

The Companions of the Cave: reflections on Sūrah al-Kahf

i. The superiority of this Sūrah

*In a hadīth recorded by Imām Ahmad, Abū al-Dardā (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

من حفظ عشر آيات من اول سورة الكهف عُصم من الدجال

Whosoever memorises ten verses from the beginning of Sūrah al-Kahf will be protected from the Dajjāl (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 109).

In a hadīth recorded by Imām Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'i and al-Tirmidhī, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) indicated three verses, not ten.

*Imām al-Hakim records in his *al-Mustadrak* that Abū Sa'īd (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

من قرأ سورة الكهف في يوم الجمعة اضاء له من النور ما بينه وبين الجمعتين

Whosoever recites Sūrah al-Kahf on Friday, it will illuminate him with light from one Friday to the next.

*Al-Bayhaqī records a hadīth that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

من قرأ سورة الكهف كما نزلت كانت له نورا يوم القيامة

Whosoever recites Sūrah al-Kahf as it was revealed, it will be a light for him on the Day of Judgement.

*The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) encouraged Muslims to recite this chapter every Friday. There must be immense spiritual comfort in it if he asked us to recite it at least once a week.

ii. Background to the Sūrah

Quraysh sent al-Nadr ibn al-Hārith and Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'īt to al-Madinah in order to learn more about Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) from the Jewish rabbis residing there. They told them to ask Muhammad about three things. The rabbis said that if he could give the answer to the questions, then this would indicate he is a true messenger of Allāh. The questions were (i) about a group of young men and their strange and wondrous tale (ii) about a man who travelled a great deal, east and west (iii) about the *Rūh*. Confidently, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) told the Qurayshis that he will tell them

tomorrow, knowing that Jibrīl would send the revelation from Allāh. However, he did not say Insha Allāh. As a result, it was fifteen days before the revelation came (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 113).

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was saddened by the delay in revelation. The Sūrah itself explained that a person should not talk about any future event, except by adding Insha Allāh (verse 23-4).

However, the episode showed clearly that the Qur'ān is the word of Allāh, and that it was not written by Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). If it was, then there would be no need to delay the answers, not least because it gave an opportunity to the enemies to talk negatively about him.

For those who try to find shortcomings in the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) by using this episode (he forgot, he is merely a man and so on), we remind them the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) sometimes made deliberate mistakes, in order to teach the Ummah. In his own words,

لست انسي ولكن أنسى

I do not forget but I am made to forget.

In other report (*al-Shifā*, 343), he said:

اني لأنسي أو أنسى لأسن

Certainly I forget or I am made to forget so that it becomes a Sunna.

Sūrah al-Kahf answered the questions put to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). In considerable detail, the chapter highlighted the story of the As'hāb al-Kahf and Dhūl-Qarnayn. However, with regards to the *Rūh*, Allāh stated that man had not been given extensive knowledge on this.

iii. The Companions of the Cave; in short.

The Companions of the Cave were a group of young people who fled from a tyrannical regime that tried to force them to disbelieve in Allāh. So they fled and sought refuge in a cave. We know that they were youngsters who had firm belief in Allāh. As a result Allāh strengthened their faith further (verse 13).

Though a cave by nature is very tight and restricted, Allāh ensured them that He would make the cave vast for them (verse 16). Though a cave by nature is not ideal residence but Allāh provided all types of ease and comfort for them.

iv. What do we know about them?

Ibn Kathīr writes that these young men were the sons of the kings and leaders of the Byzantium empire (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 122). They went out one day to their local festival. They were very disappointed with what they saw in terms of idol-worship and so they secluded themselves, one by one. None of them knew one another but they were brought together by their dislike for polytheism. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

الارواح جنود مجندة فما تعارف منه ائتلف وما تناكر منها اختلف

Souls are like recruited soldiers. Those that recognise one another will come together, and those who do not recognise one another will turn away from one another (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 122).

As a result, they all became brothers in faith. They adopted a particular location and began worshipping Allāh alone there, but their people found out about them. The king ordered to appear before them and they informed him they worshipped Allāh alone. He stripped them of their belongings and clothes and gave them three days to think about their faith. It was at this moment that they decided to flee the town and take refuge elsewhere (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 124). The people realised they were missing but they could not locate them.

These youngsters were more guided than the elders of the town, who stubbornly held on to their pagan beliefs. Parallels can be drawn between them and the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). The elders of Quraysh too held on to their old beliefs (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 120).

v. The cave

In Arabic, Kahf refers to a large opening in a mountain whereas a restricted and small opening in a mountain is called Ghār. Both words have been used in the Qur'ān.

When they entered the cave, then they certainly would have had questions that needed answering.

*How long are we safe here?

*Where shall we eat and drink from?

*Would they have to leave the cave at all, even temporarily?

In one stroke of unbelievable mercy, Allāh granted them a prolonged sleep, which answered all of their questions and dilemmas.

vi. The sleep

In the Qur'ān, Allāh informs us that they slept for 309 years. In order for this to happen, Allāh ensured certain things:

a. Sleep for such a long period of time harms and eventually decays the body. So Allāh made them turn left and right every so often. The Qur'ān says 'And We turned them on their right and on their left sides' (verse 18). Pressure ulcer is a very serious illness that typically develops when frail patients cannot move much. This is something we know now. The Qur'ān touched upon this 1400 years ago. Ibn Abbas states that if they did not turn over, the earth would have consumed them (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 129).

b. When a person sleeps then the organ that remains active is the hearing ones. Most of the time we awake thanks to a sound, hence alarm clocks. Over a 309 year period, the Companions of the Cave would inevitably wake up due to a sound. To stop this from happening, Allāh covered their ears (verse 11).

c. Allāh states:

And you would have thought them awake, whereas they were asleep (verse 18).

Some scholars have stated that when they were put to sleep by Allāh, He kept their eyes open, which would be better for the sake of preservation.

d. Allāh suspended time for them. They had no idea how long they had been asleep for. This is a natural reaction. The only way we normally know how long we have slept for is via external factors; the clock, the amount of sunlight or lack of it. For them they had none of these external factors, because they were in a dark cave.

e. In the Qur'ān Allāh states:

And you might have seen the sun, when it rose, declining to the right from the cave, and when it set, turning away from them to the left, when they lay in the midst of the cave. That is the sign from Allāh... (verse 17)

This verse indicates that the entrance to the cave faced north, because Allāh tells us that when the sun was rising, sunlight entered the cave. Ibn Abbās, Mujāhid and Qatāda said that 'turning away from them' means that it would shine on them and then leave them (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 127). It is had touched them, it perhaps would have woken them up. So the sun and wind would enter the cave to help preserve their bodies, but not to wake them.

vii. The dog

And their dog stretching forth his two forelegs at the entrance (verse 18).

Two opinions can be found regarding the dog. One is that it belonged to them and it was their hunting dog. The other opinion is that the dog was stray and joined them on the way to the cave.

The second opinion is favoured by Imām al-Qurtubī. He writes that when the sleepers fled from the town, the dog followed them. They tried to make the dog return but it stayed with them. Eventually, the dog was given the ability to speak and said: 'Do not fear for me at all. I love the friends of Allāh. You can sleep in the cave and I will protect you' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1198).

لا تخافوا مني! انا احب اُحباء الله تعالى فناموا حتي احرسكم

Allama al-Qurtubī writes that by associating the pious people even a dog can gain status in the sense that Allāh mentions the dog in the Qur'ān. So what do you think will be the status of the Muslims when they adopt the companionship of the pious? (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1198).

اذ كان بعض الكلاب قد نال هذه الدرجة العليا بصحبته ومخالطته الصلحاء و الاولياء حتي أخبر الله تعالى بذلك في كتابه فما ظنك بالمؤمنين الموحدين المخالطين المحبين للاولياء و الصالحين! بل في هذا تسليية و انس للمؤمنين المقصرين عن درجات الكمال المحبين للنبي ﷺ و اله خير ال

When they slept in the cave, the dog sat at the entrance (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1194).

Ibn Jurayj mentions that the dog was guarding the cave and he sat at the entrance (Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, VI: 129).

viii. When they woke

After 309 years of sound sleep, they woke. Their bodies remained in tact, meaning in the same state that they went to sleep in. Otherwise, if their hair had fallen out or had turned white, or they had developed wrinkles, or they felt weaker, or their legs could no longer carry them, then certainly this would have been their first comments upon waking. But none of this happened. Rather, their first question was 'how long have we been asleep for?' Sayyid Muhammad Madanī Ashrafī Jilānī writes in his *Tafsīr* that they asked this question because they wanted to know how many Salāhs they had to perform. Then they had other concerns like food and drink. So they sent one of the companions to the city with a dirham (silver coin) in order to buy some food.

Even at this point, they thought that they were still being persecuted and hunted. When Allāh says فلينظر ايها ازكي طعاما this suggested that they still thought that the town was selling haram food, food sacrificed in the name of their idols. Therefore the companions told the one going to the city to be discreet and careful as he wandered out. The youngster left the cave carefully and under disguise. The city he entered had obviously changed a lot since the last time he saw it. He saw no local landmarks and no familiar faces. Decius (the king) had longed died, subsequent rulers appeared, new buildings were erected and old ones disappeared (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 11194). When he tried to buy some food, the seller looked puzzled when he saw the coin, as it did not look like familiar currency and it had the image of Decius on it. They passed the coin person to person until it reached the king. Apparently he was a Muslim and he decided to visit them all in the cave. They rejoiced at meeting him and spoke with him. The king and the people bid farewell to them and went back to sleep. Then Allāh caused them to die (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 133-4). After that, the locals built a mosque on the site.

ix. The Masjid

When they passed away, the locals disputed what to do next with their burial. Some suggested making a building at the mouth of the cave as a memorial. Others suggested building a place of worship there where people could worship their Lord. From this we learn to build a Mizār at the site of pious deceased is proven from the Holy Qur'ān (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1201).

*Allāma Thanā Allāh Pāni Pattī writes that this verse indicates that to build mosques near the site of the deceased pious men is permissible so that Muslims can attain *baraka* from it.

*There are many ahādīth which seemingly prohibit this practice. For instance:

لا تصلوا الي القبور و لا تجلسوا عليها (القرطبي، ١٠، ٢٤٨)

'Do not sit on graves and do not prostrate towards them.'

اشتد غضب الله علي قوم اتخذوا قبور انبيائهم و صالحهم مساجد

The wrath of Allāh is severe on the community that takes the graves of their prophets and pious as mosques.

لعنة الله على اليهود و النصارى اتخذوا قبور انبيائهم مساجد

May the curse of Allāh be on the Jews and Christians. They took the graves of their prophets as mosques.

In response, the scholars state that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) forbade (i) Muslim from praying towards the graves itself (ii) Muslims from insulting the graves by sitting on them (iii) As with the Christians had done before, the Prophet forbade Muslims from treating the prophets & pious ones as deities.

Otherwise, the Prophet's (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) final resting place is the chamber of Aisha (may Allāh be pleased with her), and next to it (and in fact part of it) is the Masjid. Since he left this world, Muslims have performed Salāh there (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1201).

x. Their number

Allāh informs us that the people disputed over the number of the Companions of the Cave. The verse mentions three views, proving that there was no fourth suggestion. The correct number was seven, with the dog being the eighth (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 136).

xi. Which era did they live in?

According to some, these Companions of the Cave were Christians who followed the true religion of Isa (peace be upon him). However, the background to the story suggests that they lived before this. The reason is because it was the Jewish rabbis who asked the questions (the cave, Dhūl Qarnayn and the Rūh), thus suggesting this was to be found in their scriptures. Therefore, this indicates the story dates back to their time or before it, not after Isa (peace be upon him) (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VI: 121).

Shaykh Pirzāda Imdād Hussain writes that in 248 C.E. the Roman King Decius declared war against the Christians and ordered them to be killed (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1194). This suggests that they were the followers of Isa (peace be upon him).

xii. What we learn

*The best stories, parables and moral lessons are from the Holy Qur'ān. In an age where people want to explain weird and wonderful stories to you, many without proof, Sanad or evidence, stick to the Qur'ān.

*Imām al-Sha'rāwī writes that though clearly this event took place with specific persons and at a specific time, the exact details of the places and persons have been left unclear deliberately. This is so we can take lesson and heed from it in general. Lessons from the Qur'ān are timeless. The story of the cave is a lesson for all those faithful people who find themselves persecuted by the powerful and tyrannical. When one finds himself in such a situation, the first thing they should do is seek the mercy of Allāh and pray to him. When they entered the cave, the first thing they did is to invoke the mercy of Allāh and leave their matters in His hands.

*When a person is persecuted because of his religion, then Allāh creates amazing ease for him. Such a person will never be neglected by His Lord.

*The *karāmats* of the Awliyā are proven from the Qur'ān.

*To build a Mizār at the site of the deceased pious is proven from the Holy Qur'ān.

*The story proves the permissibility of fleeing one's home when practising Islam becomes difficult (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, X: 234).

*Imām al-Sha'rāwī adds that a cave by nature is something that cannot be understood or fathomed on the outside alone. One has to venture deep into it. In this manner, Sūrah al-Kahf is a Sūrah that cannot be appreciated on a face level but needs to be explored further.

*The eloquence of the Qur'ān is also shown beautifully. Allāh states:

و لبثوا في كهفهم ثلاث مائة سنين و ازدادوا تسعا

The verse does not read 'they stayed in the cave for 309 years' but more like 'they stayed for 300 plus an additional nine years.' Why is the verse like this? Why not just say 309 years? Al-Naqqāsh writes (*al-Qurtubī*, X: 93):

انهم لبثوا ثلاثمائة سنة شمسية بحسب الايام فلما كان الاخبار هنا للنبي ﷺ ذكرت التسع اذ المفهوم عنده السنين القمرية

They stayed for three hundred solar calendar years (as it was a biblical story). When it came to informing Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Allāh informed him the length according to the lunar, Islamic calendar, which was 309 years. So in one verse, Allāh told the amount they stayed according to two calendars, the lunar and solar. In exact, it was 300 years, two months and nineteen days (*Tafsīr Ashrafī*, 581).

xiii. Bibliography

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Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari
@hafiz_ather

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadiyah Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.