

The Hellhound of the Qur'an: A Dog at the Gate of the Underworld

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You may see the sun when it rises, bending away from their cave to the right. And when it sets, it passes from them to the left and they are in the hollow of it. That was from God's signs. Who God guides, he is one guided. And who He misleads, then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide. And you would reckon them awake and they were asleep. And We revolved them to the right and to the left while their dog extended his two arms at the portal. If you peered at them, you surely would have turned from them fleeing. And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them (Q. 18:17–18).¹

In the sura of the Qur'an named 'the Cave' (*Sūrat al-Kahf*) at Q. 18:9–26 there is a retelling of the famous story that Christians call 'the Sleepers of Ephesus' or 'the Seven Sleepers',² and Muslims call 'the Companions' or 'People of the Cave'.³ The story in its many editions tells the tale of a small group of saintly young men or boys who enter a miraculously long sleep of hundreds of years. The story of the Sleepers was widely known in the Christian communities of Late Antiquity, and perhaps known to a lesser extent in other religious communities as well.⁴ The Qur'an expects this familiarity of its primary audience: the Arabic scripture does not need to explain who the Sleepers were, only how to understand them. However, in the Qur'an the Sleepers are not alone; they are accompanied by a dog. This dog is only mentioned briefly and does not contribute to the plot of the story in any obvious way. Without note or explanation, we are just told that the dog is lying at the entrance to the cave. And yet this detail appears in no pre-Islamic record of the story that is known to us.⁵ In the version of the Sleepers' legend by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521 CE; the example of the tale most similar to the Qur'an's) there is a watcher whom God sets over the Sleepers. They cry out, "We beseech you, Good Shepherd, who has chosen his

servants, guard your flock from this wolf who thirsts for blood ...” and [God] left a watcher to be the guardian of their limbs’.⁶ Although it would not be too hard to see how this ‘watcher’ could be doglike in some regard—like a guard dog outside an encampment or looking after sheep—this watcher appears more supernatural than canine. Only in the Qur’anic account is the companion of the Sleepers an actual dog. Therefore the presence of this element in a well-known story must give us pause. Why would the Qur’an point out this animal? Is it doing something? The Qur’an does not appear to have a positive interest in dogs generally (cf. Q. 7:176, *If it had been Our will, We could have used these signs to raise him high, but instead he clung to the earth and followed his own desires—he was like a dog that pants with a lolling tongue whether you drive it away or leave it alone. Such is the image of those who reject Our signs ...*), so the Sleepers’ dog must be something exceptional. I would argue that the apparent addition of the dog offers us a vital clue about the Qur’anic re-imagining of the Sleepers, and most significantly, the cosmology and theology these figures suggest.

The Qur’an does not claim to be disclosing novelities. Rather, it presents itself as a ‘reminder’ or a re-presentation of what is known already, but has been ignored, misinterpreted, or forgotten. The recitations to the Prophet do not present themselves as a pure innovation, but as an elaboration, clarification, and reminder of ancient truths and narratives. The Qur’an takes for granted that its earliest listeners were already aware of the materials to which it makes reference. The Qur’anic use of Jewish and Christian lore is the most obvious example of this assumption. Like a homily or an exegesis, the Qur’an offers revisions, rereadings, or corrections of pre-Islamic material, and thus moves the familiar into a powerful new relief. Using the language of Claude Lévi-Strauss, we could call the Qur’an a fine example of *bricolage*: a creative rearrangement which begets novelty for a community by a re-introduction to the familiar.⁷

That noted, what is it about dogs that the Qur’an is handing back to its primary audience? The peoples of the Middle East have had a long and complicated relationship with the dog. When Middle Easterners thought of dogs in a positive light, it has typically been because of their utility. The ‘good dog’ of the premodern Middle East serves a purpose; a dog is supposed to fulfil some task. The Qur’an stipulates that the dog may be used for hunting (Q. 5:4, *They ask you Prophet, so what is lawful for them. Say, ‘All good things are lawful for you.’ [This includes] what you have taught your birds and beasts of prey to catch, teaching them as God has taught you, so eat what they catch for you ...*⁸), and many Islamic rulers collected well-bred hunting dogs. The practice was quite common amongst the upper classes, especially in the Ottoman, Safavid,⁹ and Mogul empires.¹⁰ Much earlier, poets like Abū Nuwās (d. c. 200/815) and Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 296/908) sang the virtues of the hound on the trail.¹¹ Besides being hunters, dogs guarded bedouin camps, or watched after

livestock, as they often still do.¹² The guard dog also found its way into great Ṣūfī literature as a symbol of loyalty. Thus, for example, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAttār (d. c. 616/1220) lauded the obedience of the lowly guard dog who stays up all night as the opposite of a prideful human: the dog knows its place, the human forgets.¹³

On the other hand, in the Bible and in premodern Middle Eastern Jewish culture the dog is also associated with filth, decay, greed, and corruption. Association with a dog was one of the quintessential insults.¹⁴ The dog was an emblem of ritual impurity: 'Dogs will lick up your blood';¹⁵ 'A dog returns to his vomit';¹⁶ 'Do not give to dogs what is sacred'.¹⁷ Rabbi Eliezer the Great (act. c. 110 CE) remarked that 'he who breeds a dog is like him who breeds pigs', and the dog can 'cause the Shekhinah to depart from Israel'.¹⁸ Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish (act. c. 200 CE) said, 'he who breeds a wild dog in his house keeps loving kindness away from his house'.¹⁹ These attitudes to the dog reflect those found throughout premodern Middle Eastern culture. Thus, in similar vein, a very popular saying attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad through Abū Hurayra (d. 59/681) tells us unambiguously: 'I heard God's Messenger saying: "Angels do not enter a house wherein there is a dog ..."'.²⁰ Another Prophetic report mentions that dog ownership devalues the believer's good deeds.²¹ A third *ḥadīth* says that the touch of the dog's tongue on an object requires a specialised cleansing process.²² In terms of wider medieval Middle Eastern culture, the Arabic root of the word 'dog' (*kalb*) has a number of semantic relations. Nearly all of these are negative; for instance, 'to be raving' (*istaklaba*), 'rabid' or 'greedy' (*kalib*), in a state of 'agitation' (*taklīb*), and 'crazed' (*maklūb*). Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for example, equated the dog with 'the carnivorous beast' of human nature: 'the dog is anger', 'bestiality', 'hostility', and 'mordacity'.²³ Dogs haunted graveyards and battlefields to eat exposed human bodies.

Sometimes Middle Easterners have indeed been consciously ambivalent on the subject of canines. To call someone 'Layla's dog' (*sag-i Layla*) suggests this person is both devoted to one's beloved and yet a nuisance, like a manipulative in-law or annoying friend.²⁴ Often when people did sing the praises of dogs, it was directly or indirectly framed by human shortcomings: humans are so horrible, the dog can seem noble by comparison. When Ibn al-Marzubān (d. 309/921) recounts the virtues of dogs, the discourse begins by detailing the deficiencies of people.²⁵ Similarly, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (act. c. 365/975) tell of a bear who accuses the dog of being so much like the human that it is hardly a proper animal anymore.²⁶

Dogs were drawn to the precincts and abodes of men simply by their kindred nature and character. With men they found food and drink that they relish and crave—and a greedy, covetous ignoble, stingy nature like their own ... all these qualities were found in humans and dogs. So it was their kindred nature and character that led dogs to leave their

own kind and shelter with men, as their allies against the hunting animals, who were their own race.

Because the Middle Easterner has conceived of the dog in ways that are simultaneously positive, negative, and equivocal, the dog makes for a complex symbol. Dogs are religiously, mythologically, and allegorically powerful because they are full of contradictions. They stand between categories. First, dogs are animals that associate with people. Although that is not unique, it marks dogs as unusual. Second, unlike other commonly domesticated animals, the dog is a predator that may threaten humans. A horse or bull may injure a person who scares it, but a dog may actually try to hurt a person deliberately. A cat may be a domesticated predator, too, but a dog could actually kill and eat a person. The dog may hunt for people, or it may hunt people. Third, the dog both guards and craves. A dog can serve as a protector, but it may also be a greedy thief or a scavenger. The sheepdog protects what it also wants to consume. Fourth, dogs occupy intermediate roles. The hunting dog (with its defiling saliva) can give a human edible food. The guard dog stands between the inside and the outside of the home, the camp, or the palace. Dogs belong on the threshold.

For all these reasons the dog is a very common Middle Eastern symbol of liminality, doorways, and borderlands. These can be the borders between purity and impurity. Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Greek rituals used dogs as receptacles of contamination. A defiled human could pass defilement onto a dog, which would then be sacrificed and buried in a pit.²⁷ Such ritual slayings of dogs were common in the Levant as well. In the Persian province of Judea the practice peaked between the fifth and third centuries before the Christian era, continuing on into the Hellenistic Period.²⁸ Dogs can also be the borders between the human and the nonhuman;²⁹ the civilised and the uncivilised; the foreign and the familiar. Dog-headed people (*kynokephaloi*) were often thought to live at the edges of the inhabitable world. The belief was common enough in Late Antiquity that Augustine himself responded to questions of their existence and descent from Noah in his *City of God*.³⁰ The dog-people feature in many of the fantastical journeys of the two-horned Alexander in the mountainous zone between heaven and earth from whence rivers flow,³¹ and are repeatedly associated with Gog, Magog, the Amazons, and other barbarian peoples near the world's limits.³² The most famous of these dog-people-as-liminal legends branches out of a Coptic tale of at least the fifth or sixth century CE in which a dog-man named Reprobis is a boatless ferryman. Instead of rowing, he physically carries people over a river on his gigantic shoulders: he is a living bridge. One of these passengers is an apparition of the Christ Child. Reprobis thus earns the name Christopher, 'the Christ-carrier',³³ and he remains the popular saint of the liminal state of travel.³⁴

The most significant threshold occupied by the dog in the pre-Islamic Middle East was in the intermediate spaces between life and death. The dog repeatedly took on a

chthonic aspect as the guardian of the underworld, the escort to the afterlife, or a reminder of death. As the dog is simultaneously the guardian of life and a scavenger of corpses, a defiling defender of clean spaces, and a wild animal who sits before human doorways, this function is especially apt. Several of these images are still active in the popular imagination today. Recall the Egyptian jackal god Anubis, who in Greek imagery became a dog. Exhibiting similar symbolic themes that would later manifest in the Coptic Reprobos/Christopher, Anubis was the guardian of the 'soul' (*ba*) as it passed into the underworld via the riverway of the sun. He was the patron of cemeteries and the guide through the rites of mummification.³⁵ Consider also Cerberus. In the *Aeneid* he is a bulky guardian, 'sprawl[ing] over all his cave' on 'the river's edge, the point of no return'.³⁶ When Aeneas must cross Cerberus' threshold, he puts the monster into the liminal state of sleep, as does Orpheus in his legend. Less well known today, but closer to the time of the appearance of the Qur'an, there was the Zoroastrian funerary practice of *sagdīd* (literally, 'dog looking'), in which a person was not considered officially dead until the body had been seen by a dog.³⁷ In Zoroastrian cosmology, too, the bridge between this world and the next is guarded by one or more dogs.³⁸

Echoes of this association of dogs with doorways and death appeared in Christian and Jewish sources also. An early medieval rabbinical commentary on Ecclesiastes notes, 'In the world to come ... dogs will open gates'.³⁹ In the apocryphal Acts of Andrew, Saint Andrew combats seven demonic canines in a graveyard. In the following episode, he revives a dead man who was attacked by these dogs.⁴⁰ In the Acts of Peter, a talking dog acts as the apostle's envoy to the sorcerer Simon Magus, and the themes of portals, foreignness, and death appear yet again.⁴¹

And the dog ran away at once and went into the midst of the people who were with Simon, and lifting his front legs he said with a very loud voice, 'Simon [Magus], Peter who stands at the door bids you to come outside in public, for he says "On your account have I come to Rome" ... You shall be accursed, enemy and destroyer of the way of Christ's truth. He shall punish your iniquities, which you have done and you shall be in the outer darkness.' ... Having thus spoken the dog fell at the feet of Peter and expired.

Where do the Qur'anic dog and the Sleepers fit into this picture? As with many references to pre-Qur'anic figures from Jewish and Christian lore, the Qur'an explains that the Sleepers and their miracle are signs (*āyāt*) for those who would reflect. The Qur'anic pericope of the Sleepers introduces the story by so framing it. The Sleepers are indicators pointing through themselves to God.

Without further introduction, the material then shifts immediately to the Sleepers fleeing to a cave where they ask God for mercy and guidance (Q. 18:9–12):

Or have you reckoned that the companions of the cave and the inscription (raqīm) were from Our signs a wonder?⁴² [Recall] when the youths retreated to the cave. And they said, 'Our Lord, grant a mercy to us from Yourself. And ease us from our condition properly.' So We struck over their ears a number of years in the cave. Then We raised them so that We might know which of the two parties best enumerated the length they stayed.

The passage goes on to explain that the Sleepers have fled from their own people because these folk have fallen into idolatry and/or polytheism. Rather than give in to the false beliefs of their own religious culture (*milla*), the youths ran away and took refuge in a cave (Q. 18:14–16). There is no mention of the dog as of yet:

We strengthened their hearts when they stood up and said, 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We do not call on any god other than Him. Certainly we would then have spoken an outrageous thing. These people of ours have taken gods other than Him. If only they would bring some clarifying authority concerning them! Who is more evil than the one who forges a lie against God?' And when you have withdrawn from them and what they serve instead of God, take refuge in the cave. Your Lord will display some of His mercy to you, and will furnish some relief for you from your situation.

Then the passage moves forward in time again to show us the Sleepers in their dormant state. Several mysterious elements of the story are provided. None of these narrative elements appear in the pre-Islamic variations of the legend that still survive.⁴³ Unique to the Qur'an, the sun moves in a peculiar relationship to the Sleepers and their cave. Also, the Sleepers seem to be awake but are not. Furthermore, the whole scene is declared frightening to a hypothetical onlooker who might have somehow observed the miracle (the Qur'an's audience, addressed as 'you'). The dog makes its first appearance here as well, also without explanation or previous reference:

And you may see the sun when it rises (tala^cat) bending away from their cave to the right. And when it sets, it passes from them to the left and they are in the hollow of it. That was from God's signs. Who God guides, he is one guided. And who He misleads, then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide. And you would reckon them awake and they were asleep. And We revolved them to the right and to the left

while their dog extended his two arms (dhirā'ayhi) at the portal. If you peered (ittala'ta) at them, you surely would have turned from them fleeing. And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them.

After this, God wakes the Sleepers up and they say that they do not know how long they have been asleep in their cave. They guess it has only been *a day, or some of a day* (Q. 18:19).

One of the Sleepers is sent out for food with their *wariq* ('coinage' of silver or gold).⁴⁴ Through this, God caused the people of the nearby city to become aware of the Sleepers. The Qur'an mentions that this was so that these people would realise that God's promises to the world will surely come to fruition: the final hour is coming. The Sleepers are signifiers of the end. However, as the Qur'an often warns regarding the signs of God, most people misinterpret—or actively distort—the message God has sent in the form of these figures. Instead of understanding the story of the Sleepers as a sign of imminent judgement, the later believers in the miracle wanted to worship the Sleepers themselves. There is talk of building a place to prostrate (*masjid*, literally 'a mosque') over their cave (Q. 18:21).⁴⁵ Furthermore, in Q. 18:22, these (un)believers quarrelled over the details of the story. For example, how many Sleepers were there?

*They will say, 'There were three and their dog was fourth of them.'
And they will say, 'There were five and their dog was sixth of them.'
Guessing at the unseen, they say, 'There were seven, and their dog was eighth of them.' Say, 'My Lord is best informed of their number.' None knows them aside from a few. So do not dispute about them, except with an obvious (zāhir) argument. And do not ask about them from anyone of them.*

This verse tells us that there were multiple versions of the Sleepers' story in oral circulation in the Qur'anic milieu, which gave rise to disagreement. Such a disagreement over the number of the Sleepers does appear in the Syriac versions of the legend,⁴⁶ and the Qur'an uses the issue to underscore the limits of human knowledge regarding unseen matters. The misguided religion of the past, it seems, was not without its equivalents in the Qur'an's present: quibbling sectarianism over issues outside of mundane human understanding. In response, the Qur'an deliberately dismisses such bickering by obfuscating the true facts of the tale. The debate over the number of Sleepers is discussed, but the correct number is never provided. This is known only to God and an undisclosed few. We can guess that such specifics of the story are not of ultimate concern.

The Qur'an then warns the listener/reader never to assume that tomorrow will be as one plans it unless God wills it so. The Sleepers thought they slept for just one night, but in truth they remained in their cave for 309 years. By the end of the section it

seems that the moral of the story is that it is not the role of human beings to understand God's actions or predict them. Ultimately, God alone knows how long the Sleepers slept or what tomorrow will hold. The pericope closes with verses 23 to 26:

And do not say of a thing, 'Surely I will do that in the morning.' Aside from, 'If God wills it.' And remember your Lord when you forget. And say, 'Maybe my Lord will guide me (yahdiyani) nearer than this properly (rashadan). And they stayed in their cave for three hundred years and add by nine. Say, 'God is best informed about their stay.' For Him is the unseen of the heavens and the earth. He sees best in it and hears best. They do not have one-to-turn-to (wali) beside Him. And He does not associate anyone in His judgement.

The pre-Islamic story of the Sleepers is thought to be a fusion of apocalyptic expectation with the Synoptic Gospel narrative of the seven resurrected brothers⁴⁷ and some Jewish tales of sleeping holy men.⁴⁸ The oldest versions of the Christian Sleepers' story were written in Greek sometime in the fourth or fifth centuries. Unfortunately, these are now lost. The oldest surviving versions appear instead in Syriac. From here the story spread into many languages, well into the Middle Ages and beyond. The most famous western version appears in the Latin *Golden Legend*.⁴⁹ Like most Christian hagiography, the Christian story of the Sleepers is a lesson in Christology. The Sleepers remind the listener of the persecution, burial, and resurrection of Christ. In this case, the reality of Christ is pluralised to foreshadow the general resurrection of the dead at the Eschaton. Like Christ and the Sleepers, all the faithful will enter the sleep of death and rise again on the Last Day.

In the Qur'anic version of the story, there is also a Christology at work. However, the Qur'an has a low Christology; meaning Jesus is a prophet, the Messiah, and a sign of God on earth. This is opposed to high Christology where Jesus is all of these, but is also divine. Indeed, the Qur'an repeatedly warns its audience against the worship of Christ. For example, only a few verses before the opening of the Sleepers' pericope, *Sūrat al-Kahf* gives the admonition: *And [the Qur'an has been sent] to warn those who say, 'God has taken a son.' They do not have any information about it, and neither their fathers. Momentous is the word that proceeds from their mouths. They say nothing but a lie* (Q. 18:4–5). Following from the Qur'an's low Christology, the Sleepers serve as a warning against the worship of God's servants and saints as second divinities and possible intercessors. As we have already seen, in the Qur'anic story the apparent monotheists who found the Sleepers are even said to have wanted to build some kind of shrine over their cave. It is also possible that the Qur'an further weakens the lure of worshipping such revered figures by purposefully confusing their number. The Sleepers are thus a sign from God, but they ought not to be worshipped, or prayed

to. Telling the listener to meditate on the miracle of the Sleepers, the Qur'an says they were from God's signs. *Who God guides, He is one guided. And who He misleads, then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide* (Q. 18:17). Put simply, and with a kind of irony that is typical of the Qur'an, the Sleepers are signs of God who now warn against the Christian habit of worshipping the signs of God.

What role does a dog play in this eschatologically oriented tale? In the Qur'an, the dog only appears in the story after the Sleepers were already unconscious in their cave. Neither does the dog serve a role in the pericope after the Sleepers have awoken (beyond the arguments about the number of the Sleepers from later peoples). The dog's absence both before and after the Sleepers' miracle suggests that it is only relevant to the story during the Sleepers' dormancy. Without any precursor in any other Qur'anic passage, or even any other known text, the Qur'an simply includes the two details that *their dog extended his two arms at the portal, and if you looked at them, you surely would have turned from them fleeing. And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them* (Q. 18:18). The dog is frightening, as are the Sleepers themselves. The Sleepers seem to be awake, even though they are asleep, and they move in a way that follows the movements of the sun. What is it that is terrible about these miraculous events, then?

The Syriac authors agree that the story of the Sleepers is a parable about death and the Resurrection. Babai the Great (d. 6/628) specifically named them as evidence for the doctrine of soul-sleep: 'The Holy Scriptures call death sleep; thus, too, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.'⁵⁰ This soul-sleep is also called hypnopsychism or psychopannychism. As far as the living are concerned, dead people are asleep (or in a state quite like sleep). Awaiting the final Resurrection, the dead are dormant for the time being. As the living bypass time in normal sleep, so the dead bypass the remainder of history unaware of what is happening on earth. As in the Syriac versions of the story, the Qur'an is also employing the Sleepers as metaphors for the sleep of death, in a very similar way.⁵¹ The central message in the Qur'anic account is that praying to prophets or other holy people, or hoping for their supernatural assistance or intercession, is pointless as they can neither hear these prayers or respond. It is not surprising then that the Qur'an tells us that the Sleepers' ears have been struck shut by God. In opposition to this, the Sleepers' story ends by reminding the audience that it is only God who hears and sees everything. *To Him belongs the unseen of the heavens and the earth. He sees best in it and hears best* (Q. 18:26). This is the precursor of the Islamic intermediate state of the *barzakh*. Soul-sleep, or the *barzakh*, make saint cults irrelevant. The cult of the divinised Christ would quite likely be the prime target of such eschatology.

Returning to the Qur'an, but reading the Sleepers as the sleeping dead, the more mysterious elements of the pericope make a great deal more sense. Unlike all of the

Christian versions of the Sleepers of Ephesus, in the account of the Companions of the Cave they are not sealed into their resting place by a stone or bricks. This is first suggested by the relationship between the Sleepers and the movements of the sun described in Q. 18:17, *And you may see the sun when it rises, bending away from their cave to the right. And when it sets, it passes from them to the left and they are in the hollow of it.* The spatial relationship of the sun to the cave is not entirely discernible,⁵² but if it is possible to see the Sleepers and the full range of the sun's movements, this means that the Sleepers are not sealed up. They are *in the hollow of* the cave, but exposed. This detail is without precedent and purely Qur'anic. Therefore, we can suppose that this detail is likely related to the Qur'anic agenda. The pieces of a *bricolage* are old, and so new pieces in the arrangement tell us what this particular presentation has in mind.

If the Sleepers are to be understood as the dead, or at least as proxies for souls in the underworld, then the detail of the sun is critical. Middle Eastern mythological milieus quite often equated the road to the underworld with the pathway of the sun. The sun passes under the earth when it sets and returns when it rises. It was easy to explain this cosmology by having the sun enter and leave the underworld through a cave or gateway equated with the horizon, the mountains, or both. Compare this to the descents of Middle Eastern solar deities into the land of the dead, such as Gilgamesh, Shamash, or Ishtar. In the Egyptian afterlife dramas, Anubis escorts the dead into the underworld via the solar barge. When Demeter is looking for her lost daughter, Helios points her to a cave that leads down into Hades. The Nabatean-Arabian incarnation of Ishtar and Isis, al-^oUzzā, may have even been the occasional consort of the Syrio-Roman solar-mountain god Elagabalus (Heliogabalus, Ilaha-jabal).⁵³ The Qur'an is working with a similar motif in a monotheistic form. A cave is a passage to the space under the earth, and the only created being that regularly moves under the earth is the sun. We see both the sun's rising and setting and hence we would think of this cave as related to the horizon and/or the mountains, as well as the land of the dead. The only distinction between these mythologies and the Qur'an is that in the latter we cannot be entirely sure if the story is supposed to be reminding its audience of the passage to the underworld, or if this cave *is* a passage to the underworld. Either way, it can be assumed that this symbolism will resonate meaningfully with the Qur'an's audience.

Following from this, we can explain the next piece of data that is unique to the Qur'an: the Sleepers are moving. *And you would reckon them awake and they were asleep. And we revolved them to the right and to the left* (Q. 18:18). Immediately we must question what the Qur'an means by sleep if the Sleepers are in motion. If this is simply a miraculously long version of typical sleep, that does not explain why the Sleepers are moving enough to be mistaken for being awake, and why this movement mimics the route of the sun. If a person were merely turning over in their bed during

normal rest, we would not confuse them with someone who was awake. Some exegetes have tried to resolve this issue by claiming it was merely the Sleepers' eyes which were turning (see below). This seems very unlikely. That God 'turned' or 'revolved them to the right and the left' can only be understood as a full bodily movement. However, if the cave of the Sleepers is equivalent to the mouth of the netherworld, and the Sleepers are closer to death than mere dormancy, this issue evaporates. Like the sun, people (even holy ones) move from birth to death; sunrise to sunset. In the other mythological systems of the netherworld in the Antique and Late Antique Middle East, like Kigal, Duat, and Hades, where sleep and death are all but identical, we often find shades and other beings who are both at rest and in motion; dead but not entirely inanimate. This is in opposition to the earliest traces of Biblical lore which utterly lack a hero-quest into the underworld, for the dead are in a notably non-mobile and non-eventful rest in Sheol. In the Qur'anic world, we find elements of both trends; both a vision of the underworld's activities and the lack of human agency there. The sleeping dead are at once doing nothing and doing something. This would also partially explain the remark, *If you peered at them, you surely would have turned from them fleeing. And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them* (Q. 18:18). It is not clear why someone who was merely at rest (whether preternaturally long or not, mobile or not) would be frightening. If the Sleepers are both dead and still moving, the terror of looking upon them is self-explanatory.

This takes us to our third original piece of the Qur'anic *bricolage*: the cave of the Sleepers is open to the sunlight and it is possible for 'you' (the hearer/reader of the Qur'an) to see them. The Sleepers are exposed and specifically not walled into their hollow—unlike the other editions of their story and most especially unlike the entombed Christ. Besides being ensnared by sleep, in Syriac literature the dead are also blocked away from this world by a wall or a barrier. This lack of a solid barrier in the Qur'an's story is highlighted by the inclusion of the dog who *extended his two arms at the portal*. Moving one step further, the absence of the previously ubiquitous sealant of the cave and the presence of the unheard of dog can reorient us. There is a barrier still in place, only now it is not a wall or a stone, but a guard dog.

Put boldly, the Sleepers do not have a pup; they have something more terrifying than that: a frightening guard dog of an environment that strongly suggests the underworld. The presence of a guardian plays a dual role: the way is blocked, but it can be crossed. This allows for liminality. Likewise, this liminal zone is marked by a liminal being. The dog simultaneously indicates the defence of the living and the horrific decay of death. Like the scorpion-men who guard the solar gate to the underworld in the Gilgamesh epic, the dog is at once a protector of human life and a sign of its inevitable end in the grave as a corpse. Consider also Cerberus,

who like the Qur'anic dog with its *two arms extend[ed] at the portal*, 'sprawls over all his cave', in the *Aeneid*.⁵⁴ The Qur'anic inclusion of a dog in the story of the Sleepers is therefore not an exception to the Middle Eastern view of dogs as ritually impure. It is a perfect example of the trend. What separates the living from the dead? A fearful, defiling guardian who symbolises mortality, decomposition, and terror. The living must not approach decay, while the deceased are destined to. The mouth of the cave is shut to the living but accessible to the dead. A liminal sentinel permits both.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, later Islamic literature on this story posits this dog as the Sleepers' pet. This may be because the commentaries and post-Qur'anic Prophetic traditions were compiled and edited in milieus with quite different feelings about dogs. Perhaps the ancient motifs of dogs no longer resonated in the imagination. Also, the Qur'anic references to the dog as 'their dog' may confuse the matter even more. For example, here is the early commentator Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) on the passage:⁵⁵

And you would reckon them awake when they turned and their eyes were opened ... they were turned by Gabriel, peace be upon him, twice every year, so that the earth would not consume their flesh. *And they were asleep*, meaning sleeping, *and we revolved them to the right and to the left* on their sides, and they were asleep and did not feel. *Their dog*, his name, Qīṭmīr, *extended his two arms at the portal* [meaning the space at the door of the cave]. The dog belonged to Maximian, and he was a sheepdog (*rāṭī ghanam*). So the dog extended his two arms at the door of the cave to guard them. And God Almighty let the dog sleep all those years, as the youths slept, the Prophet said, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him.

Notice that the dog is understood as a guardian, even though it is asleep. As well as being a sentinel, Muqātil says it is also the pet of Maximian (Mukslimīnā, one of the Sleepers). Even though the Qur'an claims the dog is 'their dog', and thus not just one individual's dog, this later way of addressing the Qur'anic canine as a pet would become dominant. In Islamic art the scene of the Sleepers appears again and again with a dog curled up, sleeping right alongside his apparent masters. There are even modern children's books about this dog⁵⁶ who, according to later traditions, will be one of the few animals to be permitted to enter Paradise. The Qur'an is a multivalent text, and so while these readings can be argued for, they do not appear to be the earliest reading. There is no indication in the Qur'an itself that this dog is supposed to be a mere pet, or even that the dog itself is asleep. Indeed, the Qur'an seems to say that the dog is awake, spread out at the entrance to the Sleepers' cave. Further, the dog is

apparently horrific, as seeing it and the Sleepers would have caused 'you' to run away in terror.

This leads us back to the Qur'an's monotheistic agenda generally, and in the Sleepers' pericope specifically. While the Qur'an repeatedly highlights the value of those who are God's chosen spokespersons, or are themselves signs of God, it is also insistent that these people remain mere mortals with limited knowledge and no independent intercessory roles. The line *Who God guides, he is one guided. And who He misleads, then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide* (Q. 18:17), which precedes the introduction of the dog, is likely more than coincidence. God does not just tell people not to worship dead holy men and prophets as intercessors. He places a terrible barrier before them to keep the living at bay. Those who approach the dead are meddling with the powers of death and corruption. The dog marks the liminal space between the living and the underworld, signifying that those who approach the servants of God as they ought not to (by worshipping them, or seeking their divine assistance) will be blocked away from them *and* they will suffer the consequences. The fearful and defiling dog is a reminder of divine retribution in hell.

Some other indications that the dog is a barrier from false gods survive to us. While the dog is not named in the Qur'an itself, Muqātil b. Sulaymān and many others were already invoking the very unusual name *Qitmīr* even before the full flowering of the Islamic commentary and historical sciences. *Qitmīr* is the only Arabic word that is constructed from the four-radical root *q-t-m-r*, which has no equivalent in any pre-Islamic Semitic language. A *qitmīr* is said to indicate 'the cleft of a date-stone', 'the skin of a date-stone', or 'the white point in the back of the date-stone'. Idiomatically, it implies 'a small, mean, paltry, contemptible thing'.⁵⁷ The name is not a compliment. This word is a Qur'anic *hapax legomenon*, making its only appearance in *Sūrat Fāṭir*, at Q. 35:13–14:

He makes the night pass into the day and He makes the day pass into the night. And He imposed on each the sun and the moon [a] running for an appointed timespan. That is God, your Lord. The possession is His. And for those who call on another besides Him, they will not even possess a qitmīr. If you call them, they do not hear your call. And if they heard, they would not respond to you. And on the Day of the Resurrection they will deny association with you.

As with the introduction of the dog in Q. 18:17–18, the sole Qur'anic usage of the word *qitmīr* appears immediately after a description of the sun's movement. The solar reference here is also concluded by denying the authority of alternative or associate divine powers besides the one God. Compare this passage to Q. 18:17, which we have

seen already: *And you may see the sun when it rises ... That was from God's signs. Who God guides, he is one guided. And who He misleads, then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide.* Also, sleep reappears here as well. As the deafened Sleepers are foreshadowing sleeping-death and the Resurrection, here the Resurrection concludes the false idols' inefficacy and deafness. The powerlessness of both the Sleepers and the would-be intercessors is equated to their inability to hear or respond to human calls. Both the dog and the *qitmir* are invoked as signs of the uselessness of turning to powers besides the one true God. The otherwise bizarre name of this animal in many of the later Islamic sources echoes an older reading of the story, which does not consider the dog as simply a pet but as a warning: false divinities have no power, they cannot hear you or help you, and if you turn to them you turn to damnation.

There is other evidence that the Qur'an considers this dog a guardian of, and barrier to, the underworld and a warning against divine association as well. Michel Cuypers and other scholars of the Qur'an have begun reading the text in search of ring structures.⁵⁸ Although this method (and the academic shift towards Qur'anic structuralism that undergirds it) is not without issue,⁵⁹ and its novelty means that its ramifications have not been fully understood yet, the search for ring structures often provides very encouraging results.

A ring structure is a mnemonic device employed by performances in highly oral cultures, in which most of the system's parts fall into symmetrical pairs, thus facilitating easier recall of large amounts of information. The first part of a textual system will thematically or grammatically mirror the very last part of the same system. The second part of this system parallels the second to last part, and so forth. Further, this method can be detected at many different scales: within a single line, or a pericope, or even an entire sura that may be many 'pages' long. Often at the end of each system and subsystem is a 'latch' that points out the system's end by either repeating a blunt statement twice or introducing a tangent which requires no further explanation.⁶⁰ Regardless of length, at the centre of each ring system is a very short pivot, which carries the most rhetorical force of the passage. These pivots can take the form of a direct questioning of the audience (which in a primarily oral culture would have been responded to forcefully), a bold declaration of a great truth, an unusual or even counterintuitive thought such as a paradox, a challenge, an overlap of two otherwise distinct narratives, a reversal in an important conversation ('you say x, but I say not x'), or any combination of these. Because these pivots appear in the centre of self-echoing rings of text, when read (or better, heard) linearly, they seem to be asides in an otherwise straightforward discussion or pattern.

<u>Structure</u>	<u>Content</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1A	Sleepers are signs, ears struck shut, unknown number of years	(Q. 18:9–12)
2A	God goes over the truth of the story	(Q. 18:13)
3A	Entering and leaving the cave, false religion	(Q. 18:14–16)
Pivot	These are signs, God has no associates; the sun and the dog	(Q. 18:17–18)
3B	Entering and leaving the cave, false religion	(Q. 18:19–21)
2B	Debates, God knows the true story	(Q. 18:22)
1B	God has no associates, God sees/hears, true number of years	(Q. 18:23–26)

Table 1. Ring Structure of the Sleepers' Pericope.

The appearance of the dog in the Qur'anic pericope of the Sleepers is found in a ring that immediately frames the account's pivot. Here is Q. 18:17–18 again:

*And you may see the sun when it tala^cat bending away
from their cave
to the right and when it sets it passes from them to the left and
they are in the hollow of it.
That was from God's signs.*

Who God guides he is one guided

and who He misleads then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide.

*And you would reckon them awake and they were asleep.
And We revolved them to the right and to the left while their dog
extended his two arms at the portal.
If you peered (ittala^cta) at them
you surely would have turned from them fleeing.
And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them.*

There are several indications that this contains the central pivot of the Sleepers' pericope. First, there are a very high number of terms and roots that appear nowhere else in the sura: the 'bending away' (*tazāwar*), the 'passing' (*taqrīd*), the 'hollow' (*fajwa*), 'awake' (*ayqāz*), 'asleep' (*ruqūd*), 'extending' (*bāsīt*), 'forearms' (*dharā^c*), the 'portal' (*waṣīd*), 'fleeing' (*firār*), and 'horrorstruck' (*ru^cb*). These are each indications that a particular message is being relayed in these two verses that is specific to this part of the system. The singularity of these elements within the pericope means that they are not a part of a larger pericope-ring. In a similar manner, we can be more certain that this is the pivot of the pericope because those parts that do repeat themselves in these two verses only repeat themselves within these two verses and nowhere else in the pericope. These are the movements to 'the right and the left' (*dhāt al-yamīn*, *dhāt al-shamāl*, Q. 18:17 and 18) and the root *t-l-l^c*. This latter repetition shows itself with the sun's rising (*tala^cat* at verse 17), and the listeners' own hypothetical peering or 'looking at' (*ittala^cta*) the Sleepers and their dog (verse 18). Another repetition appears at the end of the section. Here we see two back-to-back indications that *you surely would have turned from them*

fleeing, and you surely would have been horrorstruck by them. This is the 'latch' which marks the end of a sequence with a bold double-statement. At the very middle is the section's strongest statement, which is also a set of parallelisms consisting of reference to those whom God guides and does not. This also ends with a repetition: *one-to-turn-to, a guide*. And both of the rapid parallels at lines 17 and 18 use the root *w-l-y* in their first statement: 'one-to-turn-to' (*walī*); 'you surely would have turned' (*la-wallayta*). These two verses repeatedly invoke this turning. We also see that the sun 'bends' over the Sleepers who 'revolve' in symmetry to it. The centre of the Sleepers' pericope is in this motion: the rising and the falling of the sun, the life and death of people, and the turning to or from proper faith are equivalent.

Of particular concern here is the ring immediately framing this central pivot, which seems to equate *that was from God's signs* (verse 17) to *you would reckon them awake and they were asleep* (verse 18). Without looking for the ring structure these thoughts would not seem to have any noteworthy relationship to each other. However, if the story of the Sleepers in the Qur'an is particularly interested in nullifying the cult of saints while still keeping them theologically valuable, the ring serves a significant function. Yes, these holy people and their miracle(s) are from God, but they are mere signs. You may think that one can seek their help and intercession, but they are inactive, deafened, and asleep.

The pivots in ring structures will also point to the very beginning and very ending sections of the story to which they are the centrepiece. On the lexical level, both the opening (Q. 18:9–12) and closing (Q.18:23–26) of the pericope are (p)re-presented in this centre. Recalling the opening of the pericope, the Sleepers are signs (verses 9 and 17), about whom people reckon (*ḥasibta* at verse 9, *taḥsabuhum* at verse 18). Predicting the end of the story, beyond God there is no one-to-turn-to (*walī* at verses 17 and 26) and no other guide (*yahdi* at verse 17, *yahdiyyani* at verse 24).⁶¹ God alone grants proper guidance (*rashad* at verse 10, *murshid* at verse 17, *rashad* at verse 24).

Such ring-structural readings also work on the text's macro-scale: the entire sura. When the entire Qur'anic sura of the Cave is read this way, it can be thus rendered:

<u>Structure</u>	<u>Pericope</u>	<u>Verses</u>
Ring 1A, the outermost ring	Introduction	(Q. 18:1–8)
Ring 2A, exempla	The Sleepers	(Q. 18:9–26)
Ring 3A, exempla	Recollections of <i>Isaiah 5</i>	(Q. 18:27–46)
Ring 4A, the centre ring	Judgement Day	(Q. 18:47–49)
Central Pivot	Adam and Iblīs	(Q. 18:50–51)
Ring 4B, the centre ring	Judgement Day	(Q. 18:52–59)
Ring 3B, exempla	Moses	(Q. 18:60–82)
Ring 2B, exempla	The Two-Horned One	(Q. 18:83–102)
Ring 1B, the outermost ring	Conclusion	(Q. 18:103–110)

Table 2. Ring Structure of *Sūrat al-Kahf*.

According to this reading, all the pericopes of *Sūrat al-Kahf* are in symmetrical orbits around one of the Qur'an's seven uses of the story of Adam and Iblīs, at Q. 18:50–51. Only two verses long, it reads:

And [recall] when We said to the angels, 'Bow to Adam,' then they bowed. Except Iblīs: he was of the jinn so he disobeyed the conditions of his Lord. So will you take him and his offspring as ones to turn to instead of Me, while they are your transgressors? Contemptible for the sinner is the swap. I did not make them witness the heavens' and the earth's creation, and not the creation of themselves.⁶² And I am not one who takes the misleaders as assistants.

This small pericope carries many of the hallmarks of a ring structural pivot. It gives the audience a challenge (*So will you take him and his offspring as ones to turn to instead of Me, while they are your transgressors?*) and strongly declares the sole dominion of God. It takes the form of a paradox (is Iblīs sinful for his disobedience, or correct not to worship a mere creation?). Ring structural pivots appear to interrupt larger discussions, and in this case it is the discussion of the end of times (Q. 18:47–49; 52–59) that is cleft in two by this discussion of primordial times (50–51).

Furthermore, as this central pivot governs the structure of the entire sura, its message is predicted and reprised in the sura's opening and closing. Both sections underscore the mere humanity of the messengers (Jesus at Q. 18:4–8; Muḥammad at Q. 18:110), and the greater authority of the revelations such messengers bring (Q. 18:1–3, 109). While the specific issues of the worship of prophets (and hence, *shirk*) does not reappear in the inner rings of the sura, exempla episodes of the theme do appear throughout. Three sections (Q. 18:27–46) explain the futility of looking for value in mere creations of worldly goods like water, wealth, property, and children. Similar themes of water, wealth, property, and children return in the adventures of Moses to the meeting place of the waters and his encounters with a mysterious 'servant' related in Q. 18:60–82. As opposed to these anti-materialism parables, the Sleepers' narrative is presented as a warning against those who take up second gods or the worship of saints in the pivot of the Sleepers' pericope: *That was from God's signs. Who God guides he is one guided and who He misleads then you will never find one-to-turn-to, a guide.* This unbelief is rendered useless as the would-be objects of prayer are symbolically dead, literally deafened and unconscious, and a terrifying guardian has been set before them as a barrier.

The translation technology of ring structures also leads us to compare the pericope of the Sleepers (the first half of *Sūrat al-Kahf*'s second major ring) with the pericope of the Two-Horned One (Dhū'l-Qarnayn, the second half of the same ring, Q. 18:83–102).

<u>Structure</u>	<u>Content</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1A	Remembrance of Two-Horned One, his course on the earth	(Q. 18:83–84)
2A	He follows a course to the sun at the pool of muck	(Q. 18:85–86)
3A	Torment and reward	(Q. 18:87–88)
4A	He follows a course to the sun at the unsheltered people	(Q. 18:89–91)
Pivot	He follows a course, Gog and Magog on the earth, deafened people	(Q. 18:92–95)
4B	Barrier built by pieces of iron and blowing on fired copper	(Q. 18:96)
3B	Barrier will fall by the promise of the Lord	(Q. 18:97–98)
2B	The Resurrection and the horn is blown, hell displayed	(Q. 18:99–100)
1B	Remembrance of God, they covered their eyes and ears	(Q. 18:101)

Table 3. Ring Structure of the Two-Horned One's Pericope.

While there has been some debate over his identity, it is overwhelmingly certain that the 'Two-Horned One' is Alexander, although the Qur'an never uses this name. Instead he is only called by the title that underscores his relationship to the sun.⁶³ And so, like the Sleepers, the Two-Horned One is following the course of the sun. First the prophetic (or prophet-like) hero crosses into an environment that suggests decay and death, mirroring the role of the mysterious dog. This is the *pool of muck* at the place of the sun's setting (Q. 18:86). Next, the hero comes to the place of the sunrise, where there are people who have no concealment (*sitr*) from it (Q. 18:90). The Qur'an does not explain what this means, and so it suggests an emic reference. The Qur'an's audience must have already known what they needed to know about the unsheltered oriental people in this verse. In the Syriac 'Christian Legend Concerning Alexander', contemporaneous to the Qur'an's appearance, we can get some more information that may be applicable:⁶⁴

The place of [the sun's] rising is over the sea, and the people who dwell there, when he is about to rise, flee away and hide themselves in the sea, that they be not burnt by his rays ... and those who dwell there have caves hollowed out in the rocks, and as soon as they see the sun passing, men and birds flee away and hide in the caves.

Comparable information about their dwelling places is given by many of the Muslim exegetes, too.⁶⁵ As the unsheltered Qur'anic Sleepers follow the course of the sun and frighten people away from their cave which recalls the horizon, these unsheltered

people at the horizon likewise follow the sun's movements, but instead flee into caves.

The pivot of the Two-Horned One's pericope is found where the hero's adventures end. Here, this plot overlaps with the creation of a barrier and a prediction of its fall at the Resurrection (when the dead awaken from their sleep). The pattern of the first half of the pericope governed by the variations of the phrase 'he followed a course (*sabab*)' collides with the discussion of the barrier's rise and fall that composes the second half of the pericope. It also takes the form of a conversational reversal between the people and the two-horned adventurer who is divinely guided (Q. 18:92–95):

Then he followed a course, until, when he reached between two barricades (or mountains, saddayn), he found beside them a people, who could almost not comprehend what he said. They said, 'O Two-Horned One, surely Gog and Magog are reprobates on the earth. So we will make a payment to you if you would make between us and between them a barricade.' He said, 'What my Lord has established for me is better. But with strength help me: I will make between you and between them a barricade.'

Like the Sleepers whose ears are blocked up by God, now we encounter another group of people who have a hearing problem of some unspecified sort (Q. 18:93). This hearing problem is in a sense resolved in the following verses, in which the Two-Horned One makes a prophecy of the fall of his barrier: *When the promise of my Lord comes, He will make it flattened ... and the horn will be blown, so We will collect them collectively ... Those are the ones who covered their eyes from remembrance of Me, and were not able to hear* (Q. 18:98–101). The Sleepers, the people in the mountains between two worlds, and the unresurrected dead cannot hear. Read symbolically they are the same. They are in liminal states and cannot be reached by human effort. However, the only one-to-turn-to, the true God, always sees and hears (noted at the end of both pericopes at Q. 18:26 and 101).

Properly, the Two-Horned One reminds the people between the mountains of this. They ask for his assistance, and although he grants it to them, he first explains that *what my Lord has established for me is better* (Q. 18:95). Then he goes on to build a fiery metal barrier that keeps the forces of the apocalypse (Gog and Magog) away from the world of the living. In this account the directionality of the Sleepers' story is reversed. The living are blocked away from the would-be intercessory saints by the dog who personifies the terrors of death and decay. Meanwhile, the would-be interceding Two-Horned One blocks the forces of death away from the living. Both barriers, the ritually impure dog and the molten metal wall, separate this life from the end of history. This double barricading, which both shuts in and shuts out, also has

older precedents. Again in the Gilgamesh epic, the gate of the sun god Shamash was marked by animal harbingers of death and keeps the living out of the underworld. Meanwhile, the famous walls of Uruk defend life from death. Compare Luke's/the Diatessaron's account of Lazarus and the rich man as well. In life, Lazarus is barred away from the rich man by a gate, where he lives in filth along with the dogs. In Hades, the rich man is kept away from Lazarus in Abraham's bosom by an infernal chasm.⁶⁶

Between the dead and the living is a barrier and so the living cannot reach the dead or hope for their intercessions. In the story of the Two-Horned One, the barrier is a wall of iron and molten copper⁶⁷ that will stand until the dead are raised up. In the story of the Sleepers, the barrier takes the form of a terrible dog who watches over the sleeping dead in order to prevent their idolisation (and by extension, the worship of Christ as the Son of God). After taking account of the central pivot story of Adam and Iblīs, an even more complete message comes out. Living people cannot leave the world because they are barred from whatever lies beyond. Neither can any power from outside of the living world intrude into it. But, there is one exception that both crosses the space between the two worlds and reinforces their separation: revelation. In the very beginning, middle, and end of *Sūrat al-Kahf*, the role of the prophets is minimised as the function of revelation is emphasised.

This reading of *Sūrat al-Kahf* and the direct identification of the dog with an eschatological cosmology does not appear in the later Islamic literature on the subject. In truth, the Islamic tradition as a whole does not offer one particular explanation of the dog. Instead one finds that the exegetes and historians revisit a number of very minor debates regarding the story with much repetition and little consensus. For instance, while the name of the dog was usually Qīṭmīr, other names were occasionally mentioned as well. Thus, in the exegesis of al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) we see a discussion over the meaning of *raqīm*. Amongst a number of other theories about the term, some speculated whether this was the dog's name.⁷² Al-Tha^clabī (d. 427/1036) offers a number of variant names of the dog, such as Rayyān and Ḥamrā, as well as Qīṭmīr. Conversely, the meaning of the word *kalb* is sometimes discussed as well. If one's view of dogs was negative, there would be incentive to wonder why the Sleepers would be associated with one. Was this to be understood as a literal dog?⁶⁸

When the dog was given a backstory, it took one of three general shapes. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)⁶⁹ and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373)⁷⁰ both recall accounts which relate the dog to a certain chief from the followers of the Sleepers who rejected their pagan king as they did. Also al-Tha^clabī and Ibn Kathīr record some who say the dog was a royal hunting dog from the court of the Sleepers' evil king.⁷¹ Neither of these possible

explanations of the dog provide much more information, however, and they do not contribute to the plot of the Qur'anic story. This suggests that these accounts are elaborations of the Qur'anic text, and not independent survivals from the elusive Qur'anic milieu of earlier centuries.

The third and most common variant says it was a sheepdog. We have seen this already suggested by Muqātil above. The dog-as-sheepdog appears also in the *History* of al-Ya'qūbī (d. 292/897),⁷² the *Tales of the Prophets* of al-Tha'labī, and in commentaries on Q. 18:18, such as al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1209)⁷³ and al-Qurṭubī's (d. 671/1273).⁷⁴ Al-Tha'labī gives us two versions of this story. In both, the Sleepers are in flight to their cave when they encounter a sheepdog. They throw stones at it to chase it away, thinking its barking will reveal their location. At this the dog stands on its hind legs like a person and speaks. In the first version of the story, attributed to 'Alī (d. 40/661), the dog says: 'Do not drive me away, for I bear witness that there is no god but God alone, who has no partner. Let me protect you from your enemy.' In a similar fashion, the second version of the sheepdog narrative, attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), has the dog say: 'Do not be afraid of my presence for I love those beloved of God. So sleep, and I shall guard you.' Again, there is no mention of the dog after the Sleepers wake up, or before they arrive at their cave, suggesting these are lacunae, not narratives independent of the Qur'an. But there are some parallels between these materials and our hypothesis that the dog is a chthonic symbol warning against idolatry. The liminal features of the dog appear in both variants. The dog is both fearful (the Sleepers see it as a threat) and a guardian (it offers to protect them). It is a terrestrial being (a particular sheepdog) with supernatural abilities. It is an animal (a dog) that plays at being human (it stands on two feet and speaks). In 'Alī's account it even introduces itself as a monotheist and dismisses divine association.

Moving further back in the historical record, we come to the biographical sources of the Prophet's life. The dog of *al-Kahf* is not explained in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām or the canonical *ḥadīth* collections, but its symbolic framework does appear. Caves are associated with the horizon, they act as liminal zones of sleep/death from which people flee, and they are guarded by animals. At the revelation of *Sūrat al-'Alaq* (Q. 96) the Prophet enters the cave of Ḥirā' 'turning to his right and his left'. There he sleeps. He is presented with a piece of writing, and is put into a liminal state 'that I thought was death'. The Prophet then wakes up, flees from the cave, and sees Gabriel standing on the horizon.⁷⁵ Likewise, in the many *ḥadīths* that provide the *sabab* for *Sūrat al-Muddaththir* (Q. 74), Gabriel is identified with Ḥirā' and is seen seated between heaven and earth.⁷⁶ In the *sabab al-nuzūl* for *Sūrat al-Mursalāt* (Q. 77), the Prophet and his Companions are sitting in a cave when a revelation comes. A snake then attacks them, which the Prophet commands his followers to kill. It escapes, at which the Prophet both affirms and denies what the snake has done: 'It has escaped your evil, as you escaped its evil'.⁷⁷ In the cave of Thawr, the Prophet and

Abū Bakr are hiding from idolators and are protected by one or more birds and/or a spider.⁷⁸

In the canonical *ḥadīths*, the dog of the Sleepers is not mentioned at all. However, these reports may say more about the Qur'anic community's feelings towards dogs than the exegetes regarding this issue. While there were positive conceptions of dogs in the Middle Eastern world, in the hundreds of *ḥadīths* that discuss them the association is overwhelmingly negative. One is not permitted to own a dog unless it is for hunting or guarding.⁷⁹ All other dogs may be killed.⁸⁰ One cannot accept money in exchange for a dog.⁸¹ During the prayer, the forearms are not to rest on the ground 'like a dog'.⁸² A black dog is a 'devil' (*shayṭān*).⁸³ Even in the many accounts of a person who earns salvation by giving a dog water, the suggestion is not the value of the dog but the humbleness of the one who helps it; she helped *even* a filthy dog.⁸⁴

It cannot be said with certainty if the dog in the Qur'an is supposed to be taken as a typical animal given a supernatural, symbolic role for the duration of the Sleepers' rest (hence it is still 'their dog' in our understanding of such a phrase), or if instead of this situation, the dog is a purely supernatural being whose sole purpose is to watch over the mouth of the cave (as in Jacob of Serugh's story of the Sleepers, above). It seems very unlikely that the dog of *Sūrat al-Kahf* is a fixed mythological being such as Cerberus or Anubis. However, the dog seems to be acting symbolically as more than just an extraneous detail. In either case, the dog is a sign which guards the faithful against false, idolatrous religion and ultimately acts as a reminder of death and the infernal.

However, consider again the saying of the Prophet mentioned earlier about how angels do not enter houses where there are dogs. The full quotation reads, 'Angels do not enter a house wherein there is a dog or a picture of a living creature'. The presence of dogs, like pictures of living creatures (i.e. icons and idols), marks a deviation from the proper worship of God alone. The dog in *Sūrat al-Kahf* is this saying played out in narrative form. Do not confuse the messengers with their message; the servants with their God. Like the adoration of idols and icons, the dog is a marker of irreligion, but the dog in *al-Kahf* scares the believer away from worshipping the dead and the merely human. The Qur'an itself supports this interpretation much more than reading the dog as simply the Sleepers' faithful pet. This also accords much more easily with the many depictions of dogs in the ancient Middle East as both ritually unclean and markers of death.

While approaching the dog in the Qur'an this way is not in keeping with the later readings of this passage by the Muslim commentators and folklorists, it does reflect the background of the Late Antique milieu into which the Qur'an appeared, and with which it was in conversation while explaining some of the more unusual features of the Sleepers' tale. It seems likely that several Christian versions of the Sleepers'

legend passed into the highly oral milieu of the Qur'an. All or some of these already contained a supernatural watcher over the sleeping-saints. At some point before the appearance of the Qur'anic addition of the story, the watcher was fused with the long-standing Middle Eastern mythological equation between dogs and the dead. Hence the Qur'an can make reference to the pre-Islamic arguments about the Sleepers, and the dog was already part of this debate. The Qur'an then took the story, folding in both low Christology and pagan elements from the Arabian imagination, and exposed the Sleepers as a lesson against intercession and association. In time, the Qur'an appeared well outside the oral, tribal Arabian milieu in which it first appeared in the seventh century. There, the Islamic exegetes and compilers of history did not know of the Christian association of the Sleepers with Christ, or the pagan association of dogs with caves, the path of the sun, or the underworld. The dog still appeared as a watcher, but not as a warning. As the readings provided by the commentators gained authority and stabilised over the centuries, the dog as a mere accessory to the story became the standard interpretation, as it remains today.

NOTES

This project was introduced at Brown University's conference on 'Beasts, Monsters, and the Fantastic in the Religious Imagination', on 1 March 2014.

1 All Qur'anic translations are the author's own. When certain parallels are being highlighted in the Arabic original, I have occasionally introduced atypical grammar or vocabulary to show the relationship. In the example above, this would be the translation of *walī* ('ally', 'protector') as 'one-to-turn-to', thus reflecting the connection to the following verse's *la-wallayta* ('you surely would have turned'). Conversely, their bodies 'revolve' (*qallaba*) rather than the more standard 'turn' in order to not create a false relationship to *walī* and *la-wallayta*.

2 The collected vision of the Christian story involves young Christian men, usually seven in number, from the city of Ephesus, fleeing the persecution of the Roman Emperor, usually Decius (d. 251 CE). They hide in a cave and are sealed in by their pagan persecutors. The youths are overtaken by a miraculous sleep in which they do not age, finally awaking in an era of Christian acceptance: under either the Emperor Theodosius I (d. 395 CE) or Theodosius II (d. 450 CE). The Sleepers are at first not aware of how long they have slept, but are shocked to find that the world now seems to be populated solely by Christians. After their presence is brought to the attention of the locals, the Sleepers either die peaceful deaths or return to their resting place in expectation of the general resurrection of the dead, with their cave becoming a pilgrimage site.

3 Q. 18:9–26. For clarity, I will refer to the people of these stories as 'the Sleepers' only. This is not to dismiss the Christian relationship of these saints to the city of Ephesus, or to dismiss the traditional Islamic names of 'People' or 'Companions of the Cave'. However, 'the Sleepers' is the most pithy and yet descriptive designation of the group, and so most practical to this project.

4 Before the coming of the Qur'an, the Sleepers legend was strictly a Christian story. There is no non-Christian, pre-Islamic version of it. It seems very unlikely that one would have existed as the tale of the Sleepers is obviously full of Christian themes. However, there is some evidence that suggests the legend may have been known beyond just Christian communities. In the common occasion of revelation of *al-Kahf*, the story of the Sleepers is known by some

rabbis (see, for example, Ibn Ishāq's (in the recension of Ibn Hishām) version of the *sabab* in Guillaume's translation *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 136). The historical reliability of this *sabab* can be easily questioned. However, we still must consider then that for the original source of the *sabab* it was conceivable that Jews would be aware of the legend as well as Christians. The fact that Ibn Ishāq (or someone else living in the eighth century?) believed rabbis would know the Sleepers legend demonstrates its popularity. This does not suggest that a non-Christian version of the story existed in writing, only that the story was very widely known. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) notes a similar issue in his commentary on Q. 18:13, although he comes to a very unusual conclusion. While he never doubts the authenticity of the *sabab*, he has also heard that the Sleepers' story was also previously told by Christians. He uses this discrepancy to conclude that the story is probably pre-Christian; the rabbis' knowledge of the story is possible evidence that the Sleepers lived before the time of Christ (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3, pp. 70–72).

5 It should be noted that when the Qur'an mentions the sectarian debates about the number of Sleepers at Q. 18:22, the dog is included in the argument. This suggests that the dog was already present in the Qur'anic milieu before the arrival of this passage on the Prophet's lips. However, no record of the dog from the pre-Islamic period is known to us otherwise.

6 Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an', p. 128.

7 Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 17.

8 The passage in question says that the food caught by any trained hunting animal is permissible for consumption, but the term used for the trainers of such creatures, *mukallibīn*, strongly suggests hounds.

9 Reindl-Kiel, 'Dogs, Elephants, Lions'.

10 Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition*, pp. 129–143.

11 Ibn al-Marzubān, *The Book of the Superiority of Dogs over Man*, pp. xxxi–xxxii.

12 Also prescribed by Muḥammad's teachings in many reports, e.g. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol. 3, p. 403.

13 Schimmel, *Islam and the Wonders of Creation*, pp. 40–41.

14 For example, Judges 7:5–6, 2 Samuel 16:9, Psalms 26:11, Philippians 3:2, and Revelation 22:15.

15 1 Kings 21:19–24.

16 Proverbs 26:11.

17 Matthew 7:6. See also the Gospel of Thomas, saying 93, which includes a further remark linking dogs to filth: 'Do not give what is sacred to dogs because they will throw it on the dungheap.'

18 Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma 83a, in Menache, 'From Unclean Species', p. 43.

19 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63a–b, in Menache, 'From Unclean Species', p. 44.

20 In many versions, e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 5, p. 226.

21 Many versions, e.g. al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 3, pp. 270–271.

22 Many versions, e.g. al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, vol. 1, pp. 58–60.

23 al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, p. 321.

24 Schimmel, *Islam and the Wonders of Creation*, p. 41.

25 Ibn al-Marzubān, *The Book of the Superiority of Dogs over Man*, pp. 3–12.

26 Goodman and McGregor, *The Case of the Animals*, pp. 158–159.

- 27 Edrey, 'Dog Cult', pp. 13–14.
- 28 Edrey, 'Dog Cult', pp. 15–22. Besides giving more than a dozen archeological sites of dog burial and slaying by strangulation, decapitation, and neck-breaking in Judea, the author also mentions Isaiah 66:3: '[He] who sacrificed a lamb [would now] break a dog's [(*klb*)] neck.'
- 29 Menache, 'From Unclean Species', p. 42.
- 30 Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 2, pp. 116–118.
- 31 Budge, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 234–236.
- 32 White, *Myths of the Dog-Man*, pp. 47–70.
- 33 White, *Myths of the Dog-Man*, pp. 34–36.
- 34 Pageau, 'Understanding the Dog-Headed Icon'.
- 35 See Burger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, p. 5; McHugh, *Dog*, p. 12. Although there is a biological distinction between a jackal and a domestic canine, they are symbolically identical. In either case, by the Greek period Anubis was taken to be a dog (if he was depicted with animal attributes at all).
- 36 Virgil, *Aeneid*, p. 196.
- 37 Digard, 'Dog', pp. 461–470.
- 38 Tafazzoli, 'Činwad Puhl', pp. 594–595.
- 39 Qohelet Rabba 1, in Menache, 'From Unclean Species', p. 46.
- 40 Acts of Andrew 6–7, in Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 274.
- 41 Acts of Peter 9–12, in Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 206–209.
- 42 A *hapax legomenon* whose meaning was once a notorious mystery. It is certainly an 'inscription', however theories once abounded. Other solutions included the name of the cave's location, the dog's name, a misspelling of *ruqūd*, and others. For discussions of this matter, see Bellamy, '*Al-Raqīm* or *al-Ruqūd*?'', pp. 115–117; Tottoli, art. 'Raqīm', pp. 351–352; Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, pp. 171–173.
- 43 See two homilies by James of Serugh, both in Ignazio Guidi, 'Testi Orientali Inediti Sopra I Setter Dormienti do Efeso', pp. 16–29; Zacharias of Mytilene in Brooks, *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori, Vulgo Ascripta*, pp. 106–122; Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, pp. 111–112. For a complete overview of the early examples of the tale, see Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an', pp. 120–122.
- 44 The word *wariq* comes from the root *w-r-q*, 'to leaf, to put forth leaves'. Every other appearance of the root in the Qur'an retains this connection to 'leaf'. Here, the text contains a collective noun of value: 'coinage' or 'money'. The implication is 'coinage' of valuable metals such as silver or gold, metals which are worked in thin leaves or sheets (Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, p. 1,021).
- 45 There are several modern caves that claim to be the sight of this miracle. One of these is found in Amman, Jordan. In a strange turn of history, this cave now boasts a mosque directly above it.
- 46 The disagreement over the number of Sleepers in the Christian lore is discussed in Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an', p. 129. For Jacob of Serugh and John of Ephesus they number eight. For Zacharias of Mytilene, there are seven sleepers. While it is doubtful that the Qur'an expects its listeners to refer to these written sources in foreign languages, this disagreement in the Syriac texts, coupled with the Qur'anic passage here, strongly indicates multiple oral versions of the story that number the Sleepers differently.
- 47 Mark 12:18–27, Matthew 22:23–33, and Luke 20:27–40.

48 These include the stories of Ḥoni the Circle Drawer and Abimelech in Herzer, *4 Baruch*, pp. 81–100. Another possible influence may be the pagan sleeping saints of Sardinia, in Colker, 'A Medieval Rip Van Winkle Story', p. 131.

49 de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, pp. 401–404.

50 *Commentary on Evagrius*, in Gavin, 'The Sleep of the Soul', p. 107.

51 Andrae, *Mohammed*, pp. 89–90; Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, p. 167.

52 Because the Qur'an does not specify where the hypothetical onlooker is positioned, the layout of the cave is debatable. Ibn Kathīr's commentary on Q. 18:17 argues that the cave is open to the North, and thus the sun is rising on the right and setting on the left to one standing in the cave facing outwards (assuming that the cave is in the northern hemisphere). This seems most probable. However, if the onlooker is facing into the cave, then the cave opens to the South. Or, if the cave is open to the sky, and thus the Sleepers are beneath ground level, the sun would still rise on the right and set on the left if the onlooker was facing north (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3, pp. 72–73).

53 Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion*, p. 52.

54 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6:488.

55 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 283. Translation is the author's own.

56 For example, Owadally, *Qitmīr*.

57 Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, p. 2,543.

58 See the works of Michel Cuypers, most particularly: *La composition du Coran* and *Le Festin*. See also Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*; Ernst, *How to Read the Qurʾān*.

59 Rippin, 'Contemporary Scholarly Understanding', pp. 1–14.

60 Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, p. 156ff.

61 In the variant reading of the Ṣanʿāʾ Palimpsest (DAM 01–27.01, folio 32B), verse 17 also includes 'beside Him' (*min dūnihi*) before 'one-to-turn-to' (*walī*). Although much of the line is missing, it can be partially reconstructed as: *God ... one guided ... beside Him one-to-turn-to (min dūnihi walī), a guide*. Compare this to line 26 in our recension: *They do not have one-to-turn-to beside Him (min dūnihi walī)*. While this may strengthen the ring structure even more, the palimpsest's line 26 is not extant. Also, it is not yet clear what the exact relationship between the standard recension and the otherwise unknown recension of the palimpsest is. See Goudarzi and Sadeghi, 'Ṣanʿāʾ 1', p. 73, for their interpretation of the palimpsest's dating and place in the Qur'anic canonisation process.

62 Angelika Neuwirth argues that this line is reminiscent of the theodicy of Job 38–41 (Neuwirth, 'Negotiating Justice', p. 4).

63 How we are to take Alexander's 'horns' is inconsistent (in some sources he has ram's horns, while in others goat's, or wears a horned helmet, or has horns of silver, or is associated with divine bulls). In all cases, his specific designation as 'two-horned' relates Alexander to the cults of a number of solar deities. Long before the time of Alexander of Macedon, Amun-Re (in Greek, Zeus-Ammon) was depicted as a criosphinx and referred to as the 'two-horned one' (*sept̄ ābui*, Budge, *Alexander the Great*, p. xviii). In both the Syriac and Ethiopic versions of Alexander's adventures, his mother is impregnated by this sun god via a magical proxy in a dream, and there is a prophecy that foretells the birth of a boy whose emblem is the sun and who like Ammon has two horns. This recalls the story of the historical Alexander and the mythology of the founding of Alexandria. Ptolemy I Soter claimed that the Apis bull came to him in a dream in the form of Zeus/Hades, thus binding together the founder of the new Greek city with the Egyptian cults of the underworld and the solar horned animal. The Apis bull,

itself a manifestation of the Egyptian Re through Osiris, was also supposedly worshipped by Alexander. The conqueror himself was first depicted with the ram-horns of Zeus-Ammon in 321 CE as part of the propaganda effort of Ptolemy, which implied the unity of the Greek and Egyptian peoples under one divine dynasty. Depicting Alexander in this seemingly unusual way also put him in continuity with all of the other horned solar gods of the ancient Middle East. This would include the Arabian Şalm, the Canaanite Moloch, the Yemeni al-Maqqā, the Babylonian Marduk, the Minoans' solar bull, and the cosmic bull of Mithraism. In the Biblical lore as well, Alexander appears horned again, now in the form of a goat (Daniel 8). And when he was depicted without horns of any kind, Alexander was still often combined or associated with anthropomorphic solar gods, such as Helios, Shamash, and Gilgamesh (Meissner, *Alexander und Gilgamesh*; Wheeler, 'Moses and Alexander', pp. 109–125). For a full comparison between the Qur'anic Two-Horned One and the Syriac sources of the Alexander cycle, see also van Bladel, 'The *Alexander Legend*'.

64 Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, p. 148.

65 Many of the Islamic exegetes mention similar details in their exegesis of Q. 18:90–92. Muqatīl b. Sulaymān mentions these people flew into their homes in the earth like swarms. Several exegetes, including Ibn Kathīr, cite a tradition of Qatāda b. al-Nu'c mān in which these people lived in tunnels.

66 Luke 16:19–31; Diatessaron 29:14–26.

67 Q. 18:96.

68 The not uncommon desire to humanise the dog is noted in Fudge, art. 'Dog', p. 546.

69 al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5, pp. 145–147.

70 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3, p. 73.

71 Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis, pp. 689–714. Other minor variants of these accounts are discussed in Fudge, art. 'Dog', pp. 545–546.

72 Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yā'qūbī*, vol. 1, p. 173, and Griffith, 'Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an', p. 136.

73 al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī*, vol. 21, pp. 101–104.

74 al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' al-aḥkām*, vol. 13, pp. 234–235.

75 Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 104–107.

76 Many versions, e.g. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 1, pp. 257–258.

77 Many versions, e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 51.

78 Eisenstein, art. 'Spider', p. 113.

79 Many versions, e.g. al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 3, pp. 270–271.

80 Many versions, e.g. al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, vol. 5, p. 173.

81 Many versions, e.g. al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, vol. 5, p. 351. This ordinance is likely related to Deuteronomy 23:18.

82 Many versions, e.g. al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, vol. 2, p. 143.

83 Many versions, e.g. Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, vol. 4, p. 299.

84 Many versions. Typically it is a prostitute who climbs down a well and brings up water in her shoe, tripling the association to lowliness and filth; e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, p. 322. In other versions, in which the person is male, the dog is often eating mud; e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 1, pp. 152–153.

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