Sūrah Al- Kahf and the Issue of Imāmat

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Abstract

This article aims to clarify the issues of the leadership and reappearance of Imam Mahdi by investigating the topics in Sūrah Al- Kahf. This study is based on the three important stories in Sūrah Al-Kahf, which only exist in this sūrah: the stories of The Companions of the Cave, Khīḍr and Moses, and Dhul-Qarnayn. The article intends to show that Sūrah Al-Kahf introduces Imam Mahdi’s characteristics by scrutinizing the structure and content of the sūrah and making a connection with the three mentioned stories. This article offers a general overview of the sūrah’s content along with its important sections, leading to a description of the specific characteristics and status of Sūrah Al-Kahf. The most important findings of this article are that the first two stories (the mysteries of the cave with a thousand-year sleep, and the mysteries of the elixir of life and a thousand-year period of being awake) are an indication of God’s creativity. The third story of this sūrah (the story of Dhul-Qarnayn), may be a symbol of the return of God’s Man (Imam Mahdi). He uses the knowledge and skills from his first life upon his return to this world, and travels across the globe using mysterious methods. Sūrah Al-Kahf refers to Imam Mahdi’s reappearance: the characteristics, possibility and quality.

Keywords: Imam Al-Mahdi, Sūrah Al-Kahf, Dhul-Qarnayn, al-Khīḍr, Moses, return
Statement of the Problem

Sūrah Al-Kahf is the eighteenth sūrah of the Quran. Based on the popular report, this sūrah, has 110 verses and there are recitation disagreements (q.v. Dānī142-7, Ibnjazarī 2, 310-16, for differences in the number of verses q.v. Ṭabrisī 6, 306; Suyūṭī 1416, 1, 185). The meaning of Kahf is a cavity, larger than a cave in a mountain (Khalīl, under the Cave, Nūwāvī 2, 198). Perhaps the name derives from the word "Alkahf" or "Kahfihim", which are mentioned only in this sūrah four and two times respectively (q.v. Ibn Abīshaybah 1, 390; Fīrūzābādī243; Abdul Bāqi, under Alkahf and Kahfihim). Sometimes it is referred to as Sūrah Companions of the Cave (Ṭirmidhī 3, 347; Suyūṭī 1416, 1, 153, 157). The subject of the sūrah is the revelation of divine commandments to warn and bring glad tidings about the existence of Resurrection, or Ma’ād (Al-Kahf 1-3; Ṭabarānī, 13, 236; cf. Sayyid al-Quṭb 4, 2257-9 who believes that the most important issue in this sūrah is correcting and strengthening one’s beliefs).

There are five stories that form the sūrah predominantly, which are referred to or mentioned in detail (Sayyid al-Quṭb4, 2256). Three of the stories are not recorded in any other sūrahs: the story of the Companions of the Cave, the story of Moses and the youth who accompanied him until visiting al-Khīḍr, and the story of Dhuq-Qarnayn (For a list of the contents in this sūrah q.v. Fīrūzābādī 1406, 1, 298). The main purpose of this article is to connect the three mentioned stories, connect the three stories to each other, and explain why they are mentioned in this sūrah.

Introduction

Al-kahf, apart from one verse, is a Meccan sūrah (Qummi2, 30; Ṭabarsīb, 306; IbnṬawūs 282 &288; Zarkīshī, 201; Ibnjowzī3, 63; for other reports about some of its first and last verses being Medinan q.v. Ibnhajār 9, 37; also q.v. Noldeke36, 55, 125-8). This sūrah is considered one of the sabiʿ ītāl sūrahs (IbnIdrīs 1, 223; Suyūṭī 1416, 1, 173).

According to the revelation order, its place is after Al-Ghāshīḥah and before Al-Nahl (Zarkīshī, 193; Suyūṭī 1416, 1, 39; Jeffrey 1392 AH, 15; cf. Suyūṭī 1416, 1, 78 & 175, for western dating q.v. Noldeke XXXVI). According to the mushaf’s order, Al-Kahf comes after Al-ṣīra‘ and before Al- Mu’unin (IbnṬawūs224). Sūrah Al-Kahf starts with rahmād(praise). Since the “praise of God” comes after “His glory” in this sūrah, it is said that is located after sūrah Al-Isra‘, which starts with “His glory” (subḥān) (Zarkīshī 1, 39).

Some scholars think this sūrah was revealed after an interruption in the course of revelation and as a result of the nonsensical statements by unbelievers (kuffār). The sūrah begins with the “praise of God” to refute the infidel statements, and to give thanks for the continuation of the revelation (Zarkīshī 1, 39; Suyūṭī 1416, 2, 302; also q.v. Ibn ’Aāshūr, 15, 8-9).

With this introduction, it is necessary to answer the following questions to solve the problem: What is the content of Sūrah Al-Kahf? What are the notable features of the mentioned stories? How do these stories, which are only mentioned in this sūrah, relate to the rest of the content: structurally and thematically? The answers to these questions are presented in different sections of this article.
1. A brief survey of *Sūrah Al-Kahf*'s content

The first part (verses 1-8), which contains the main theme of the *sūrah*, begins by thanking God who has sent down the Book to His servant. The first part of the *sūrah* discusses a decree which threatens the people with a great punishment prepared for unbelievers, and gives tidings to believers, who do righteous deeds. It also informs unbelievers that they don’t actually believe that God has a son, and it is a falsehood which they have inherited from their fathers. Afterward, it refers to the sorrow of Prophet Mohammad regarding unbelievers’ rejection of faith. Then it speaks about the earth and says God has made what is on earth as an adornment (*zīnat*) to test people to know who is better in deeds. Then, when the time comes, all these beauties will be destroyed for the start of Resurrection (*ma’ād*).

In the second part (verses 9-22), as an example of general gathering (*ḥashr*), the story of the Cave is mentioned. It is similar to the story of a man who slept a hundred years in a cave and then opened his eyes and stood up (*Al-Baqarah*, 259). In *Al-Kahf*, the cave dwellers became unconscious when the first trumpet was blown, and they didn’t wake up until the second trumpet was blown and caused an earthquake. This led the door of the cave to open, so the echo of the fearsome sound woke them up. What the cave dwellers said indicates that they were familiar with the unity of the divine unity (*al-tuhīd al-rubūbi*) and divine religions. They refused to give in to disbelief “*kufr*” in their nation and took refuge in the cave. The location of the cave is described in this way: if you stood up in front of it, the sun would be to your right. The sun would go further away after sunrise and became smaller. At sunset, sun rays shine inside the cave for moments, warming the backs of the cave dwellers for a short period of time. After their death, believers built a mosque on the tombs of these cave dwellers to keep the memory of their self-sacrifice and pilgrimage alive. During the time of the Prophet, the twenty-second verse shows that as soon as hearing the story, controversy about the number of *the companions of the cave* was raised among people.

The third part (verses 23-31) describes how the prophet treats people, and repeats the main theme of the *sūrah*. Immediately after finishing the story of the cave, the prophet is reminded not to say “I will do this tomorrow” without adding, "God willing." Then it follows the story of the cave and the time of their stay, and says God knows best how long they stayed there. The prophet is recommended to be patient toward the demands of idol worshippers, and pray at morning and night and turn to God, rather than turning to the idolaters and Quraysh seeking worldly adornments. It is said to the prophet that the Quran invites people to faith. The following verses are about good and bad consequences for believers and unbelievers in Resurrection. It describes believers’ happiness in paradise and unbelievers’ sorrow in hell. It illustrates beautiful gardens, rivers, golden bracelets, green garments of fine silk, and reclining upon throne which are prepared for believers; and the water like melted copper which falls on unbelievers head.

The fourth part (verses 32-46) begins with an example for idolaters, which is about the fate of two friends. One of them is an infidel and the owner of two glorious prosperous gardens with huge profits from their products. The other friend is a believer and a needy person. In a friendly discussion, the rich man boasts about his wealth and properties and says he thinks that his two gardens will never be destroyed nor will the Resurrection ever come. Otherwise he would have a better position in this world as well as the other world. His poor companion reminds him of his
creation from earth, then from a drop of semen; and tells him to never associate anyone with his Lord. Afterward he wishes that the rich man sees all the blessings he owns as a gift from God. The story continues that the water of the garden runs off underground, ruining the fruit. Then the owner feels regret and loneliness, and he is not be able to recover his garden. The forty fourth verse repeats the main theme of the sūrah that everything belongs to Him: all support, rewards, and final consequences of His servants.

The example of this worldly life was given: it is like water which God has sent down from the sky, so that the plants on earth mix with it and it becomes food for humans and animals, and beautifies the environment. But all of them become dry weeds which the winds blow away. Finally it concludes that all these things are this world’s adornments and only good achievements deserve rewards.

The fifth part (verses 47-53) depicts some of the scenes of the Judgment Day (Qīyāmah). Scenes of the destruction of earthand the gathering of all mankind in the presence of God (without parents, friends, or family) are illustrated. In this section of the surah, the vast gathering of all people in the Resurrection is resembled to their initial creation by God. Following that, in the Resurrection, a detailed counting along with a book of deeds in which all deeds were recorded exists. Before continuing the description of the Judgment Day’s scenes, the story of Satan not prostrating to Adam is mentioned in this section for people to recognize their enemy. These verses warn people that Satan doesn’t know anything about the mysteries involved in creating the world. The verses that follow depict idolaters being helpless, they are asked to call their gods, and their entrance to the hell.

In the sixth part (verses 54-59) it is mentioned that mankind disputes with vain arguments. After being guided, some people still do not believe or have faith. If what happened to the ancients happened to them (“sunmat-ulawwal”), they would then have faith. Finally it is mentioned that God never hastened to punish unbelievers and He appointed a specific time for their destruction.

The seventh part (verses 60-82 and 83-98) depicts the story of Moses and Khīḍr, and the story of Dhul-Qarnayn. The story of Moses and Khīḍr who was educated by God, and Moses accompanied by his slave met him in a strait which had the elixir of life. Moses followed him to acquire divine knowledge that Khīḍr had been taught. Moses promised not to ask Khīḍr the reason of his actions, but he was impatient and asked Khīḍr why he had made a hole in a ship, and why he had killed a young boy, and why he had rebuilt a damaged wa:all which a treasure was buried under it for two orphans by their father. Also mentioned in this section is the story of Dhul-Qarnayn, to whom God gave authority. He travelled across the globe and used his authority and knowledge to rid people of evils like Gog and Magog. Finally Dhul-Qarnayn said that the Resurrection would come.

The Eighth part (verses 99-110) depicts Resurrection from a different angle: blowing of the trumpet to gather people and exposing hell to the unbelievers and polytheists. This section introduces the greatest losers in their deeds whose anxious efforts in this life have been wasted while they thought they were performing good deeds. They are those who deny their meeting with Allah and take Resurrection and God’s messengers in mockery. Finally it depicts believers’ good feelings in paradise. At the end of the sūrah, it returns to its major subject: for those who
believe that because of the establishment of the Resurrection, the messengers' mission is necessary only for a short period of time, an example is given to correct their thinking. If the sea could be Ink to count people, surely the sea would be exhausted before counting the people would finishes, so all people come to this world until the Day of Judgment comes.

This sūrah ends with a recommendation to the prophet Mohammad about monotheism and Resurrection, while he is introduced as a man like any other man who learned these principals from God.

2. Some notes about this sūrah

Based on the connection of the first verses of sūrahal-kahf with similar verses in previous sūrahas, we can explain the connections between the sūrahs in this way: sūrah al-‘ārāf 44-45, 85; hūd 18; Abraham 3). So for correcting these people’s beliefs, this suraḥ started with this message that there is no deviation in the Quran to support the deceitful (q.v.Sayyid al-Qutb 4,2257). Ṭabarsī (6, 306) says that sūrah Al-Isra’ is finished with taḥmīd (praise) as sūrahal-kahf started with it too. This happens in order to make congruence between the end of sūrah Al-Isra’ and the beginning of sūrahal-kahf (also, q.v. Suyūṭī, 1408, 91). Marāqī (15, 113) mentioned the similarities between sūrah Al-Isra’ and sūrahal-kahf. The sūrahal-kahf’s relation with the sūrah that follows (Maryam) is the existence of amazing stories in the sūrahs. In sūrahal-kahf, the story of the companion of the cave, Moses and khidr is mentioned and in sūrahMaryam the story of the birth of John (Yahyā) and Jesus is mentioned (q.v. Suyūṭī 1408, 93; marāqī 16, 32).

Two of the virtues of memorizing and reading the sūraḥ are a few verses of it are the atonement for sins (“kaffārēh”) and safety from the Antichrist’s (Da’ījāl) persecution and disasters (Ahmadīnābīn Ḥanbal 5, 19; 449-450; Kulaynī 3, 439; Ibnbābwayh 1368,107; Ḥilīlī 1,338; Hurr al-‘Āmilī 71, 409-410). Muslim scholars, based on some traditions’ recommendations, believe that if someone wants to worship at night and wants to be able to awaken, he can read the last two verses of sūrahal-kahf before sleep (Kulaynī 2, 540; ibnbābwayh, 1, 471; Mufīd, 144; Ṭūsī, 1411, 204). Some jurists have said it is recommended to recite one of the sāb’īṭīvāl sūrahs after sūrahAl-Fāṭīḥah or specially this sūrah in the eclipse prayer (q.v. Nu’mānMaghribī 1, 201; Ṭūsīn. d. 138).

In some traditions, the Prophet Mohammad and his family are referred to as kahf which means a cave in the mountains to secure refugees (q.v. Ka’famī 545; Majlīsī 23, 218).

3. Important notes in sūrahal-kahf

In the ninth verse of this surah it is said: ‘am ḥaṣibtaannaashaḥāb al-kahfīwa-raqīmikānū min āyātinā ‘ajabā’. Exegetists have different ideas about the term raqīm. For example, it is considered the name of the book or tablet on which genealogy and religion of the companion of the cave were written. Other exegetists said that it was the name of inkwell, or the local name
such as mountain or village and even the name of their dog (q.v. Ṣanʿānī; Ṣabarī; Ṣuḥās; Qurṭubī, under the verse). Jeffery (2007, 143-4) believes that it is probable that this word is derived from Syriac root of the name of a desert in southern Palestine, unlike the exegetists who considered it from the Arabic root (q.v. AbūḤātim al-Rāzī141).

In verses twenty three and twenty four, the prophet and believers are reminded not to say “I will do this tomorrow” without adding, “God willing”. These two verses which came in the form of a parenthetical sentence between story of Cave, based on circumstances of revelation’s tradition, relate to the unbelievers’ question and the Prophet’s promise for telling the story (q.v. Fakhral-Rāzī; Ṣuyūṭī, n. d. under the verse). In the Muslim tradition saying ‘God willing’ before an action or promise is based on this verse (q.v. Tūsī 1417, 6, 132; Zamaḵhšarī; Qurṭubī, under the verse; Ḥilli 415). It is narrated that the prophet said the faith of God’s servants wouldn’t be completed unless they had said God willing in all of their actions (Tha’labī, under the verses, Miqrīzī10, 324).

In the forty sixth verse of this surah, wealth and children are considered as an attraction of this worldly life, and the honorable deeds (bāqiyyatsāliḥat) that last forever are preferred. There are different opinions about the concept and instances of honorable deeds (bāqiyyatsāliḥat) which is widely used in the Islamic culture, including: daily (five-time) prayers, every good deed or word that makes humans love and serve God and to remain for hereafter, the remembrance of God (zikr), the intentions on which deeds are based, and saying good things (q.v. fakhral-Rāzī; Qurṭubī; Ṣuyūṭī, under the verse).

The orthography of verse twenty three of this surah is مَلَأَتْقَوْلُونَ لَثْلِيْبَيْنَ أَنْيَ فَاعَلَ ذَلِكَ غَدَّأَ, the word "شَاءِ" (shāy‘) in all versions of the Quran is written in the same way. It is a subject made from the verb شَاءَ (shā‘a - yashā‘o). First reciters of the Quran, and their followers in next generations, recite it: "شَيْ" (shay‘). If the orthography is considered authentic, such is the meaning of the verse: “do not say to every questioner, I, myself, will be in charge of tomorrow’s situation” (for fā’ilondhālīkaq.v. zajjāj; Sayyid al-Quth, under the verse), which means to shelter the companions of the cave for some years. Some exegesis shows that there was a questioner, but they report different questions, and define fā’ilondhāleka (فاعل ذلك) (افاکحرکم) (ابخرکم). In this case, dhālika refers to shay‘, not to the companion of the cave which is mentioned in the previous verse, so the connection between verses becomes unclear (q.v. Muqātīl 2, 284; Ṣuḥās; Ibn ‘Afiyyah; Qurṭubī; Bayḍāwī; Ibn ‘Āshūr, under the verse; cf Ṣabarī; Fakhr al-Rāzī, under the verse).

Some of traditions indicate that the absence of Imam Mahdi is similar to the stay in the cave of the companions of the cave (Tūsī1411, 111,474; Ṭabarī,456, Ibn Ḥajar, 6, 365), or it is similar to the story of the donkey’s owner who stayed in a cave for a hundred years (Tūsī1411, 422-423; Majlisī151, 204-205, 224; Tustarī, 12, 477). According to the Shiite history, Imam Mahdi stayed in Raḍwā Mountain for many years. When faced with difficulty, some religious groups claimed that their imam didn’t die, and he stayed in Raḍwā Mountain (q.v. IbnBābwayh 1405, 32; Tūsī 1411, 55,163).
Conclusion

From all above mentioned notes we can conclude that the first two stories (the mysteries of the cave with a thousand-year sleep, and the mysteries of the elixir of life and a thousand-year period of being awake) are an indication of God’s creativity. The third story of this sūrah (the story of Dhul-Qarnayn), may be a symbol of the return of God’s Man (Imam Mahdi). He uses the knowledge and skills from his first life upon his return to this world, and travels across the globe using mysterious methods (also q.v. Bihbūdī 2, 203-204; for other opinions, q.v. fakhr al-Rāzī 21, 104-105).
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