

# The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

## THE SLEEPERS OF THE CAVE - THE QURAN, HISTORICAL SOURCES AND OBSERVATION

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### THE CAVE SLEEPERS

One of the better known Quranic narratives to many Muslims is the story of the cave sleepers in a Surah which bears its name (Surah Kahf, Chapter 18).

Muslims usually associate a site near Amman, close to a place called 'Abu Ulanda' in Jordan as the site where the incident took place. However, a better known site, certainly to Christian tradition and some Muslims alike, is the site at **EPHESUS, TURKEY**. There are also other lesser known claims made for the support of other sites which are not the focus of this article.

Having visited both sites at Jordan and Turkey and studied them out of academic interest, the latter site at Ephesus, Turkey certainly seems to better represent the site which is depicted by the Quran. This is not only based on theological considerations, but also archaeological evidence and literary support predating Islam in Arabia. However, the intention here is not to conduct a comprehensive academic appraisal. Rather, the intention is to share some thoughts and images from both sites with a view to (a) share experiences, (b) to entice others to conduct their own research and (c) to renew an interest with those not so familiar with the narrative.

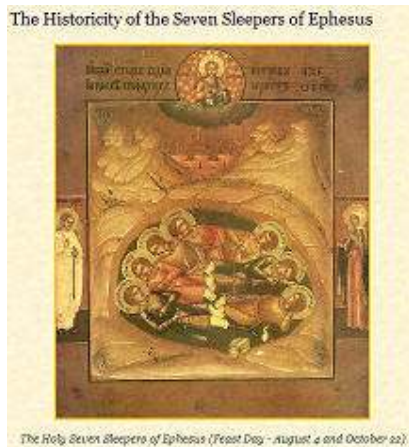
Unknown to many Muslims, a powerful, well attested Christian tradition is associated with the cave sleepers who were considered natives of the city of Ephesus. Many early and medieval sources attest to this tradition such as the medieval sourcebook, The Golden Legend (Aurea Legenda) which was compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in 1275 and rendered into English by William Caxton in 1483. However, the narrative was first described by Bishop Stephen of Ephesus (448-451CE) [1]

"Briefly the legend concerns seven youths (who are variously named in various versions) of one family who, during the persecution of Decius (c.250), took refuge in a cave near Ephesus and fell asleep. When the cave was opened during the reign of Theodosius II (d.450), the youths awakened. The coinage of Decius which they possessed confirmed their story, though they thought that they had slept for one night only. Their reawakening was taken by Theodosius as proof of Christ's resurrection. From this time (and certainly from the sixth century) onwards, the cult of the Seven

Sleepers became widely known (cf. BHG, nos. 1593-9) and the site of their tomb at Ephesus became a focus of pilgrimage: see C. Praschniker, *Das Comiterium der Sieben Schlafer* (Baden, 1937)" [2]

A good summary background of the Christian tradition and a survey of literary sources for the site at Ephesus-Turkey has been conducted by John Sanidopoulos. For those interested in the Christian tradition, this is recommended reading and can be accessed by clicking on the image below.

## THE HISTORICITY OF THE SEVEN SLEEPERS OF EPHEBUS



Source [3]

A scholarly appraisal of literary sources can be found in the Biblical commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian. Please see [4] for full reference citation below.

The tradition of the cave sleepers is so powerfully etched into Christian folklore that murals are even found within notable Christian places of worship such as the Westminster Abbey in London, England.

## NOTICES OF KING ALFRED

From an Anglo-Saxon Manuscript

"On the screen in St. Edward's Chapel, in Westminster Abbey, one of the sculptured subjects represents the Seven Sleepers lying in the cave on their left side, as St. Edward had seen them in a vision, with the 'eye of his mind'. This according to his life, by Abbot Ailred, was ascertained by three messengers dispatched to the Emperor Theodosius, who had the cave opened in consequence of the embassy..." [5]

However, it appears that gradually in Christian thought, the story became assigned to the collections of myth and attributed to the popular literature of the romantics.

"The rise of Protestantism and the period of the Enlightenment in the West gave rise to doubts about this tale, as John Donne noted in one of his poems in the 16th century. Caesar Baronius (1538-1607), not only a Renaissance scholar but a cardinal in the Latin Church, was the first to treat the story as "apocryphal". It was never taken seriously in the West again. The Latin Church still refers to the tradition as a "purely imaginative romance". The tale became very popular in the literature of

the Romantics in a twisted form, inspiring a poem by Goethe, a cautionary tale by the Grimm brothers, and even the Washington Irving tale of *Rip van Winkle* as well as H.G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes* and Mark Twain's *Innocence Abroad*, among others" [6]

## THE QURAN

From a Quran's perspective, there is no doubt to the veracity of the incident. It certainly seems clear that a contingent of the audience that Prophet Muhammad<sup>(pbuh)</sup> sought to address were familiar with the narrative of the cave sleepers at the time of his ministry. The narrative most likely formed part of the Christian collective memory and some manner of dispute seemingly arose with regards the details, including the numbers of the cave sleepers.

Whether this dispute formed a challenge to ascertain the veracity of the Prophet's integrity as a true messenger of God by a certain contingent not yet fully convinced of the Prophet's ministry, cannot be fully concluded upon given the narratives.

However, whatever the cause, it certainly appears from the Quran's narratives such as the one below, that verses were revealed to quell some manner of dispute, possibly to the numbers of the cave sleepers, but also some wider details.

فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَاءَ ظَهْرٍ وَأَلَّا تَسْتَنَفِتَ فِيهِمْ مِّنْهُمُ أَحَدًا ه

"...So do not argue / contend about them except on a matter that is clear / obvious, nor consult any of them about (the affair of) them (the sleepers)..." (18:22)

Many facts can be gleaned from the narrative about the site in particular. For example:

(1) The cave had a wide open interior where the sleepers rested. This is indicated by the Arabic term '*fajwatin*' (open space) used in verse 18:17 to describe it. This is certainly in line with the site at **EPHESUS, TURKEY**, but rather unlike the somewhat compact cave interior that is found at the site in Jordan.

(2) A place of worship was subsequently built over the site (18:21). As the tradition pre-dated Islam in Arabia, this place of worship would most likely have been associated with those followers of earlier revelation such as the Christians. Archaeological evidence has certainly uncovered the elaborate remains of an early church built over the cave site at **EPHESUS, TURKEY** and a strong Christian tradition exists which corroborates the physical evidence.

"Formerly the church as well as the burial hall and mausoleia were floored with mosaics and decorated with frescoes. Unfortunately only few original parts are preserved. The pavement of the church for example was an opus tessellatum, the geometrical pattern was laid in black and white. In the opinion of the excavator both - the church as well as the mosaic - are contemporary and were made in the 5th c. AD5." [7]



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(3) The sleepers fled from a strong community that worshipped others besides God. The cave is located at a suitable distance from the ruined city of Ephesus near present day Selcuk in Izmir, Turkey.

"One level above there is the centre of the complex, which is a church (12.6 by 10 m) to the south of the Apsidal Hall. The building consists of a square nave (about 6 by 6 m) and an apse to the east. On the opposite side there is a vestibule (length of about 5 m). A small catacombe with the assumed burial places of the Seven Sleepers was found beneath the floor of the church. In the west of the church another hall (Burial place: 15.8 by 7.25 m) with numerous graves in the soil and burial niches in the walls was erected. To the south of the church a large domed mausoleum (so-called Abradas-Mausoleum<sup>4</sup>) was built on the highest level of the complex." [8]

**EPHESUS, TURKEY**



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## THE UNLIKELY SITE AT ABU ULANDA, NEAR AMMAN, JORDAN



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Arguably one of the most descriptive narratives which almost entices one to conduct a detailed

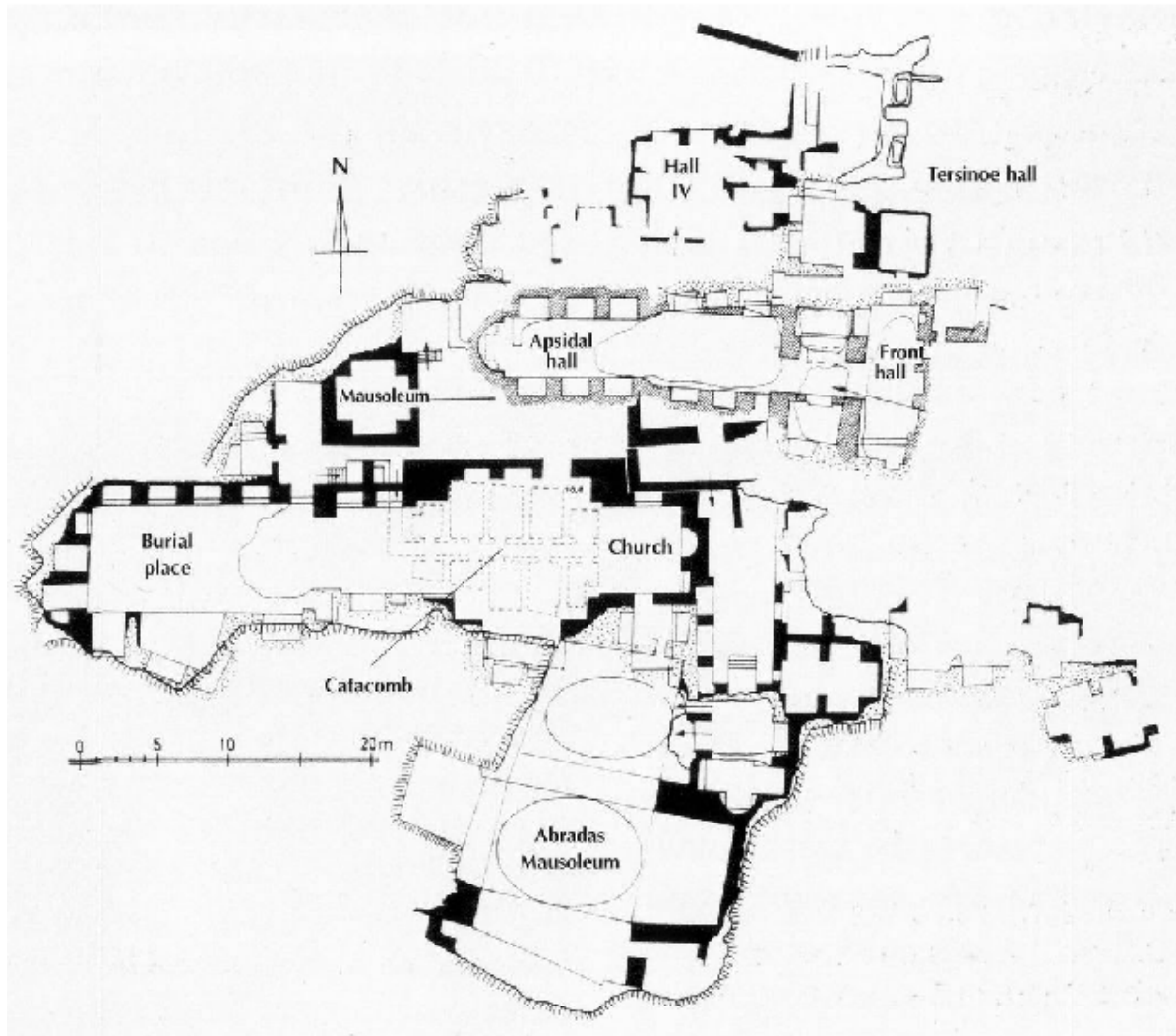


survey of any potential site is the following:

**018:017**

"And you would have seen the sun, when it rose, inclining away to the right from their cave, and when it set, passing away from them to the left, while they lay in the open space in the midst of the cave. Such are among the signs of God. He whom God guides is (rightly) guided; but he whom God leaves to stray, for him you will never find a protector, a guide (to lead him to the right way)"

## THE CAVE SITE AT EPHESUS



Sources: [9] & [10]

Whatever the details of the Christian tradition, at the time of the Prophet's ministry in Arabia, the story of the cave sleepers certainly was a well known narrative predating Islam in Arabia.

For the critics of the Christian tradition and of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) ministry, this raises interesting questions as to how an Arab man from the desert could venture to describe the location in such precise detail. This is despite the unlikelihood of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) or his

contemporaries ever having visited the site in person to verify the site's details. After all, the area in question was most likely under the control of the Byzantines and outside the general remit of the nomadic Arabs. The description of the cave has been advanced in such an elucidatory manner which can even be put to scrutiny today.

Furthermore, there is evidence from Christian sources to suggest that discussions viz a viz the nature of resurrection were prevalent during the period of the incident. The experience of the cave sleepers certainly seemed to provide evidence to the notion that human resurrection was a reality. Certainly, in this regards, there is support from the Quran.

#### 018:021 (part)

"And thus did We make their case known (to the people), that they might know that the promise of God is true and that there can be no doubt about the Hour (of Judgment)..."

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