Abi Ḥātim*, 7/346-349.

(Granada) and this opinion is highlighted based on the observations of Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah and supported by Abū al-Ḥayyān. In both locations, a structure or city called Raqīm has been mentioned. However, none of these narrations definitively prove that these sites are the cave of the People of the Cave; rather, they are based on local traditions and oral accounts. The third one is The city of Ephesus (İfsus), located on the western coast of Anatolia. This place is also mentioned as the city where the People of the Cave lived, which suggests that the cave might be in Anatolia.

In conclusion, the reports and narrations on this matter show that reaching a definitive conclusion is difficult. Although various locations and events are mentioned, it remains uncertain whether they are directly related to the People of the Cave. The narratives rely on local beliefs and parables, lacking any concrete evidence. The true location of the cave remains unknown, continuing to intrigue both historians and religious scholars. The existence of different opinions and interpretations provides a rich field for discussion, raising new questions for researchers. This highlights the complexity and diversity of historical and religious matters.

Moreover, there are some debates in the tafsir regarding the angle at which the sun shines on the cave, as mentioned in verse 17. Although the sun passes by the cave in the morning and evening, it does not shine directly on the bodies inside. The sun passing by without reaching them provided benefits such as preserving life signs and balancing the effects of wind, cold, and heat. Furthermore, the fact that the sun did not directly strike their bodies was also protective for their bodies and clothing.

This protective arrangement could be attributed to the cave’s unique structural position or its entrance facing either south or north. Ibn Qutaybah conducted complex mathematical calculations to determine the exact latitude and longitude of the cave. On the other hand, al-Zajjāj considered the sun’s avoidance of them not as the result of a specific internal condition or formation of the cave but as an extraordinary divine miracle. The verse ends with the statement: “That is one of the signs of God” (ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ). This verse is placed to affirm that the arrangement protecting them from the sun was not due to any physical formation or position but rather a sign of God’s divine power.<sup>54</sup>

God took all the necessary measures to ensure that sunlight did not reach the bodies of the People in the Cave. This could have been due to the cave’s structure, location, or an obstruction at the time of sunrise. There are many possibilities, such as the sun’s rays being miraculously kept away from them. However, none of these circumstances should be accepted as absolute facts. All these possibilities should be viewed as manifestations of God’s infinite power. In this context, examining such events is crucial for strengthening people’s faith and understanding the omnipotence of God.

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54 Ibn Qutayba, *Gharīb al-Qur’an*, 263; al-Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur’an*, 3/269-279.



Ultimately, the varying reports and narrations make it difficult to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the People of the Cave and their location. Although several places and events are mentioned, it remains uncertain whether they are directly linked to the People of the Cave. These narrations rely largely on local beliefs and oral traditions and therefore do not provide definitive proof. The location of the actual cave remains unknown, continuing to intrigue historians and religious scholars alike. The diversity of opinions and interpretations enriches the discussion and presents new questions for researchers, highlighting the complexity and variety of historical and religious issues.

### 5. Comparison of the Versions of the Story in the Qur'ān and Christian Sources

In the Qur'ān's narrative of the Seven Sleepers, the story is presented without the element of bloody sacrifice that is frequently emphasized in Christian martyrdom accounts. Instead, the focus is on God's power to intervene in the world and His ability to assist believers. This retelling not only counters the Christian understanding of martyrdom but also aligns with the Qur'ān's broader message of proclaiming and bearing witness to faith. According to the Qur'ān, bearing witness to the existence and oneness of God and openly professing faith is of paramount importance. However, when faced with persecution, it is more virtuous to flee rather than choose death.<sup>55</sup> This approach reflects a rejection of the widespread Christian concept of bloody martyrdom.

In the Qur'ān, the experiences of God's prophets (rusul) and messengers (anbiya') are often presented in a similar narrative structure: at first, the prophet preaches to a disbelieving community; then the community responds with rejection and finally, salvation is granted by God to the prophet or the pious believers. The story of the Seven Sleepers follows this same pattern: the youths profess their faith, take refuge in the cave to escape their enemies, and are ultimately saved by God. Here, divine intervention is not restricted to chosen prophets but extends to all believers who defend their faith. This emphasizes the focus of Qur'ān on salvation through life, showing that continuing to live is a more desirable goal than choosing death. Death is not seen as a form of sacrifice brought about by God's will, but rather, the value placed on human life is reflected in this understanding of the story.<sup>56</sup>

The Qur'ān's treatment of the parable involves selecting specific elements from Christian narratives and rearranging them in a manner easily recognizable to its listeners. These elements may seem familiar to those acquainted with Christian and late antiquity traditions. However, the Qur'ān avoids a long and detailed narrative of the story, instead adopting a more interpretive and explanatory approach. An example of this concise form can be seen in the mention of the

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55 For the migration of early Muslims to Abyssinia to escape persecution by Meccan polytheists, see Ibn Ishāq, *Kitāb Sirat Ibn Ishāq*, 174.

56 Bartłomiej Grysa, "The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Syriac and Arab Sources – A Comparative Study", 46-59; John Koch, *Die Siebenschläferlegende, Ihr Ursprung und Ihre Verbreitung*, 15-28.

word *raqīm* in the narrative. In Christian accounts, the lead plaques used to identify the youths are rendered in the Qur'ān as *raqīm* (written inscription). Some scholars have suggested that this term might have a Syriac origin due to its unusual form in the text, enhancing the symbolic references within the narrative and directing the reader's attention to its significance.<sup>57</sup>

The youths' prayer in the cave parallels the Christian version, where they also pray while fleeing persecution.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the responses given by the youths in the Qur'ān echo the testimony they provide to the emperor in the Christian tradition.<sup>59</sup> The detail of the youths sending one of them carefully to the city to purchase food also mirrors the Christian version. Even discussions at the end of the story about whether or not to construct a place of worship, the debate over the number of sleepers and how long they slept, point to similar discussions in Christian tradition.<sup>60</sup>

However, the Qur'ān's narrative distinguishes itself from the Christian parable by deliberately emphasizing certain elements. In the Christian version, the chronological sequence of events and the youths' actions are central, whereas the Qur'ān focuses on God's intervention. This divine intervention manifests in the protection of the youths in the cave and their long sleep. While the sleep event is not extensively detailed in the Christian account, gains importance through its iconographic representation. Although the earliest iconographic depictions of the sleepers date back to the 10th century, there is no conclusive evidence that the Qur'ān directly references these depictions. Nevertheless, given the Qur'ān's use of visual and symbolic references in other verses, the possibility of such a connection cannot be entirely ruled out.<sup>61</sup>

Another noteworthy detail in the Qur'ān is the mention of a dog accompanying the youths in the cave. Some scholars have interpreted this as a pastoral metaphor, possibly alluding to earlier traditions where the sleepers were protected by angels. For instance, in a homily by Jacob of Sarug, the youths are likened to lambs being chased by wolves, with an angel depicted as a shepherd guarding them. Similarly, in ancient mythological narratives, the shepherd's dog is also symbolized as a guardian angel. However, the Qur'ān does not portray the dog as a symbol of any superior power or guardian being (such as an angel). Thus, the symbolism found in mythological narratives is replaced by reality within the Qur'ānic rhetoric. Just as the symbol of the dog shifts from being a mere symbol to a real dog, this transformation clearly illustrates how the Qur'ān, within the framework of Islamic

57 Mohamad Syukri Abdul Rahman et al., "The Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Holy Bible and Qur'an: Lessons for Organic Youth Movements", 147-156.

58 al-Kahf, 18:10.

59 al-Kahf, 18:14-15.

60 al-Kahf, 18:120-126; Youakim Moubarac, *Le Culte Liturgique et Populaire des VII Dormants Martyrs d'Ephèse, Ahl-al-Kahf: Trait d'Union Orient-Occident entre l'Islam et la Chrétienté*, 13-57.

61 Syukri, "The Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Holy Bible and Qur'an", 147-156; Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an", 109-137.

revelation, reinterprets such symbols and turns them into tangible phenomena in the realm of reality (e.g., the dog of the Companions of the Cave). This provides valuable insight into how such themes are handled in Islamic scripture.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, the Qur'ān's account of the Seven Sleepers bears notable similarities to the versions found in Christian homilies, owing to the shared origin of revelation. However, these parallels do not justify an epigonal critique against the Qur'ān. This is because, while the Qur'ān shares certain elements with Christian sources, it also introduces original and previously unmentioned aspects, offering fresh perspectives. Furthermore, the Qur'ān reinterprets the narrative with its distinct style and rhetoric, restructuring it to convey a message fully aligned with Islamic teachings. In other words, while the narrative retains familiar elements for those acquainted with Christian traditions, it is carefully shaped to serve the overarching message of the Qur'ān.

## 6. Establishing the Originality of the Qur'ānic Version

In the Qur'ān, the details of the story of the Companions of the Cave (Ashāb al-Kahf) differ in some respects from early Christian sources. For instance, according to the Qur'ān the sleepers have been turned from side to side and this issue is absent in early Christian narratives. The idea of “turning or rotating the sleepers” is claimed to be influenced by ancient mythological and cultural images. These images include beliefs related to mythological figures from antiquity, such as Endymion, who was believed to have his hair and nails grow endlessly, during an extended sleep.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the notion that the bodies of these figures were turned to prevent decay is another element found in such narratives. In ancient beliefs, the sight of these sleeping beings often invoked terror, as they were neither fully dead nor alive. These beings, who defied the view of death as a final, all-consuming end, posed a source of fear and anxiety, conflicting with the belief in the soul's departure to the heavens and the body's lifeless state.<sup>64</sup>

A striking detail in the Qur'ān is the discussion among the youths about how long they had slept after awakening. This debate reappears in other verses and becomes a central theme as the Qur'ān reinterprets this parable. However, the extended post-awakening events and detailed descriptions of the youths' interactions with the changed world, prominent in Christian accounts, are almost entirely absent from the Qur'ānic narrative. The Qur'ān's retelling shifts the focus to the omnipotence of God and His infinite knowledge. The Qur'ānic account aligns with traditional views about how time holds a different significance in the eyes of God, as expressed in

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62 Bernard Heller, “Éléments, Parallèles et Origine de la Légende des Sept Dormants”, 190-218; Michael Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von der Siebenschläfern*, 155-214.

63 For more information on Endymion, see John Lyly, *Endymion*, 10-11.

64 Christian S. Krokus, “The Darkness is Not Death: Toward A Christian-Muslim Comparative Theological Study of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus”, 40-59.

biblical passages such as “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by”.<sup>65</sup> Key elements of the Christian narrative, such as the difficulty of recognizing the transformed world after their long sleep, are absent in the Qur’ān. Similarly, the elaborate backstories and post-event narratives of the Christian sources are omitted in the Qur’ānic version.<sup>66</sup>

In the Qur’ān’s narrative, there is a balance between the youths’ testimony of faith and God’s direct intervention in their lives. However, this balance is restructured, with the Qur’ān emphasizing divine intervention over individual testimonies of the youths. The Qur’ān portrays the youths as “signs” (ayat) of God’s greatness and power. While the Christian account presents the youths as witnesses to their own faith, the Qur’ān uses their entire story to demonstrate God’s omnipotence and control over events. Thus, the individual heroism and actions of the youths in the Christian narrative are transformed in the Qur’ān into a story that underscores God’s power and absolute dominion over humanity.

The reconstruction and reinterpretation of the story align with the Qur’ān’s overall message. The story of the youths in the cave is reshaped in the Qur’ān to reflect theological debates on resurrection, God’s omnipotence, and divine intervention in human history. In this context, the Christian parable serves merely as a theological framework, while the individual stories of the youths are relegated to the background. In the Qur’ān, the youths are reinterpreted as symbols of resurrection and God’s power, shifting away from the heroism emphasized in the Christian sources to a narrative that focuses on God’s absolute power and will.

Notably, the youths’ slumber and God’s protection of them are presented in the Qur’ān as direct interventions of God. This account highlights God’s power beyond time and space, emphasizing human limitations in knowledge and understanding. The confusion experienced by the youths in the Christian narrative upon awakening and confronting the transformed world becomes meaningless when contrasted with the Qur’ān’s depiction of God’s all-knowing and controlling presence.<sup>67</sup> The Qur’ān’s emphasis on the different meanings of time in God’s perspective reduces the importance of the debate over how long the youths slept. In the Qur’ān, this discussion becomes a testament to God’s infinite knowledge, shifting the focus away from the actions of the youths and onto God’s omnipotence.<sup>68</sup>

In conclusion, the story of the Companions of the Cave in the Qur’ān is reworked from a different perspective than the Christian parable. In this version, individual heroics and detailed plotlines are de-emphasized, while God’s power and intervention in human affairs take center stage. The Qur’ān does not merely present the youths as witnesses to their faith but also as symbols of God’s power and the miracle of resurrection. Thus, the

65 Psalm 90:4.

66 Syukri, “The Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Holy Bible and Qur’an”, 147-156.

67 Louis Massignon, *Les Sept Dormants d’Éphèse (ahl Al-Kahf) en Islam et en Chrétienté*, 5; Syukri, “The Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Holy Bible and Qur’an”, 147-156.

68 Anna Tozzi di Marco, “The Mediterranean Cult of the Seven Sleepers: Counter-Narrative vs Official Representation in Islamic Devotion”, 169-190.

story is transformed from one of individual witness to a testimony of divine omnipotence and authority over humanity. The Qur'ānic version of the story has been restructured and uniquely interpreted. The gaps and misunderstandings present in the Christian narrative are also corrected. For example, while the Qur'ān includes the detail of the youths being turned from side to side during their sleep, this information is absent in early Christian sources. On the other hand, the elaborate scenes of the youths confronting the world after their awakening, which feature in Christian narratives, are absent in the Qur'ān. From this perspective, while there are some similarities between the Qur'ānic narrative and the Christian parable of the Seven Sleepers, the Qur'ān's narrative is shown to be original, containing details not found in Christian sources and correcting certain elements of these accounts. Therefore, the claims that the Qur'ān borrowed or plagiarized from Christian sources are unfounded.

### **Conclusion**

This article has thoroughly examined the relationship between the Qur'ānic narrative of Ashāb al-Kahf and Christian sources, highlighting the theological, stylistic, and thematic differences between the two versions. It has been concluded that the Qur'ān presents an independent account of the Seven Sleepers' story and uses it to emphasize its own monotheistic doctrine. The claims of "copying" or "plagiarism" based on Christian sources are found to be baseless. The Qur'ān reinterprets the parable not merely as a historical retelling but as a vehicle to convey its core message of the oneness and sovereignty of God. Thus, the article underscores the theological differences and demonstrates that the Qur'ān reshapes this narrative in a unique and original way.

Our study has approached the Ashāb al-Kahf story not just from a historical perspective but within the central role of revelation in the Qur'ān's message. While many previous studies have focused on the Christian origins and parallels of the story, this research has emphasized how the story gains meaning in an Islamic context and emphasized which theological messages the Quran tries to convey. In this way, the story is not merely a historical narrative, but a tool Qur'ān uses to deliver its divine message. The handling of the story by the Qur'an demonstrates an effort to correct misunderstandings or flaws in the Christian version and to reshape the narrative by emphasizing the oneness of God.

In conclusion, the Ashāb al-Kahf story in the Qur'ān serves as more than a miracle narrative, different from Christianity; it is presented as a moral lesson, highlighting God's absolute sovereignty, the youths' struggle for faith, and divine assistance. Moreover, despite some perceived similarities to Christian sources, the Qur'ānic narration shapes into a monotheistic narrative, providing much deeper theological insights than Christian narrations. Ultimately, this study concludes that the Qur'ān did not borrow from Christian sources but instead presented an independent and original revelation. The Islamic interpretation of the Ashāb al-Kahf story is fundamentally different from Christian accounts.

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