

Lessons from the Story of the Cave

And God will make your affair easy



Does the story about the cave, and the pious young men sleeping for hundreds of years sound familiar to you? It forms part of a chapter of the Quran known as ‘The Cave’ and it is also an unauthenticated Christian tradition known well in the more Orthodox areas of Christendom. It takes up a little over 20 verses in the Quran yet it is filled with lessons for those who seek to find them.

Chapter names were not revealed with the Quran, thus some chapters are known by more than one name. In the very early days of Islam, chapter 18 ‘The Cave’ was known by the longer title of ‘The Companions of the Cave’. Verses 9 – 26, believed to have been revealed in Mecca in the 4th or 5th year of Prophethood, narrate the account of the Companions of the Cave.

Several young men, aware of the oneness of God and not prepared to compromise their beliefs took shelter in a cave and sought protection from God. These young men were more accepting of the truth than their elders and the majority of the people of their town. By their actions they acknowledged the oneness of God and rejected idolatry thus God protected them by sheltering them in the cave for as long as was necessary.

[The young men said to one another), “And when you have withdrawn from them and that which they worship other than Allah, retreat to the cave; your Lord will open a way for you from His Mercy and will make easy for you your affair (i.e. will give you what you will need of provision, dwelling).” (Quran 18:16)

Prophet Muhammad emphasised that God replaces the sacrifices of the pious believers with something better. *“Whoever gives up something for the sake of God, He will replace it with something better.”*^[1]

It is similar to the story known in Christian traditions as “Seven Sleepers of Ephesus”, and refers to a group of Christian youths who hid inside a cave, outside the city of Ephesus around 250 CE, to escape persecution by the Roman emperor Decius. Generally, Quran commentators do not identify the companions of the Cave with the story of the Ephesians. However God does advise Prophet Muhammad, in verse 22, not to argue with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) about the number of young men who slept in the cave. We too learn a lesson in not arguing about the religion of Islam. If someone does not want to hear about our beautiful religion it is better to leave the discussion until another time. God guides whom He wills and we cannot convince a person to see the truth of Islam with harsh words or exasperating arguments. Ibn Kathir, the renowned Quran commentator, was of the opinion that this portion of the verse contains evidence for the prohibition of seeking rulings from those not qualified to give rulings.

“...So debate not (about their number) except with the clear proof (which We have revealed to you). And consult not any of them (people of the Scripture - Jews and Christians) about (the affair of) the people of the Cave.” (Quran 18:22)

In addition, Ibn Kathir believed the narration to predate Christianity because the Jewish Rabbis of Medina asked Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, about it as one of the tests of Prophethood they set.

According to Muslim historian Muhammad ibn Ishaq, the noblemen of Mecca sent two men to Medina to inquire about the scriptures and the Prophets of God. Because their kinsmen Muhammad had claimed Prophethood, they reasoned that the Rabbis of Medina would be able to confirm or deny his claim. After hearing about Prophet Muhammad the rabbis suggested that the noblemen of Mecca ask him three questions. The first was about the young men in ancient times with a strange and wondrous tale.

When the questions were put to Muhammad he told his questioners that he would provide them with an answer in the morning, but according to Ibn Ishaq, Prophet Muhammad forgot to say “If God wills”. This is an unauthenticated story; however it does teach us a valuable lesson in knowing that nothing happens in this world without the permission of God. Apparently it was fifteen days before the chapter of Quran known as ‘The Cave’ was revealed and Prophet Muhammad was able to answer all three questions satisfactorily.

“And never say of anything, “I shall do such and such thing tomorrow.” Except (with the saying), “If God wills!” And remember your Lord when you forget and say: “It may be that my Lord guides me unto a nearer way of truth than this.” (Quran 18: 23 & 24)

This concept of abandoning an idolatrous and oppressive society, and moving to another place where one can practice the true religion of Islam, is known as migration for the sake of God (*Hijra* in Arabic). It has long been the practice of Muslims to flee from tyranny and oppression and in fact when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were forced to escape Mecca, Prophet Muhammad himself took refuge in a cave.

The young men sought refuge in a cave but when their people noticed they were missing, the King sent people to search for them but they could not find them. God concealed them. In the same way, when Prophet Muhammad and his companion Abu Bakr sought refuge in the Cave of *Thawr*, those in pursuit could not find them even though they passed within meters of their hiding spot.

A person who fears for his religion should flee from his persecutors and supplicate to God for protection. The condition of the young men in the cave teaches us that God answers all supplications. This story confirms that Islam teaches that prayer can change any situation. When any person turns to God in prayer, He will respond.

“And your Lord said: “Call on me, (i.e. believe in My Oneness and ask Me for anything), I will respond to your supplication...” (Quran 40:60)

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) *At Tirmidi.*