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The Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Holy Bible and Qur'an : Lessons for Organic Youth Movements

Mohamad Syukri Abdul Rahman¹, Zikrullah², Mohamad Muhajir³, Muhammad Ghazali⁴, & Aditya Putra Harwanto⁵

¹ Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia;
email : msyukri@uis.edu.my

² Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Malang, Indonesia; email : azikzikrullah4@gmail.com

³ Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia;
email : hajirmesir@umy.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Malang, Indonesia; email : muhammadghazali694@gmail.com

⁵ Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, Indonesia; email : aditya.putra.2208116@students.um.ac.id

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Abstract

The role of youth as agents of social change is an integral part of the history of every civilization. One fascinating example of youth role models, often overlooked in historical records, is the story of the Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahfi). The tale of the Seven Sleepers and their faithful dog is enshrined in the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This article aims to examine and analyze in depth the epic exemplarity of Ashabul Kahf as presented in the Bible, revered by Christians, and the Quran, considered an authoritative source by Muslims. This study seeks to connect the various examples of exemplary behavior with contemporary youth movements, which seem to lack a guiding framework and roadmap for their actions. The methodology used in this article is a content analysis of two authoritative sources: the Bible and the Quran. The findings of this article suggest that the epic exemplarity of Ashabul Kahf in the Bible and the Quran lies in their integrity as youth who chose to defy an oppressive regime.

Keyword

The Seven Sleepers, social change, organic youth movements, Bible and Quran, Ashabul Kahf

Introduction

Indonesia is experiencing a democratic crisis that impacts the principles of democracy in the country. The main causes of the democratic decline are debated among political experts. However, several experts agree that there is an authoritarian tendency driven by autocratic leaders to erode democratic principles, rules, and norms (Margiansyah, 2021). The illustration of weakened democracy is the factor of a despotic authoritarian regime elected through General Elections (PEMILU) that weakens political institutions, erodes democratic norms, and represses the opposition gradually and legally, no longer through military coups or bloody revolutions.

If one observes the current state of governance in Indonesia, a phenomenon emerges. The issue of delaying the 2024 General Election has led to the extension of the presidential term, creating a stigma among the public regarding the autocratization of the regime. Similarly, the performance of the three parliamentary bodies (MPR/DPR/DPD) is impacted by the strong ruling coalition, resulting in weakened parliamentary oversight and control over government policies (Rachbani, 2022). There are many other phenomena of democratic weakening due to the authoritarian regime.

This style of leadership will undoubtedly have adverse effects on the life of society, in terms of economy, politics, social aspects, and education. The negative impact on the education sector will hinder the growth and development of young people's careers (Kurniyatillah et al., 2020). Young people will experience setbacks in their progress due to government policies that tend to be detrimental to certain groups, particularly the youth. In this case, the youth need to receive motivational input so that they develop a strong mentality and can endure life under a despotic authoritarian regime.

One form of motivation that can be provided to young people is by sharing stories from the past that have similar challenges to those faced by today's youth. According to Robert K. Merton's Strain and Anomie theory, role models in society and among youth can offer alternative pathways to success, which may include unconventional or even illegal behaviors (Rosenfeld, 1989).

One example of such role models can be drawn from the story of the Seven Sleepers or Ashabul Kahf. The story of Ashabul Kahf, as recounted by Allah SWT to Prophet Muhammad SAW in Surah Al-Kahf, verses 9 to 26, holds a special exemplary value. This story is one of many signs of Allah SWT's greatness. The Ashabul Kahf tale is about a group of young men who hid and slept in a cave for approximately 309 years. They fled from a despotic regime, which could be described as authoritarian, that was compelling its people to commit shirk against Allah, the One and Only God. They purely fled to avoid the severe oppression from the regime to ensure their monotheistic faith remained intact and out of fear of Allah SWT.

The story of Ashabul Kahf is known in the Western world as the tale of the Seven Sleepers. In Western scholarship, this story is generally agreed to have truly occurred. One such assertion comes from Shaykh Abul Hasan Ali An-Nadwi R.A., who stated that no critique has been able to prove that the legend of

the Seven Sleepers is merely fiction without any historical basis. Therefore, the story of Ashabul Kahf, or the Seven Sleepers, holds a recognized place in global contexts (Prabowo, 2022).

The exemplary tale of the Seven Sleepers or Ashabul Kahf, which can serve as motivation for today's youth, especially those experiencing the autocracy of despotic regimes, has garnered the interest of researchers for further in-depth study. This research is titled "The Exemplary Tale of the Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Bible and the Quran for Today's Generation: A Valuable Lesson from Organic Youth Amidst a Despotic Authoritarian Regime.

Research that examines the exemplary tale of Ashabul Kahf for young people facing oppressive governments is still scarce. However, there are some studies that explore the values of courage demonstrated by these youths. For instance, Salman Harun's thesis titled "Educational Values in the Story of Ashabul Kahf: An Analysis of Surah Al-Kahf, Verses 9-21 of the Quran" investigates these values. The study highlights that Allah strengthened their faith when they stood before a tyrannical king who forced them to abandon their monotheistic beliefs (Harun, n.d.).

The second study investigates the existence of the story of the Seven Sleepers or Ashabul Kahf. Conducted by Frank Barlow, it is titled "The Vita Aedwardi (Book II); The Seven Sleepers: Some Further Evidence and Reflections." This research examines the existence of the Seven Sleepers story, addressing the societal stigma that considers the event merely a common legend (Barlow, 1965).

This study employs a qualitative research method using a historical and case study approach. It involves an intensive investigation using scientific procedures to draw thorough conclusions. The study presents the historical account of Ashabul Kahf and explores the problems or phenomena of authoritarian regimes, highlighting their impact on society and the deviations from expected norms.

The Story of the Seven Sleepers (Ashabul Kahf) in the Bible

The Catholic Church commemorates the Seven Sleepers on July 27th, as recorded in the Roman Martyrology. In the Orthodox Christian perspective, the Seven Sleepers are commemorated twice a year: on August 4th, marking the day of their sleep, and on October 22nd, believed to be the day of their awakening. The story of the Seven Sleepers began to lose its prominence, being considered a mere legend or fable without factual basis, with the rise of Protestantism and the spread of the "Age of Enlightenment" in Europe around the 17th century (Prabowo, 2022).

In the version from Ephesus, the story of the Seven Sleepers describes how Emperor Decius (249-251) discovered seven noblemen named Maximillian, Jamblichos, Martin, John, Dionysios, Exakostodianos, and Antoninos, who were Christians. In short, these seven noblemen gave their belongings to the poor, took only a few coins, and went to a cave on Mount Anchilos to pray and prepare for death, following the emperor's orders. The emperor commanded his soldiers to find them, and when they were discovered asleep in the cave, he ordered his soldiers to bury them alive (Ainsworth, 1844).

The story continues with a wealthy landowner opening the cave to use it as a livestock pen. Subsequently, the Seven Sleepers awoke, believing they had only slept for one night. They sent one of their own, Diomedes, to the city to buy food so they could eat before surrendering. Ultimately, the people of that time learned of the story and rejoiced at the proof of bodily resurrection (Adrian Fortescue, n.d.).

By the late 6th century AD, the story of the Seven Sleepers began spreading from Persia to Scandinavia, from Ethiopia to Ireland. The widespread nature of this story during this specific period is considered evidence that it truly occurred close to the time when the tale went viral. After the passing of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the 7th century AD, around two hundred versions of the Seven Sleepers' story emerged in various languages (Collaco, 2011).

According to ancient tafsir texts, manuscripts, and the explanations of scholars, the location of this story is in Ephesus, a Roman city now located in modern-day Turkey. Emperor Decius and his people united in worshipping other gods besides Allah without any valid authority or reason. In response to Emperor Decius's arrogance, Allah then commanded the youths to leave the city and seek refuge in the cave. (Sidik, 2016).

An interesting fact is that the story of the Seven Sleepers is not found in Jewish texts but only in Christian literature (Prabowo, 2021). Some interpreters believe that this event occurred after the time of Christ. Historical data and facts support the view that this event took place in the 3rd-4th century AD, after the time of Prophet Isa (Jesus) A.S. Various archaeological evidence supports the belief that the Ashabul Kahfi or Seven Sleepers event occurred in Ephesus in the 3rd century AD during the Roman era. Pilgrims visited the cave site in Ephesus, located in Izmir, Turkey, until the 15th century (Grysa, 2010).

The Story of the Seven Sleepers in the Qur'an

The 18th chapter in the Holy Quran is Surah Al-Kahf, which consists of a total of 110 verses. This surah was revealed partly in the region of Mecca, classifying it as a Makkiyah surah, and from verses 83-110, it was revealed in Medina, thus also making it a Madaniyah surah. Surah Al-Kahf is one of the five surahs that begin with hamdalah, a praise to Allah SWT for the revelation of His noble book to His noble messenger. Indeed, the Holy Quran is a completely straight book, without any error or deviation, and it is the greatest blessing for humanity (Hikmah, 2020).

Ashab al-Kahfi, as mentioned in the ninth verse, refers to a group of young men who believed in Allah SWT and withdrew from the oppression of the ruler of their time because they disagreed with his religious beliefs. The verse also indicates that the event experienced by the Companions of the Cave was extraordinary. According to M. Quraish Shihab, this expression is indeed extraordinary, but he suggests that the event of the Companions of the Cave and their inscription (raqim) is not the only sign of Allah's astonishing power. It is not the only remarkable event, nor the sole evidence of Allah's power to resurrect the dead; there are many others. The event experienced by the Companions of

the Cave, he continues, is no more astonishing than other signs of Allah's power. However, other signs are frequently witnessed, causing the sense of wonder and amazement towards them to diminish or vanish (Istiqomah & Hanifah, 2022).

According to Tafsir al-Muntakhab, the ruling king at that time was King Antiochus IV, known as Nabivanes (176-84 BC), who was highly fanatical about ancient Greek civilization and launched attacks against Judaism, forcing Jews to convert to ancient Greek religion. This king also ordered the burning of the Torah. If this is taken as the standard, then their awakening from sleep is estimated to have occurred around 126 AD or perhaps 133 AD. Although it is also acknowledged that it could have happened during the reign of Hadrian, who ruled from 117-138 AD, it seems that King Antiochus IV is more closely related to the event because his persecution was more brutal (Cahyadien & Saepudin, 2022).

Ibn Ashur further explains, as quoted by M. Quraish Shihab, that this event is actually a rebuke to those who asked about it, namely the Jewish rabbis. They sought to know the miracle that occurred to the Companions of the Cave, yet they were heedless of something even stranger and more miraculous, which is the death of all creatures and the destruction of the universe. This serves as a guidance to those who focus only on the odd aspects of a story without drawing lessons from it.

The initial motivation for entering the cave was their strong spiritual commitment. They were willing to leave the world behind to preserve their faith. They sought refuge in the cave and prayed to Allah to bestow His mercy upon them within the cave. Allah granted their request by putting them to sleep in the cave and sealing their ears from all external sounds. As a result, they slept for many years. They neither ate nor drank. Allah SWT turned their bodies so that no harm would come to them. Their eyes remained open, and their dog stayed with them, lying with its legs outstretched at the cave's entrance (Rifiyal & Yusuf, 2017).

After 309 years had passed, Allah awakened them. They wondered, "How long have you been here?" They replied, "We have been here a day or part of a day." Then they sought lawful and good food. They were unaware that they had slept for a very long time, thinking they had only slept for a few hours. The city they lived in had undergone many changes, as had its inhabitants. Therefore, they entered the city discreetly to avoid being discovered by their people (Yusuf, 2021).

However, the inhabitants of the land eventually discovered their presence through the dirhams they intended to use for buying food. They brought the youths to meet the ruler. When the youths met the ruler, they explained their experiences and the duration of their stay in the cave. It was only then that they realized it was all due to Allah's power. After this revelation, they passed away (Ma'rifatullah, 2023).

In verse ten, the term "fityah" is used, which is the plural form of "fata," meaning youth. This term suggests that they were at an age where they lacked experience. Nevertheless, their faith and youthful idealism deeply permeated

their minds and souls, leading them to willingly leave their homes. In another context, it is possible that in terms of age, they could no longer be considered young, being around 309 years old, but their youthful spirit remained as vibrant as when they first entered the cave.

In verse ten, their prayer is mentioned, which can be a solution for all positive endeavors: "Our Lord, grant us mercy from Yourself and guide us in our affair in the right way." This prayer also indicates that these young men prayed after making efforts to correct the wrongs in society and to save the monotheistic faith that had been misunderstood by the people at that time (Nadhiroh, 2023).

In verse 14, it is evident that one of the reasons they entered the cave was to preserve their theological existence, as they were faced with a society and rulers who oppressed them. This is further emphasized by the phrase "iz gămü," meaning when they appeared before their people or the ruler of their time with full enthusiasm and determination. Their appearance was part of their movement to defend and strengthen their faith and to proclaim the existence of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the heavens and the earth, worshipping no other god but Allah with full conviction. According to them, invoking and worshipping anything other than Allah was a grave error and far from the truth.

Exploring the Liberation Theology Curriculum of the Seven Sleepers

The faith of a person is considered strong or solid when that person engages in tangible acts of goodness. This is exemplified by the youths of Ashabul Kahfi, who employed various means to awaken their people and the rulers of their land from their idolatry. These Seven Sleepers are figures of unwavering faith, unshaken and unaffected by the influence of their idolatrous community and rulers.

The theological significance of the Seven Sleepers can be found in three verses of Surah Al-Kahf: verses 10, 14, and 24. These verses illustrate that the youths of Ashabul Kahfi consistently involved Allah in all their affairs. They did not believe in the deity worshipped by their people at that time, as this deity deviated from the teachings of their prophet, Prophet Isa. Hence, they sought the truth about the true God, believing firmly that the only deity worthy of worship is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and that He must not be associated with any partners.

The Seven Sleepers realized that the God they believed in was the One to whom they should turn for help and guidance. Thus, in Surah Al-Kahf, verse 10 ("Our Lord! Bestow on us mercy from Yourself, and facilitate for us our affair in the right way"), they prayed and sought guidance from Allah SWT. This account demonstrates the profound and unwavering theological values they possessed.

In Surah Al-Kahf, verse 16, Allah commanded the youths of Ashabul Kahfi to seek refuge in a cave after they felt cornered by the pursuit of King Decius's regime. Following the suggestion of one among them, they decided to isolate themselves from their environment and homeland by retreating to the cave, believing they could escape the persecution. Once inside, Allah SWT bestowed various mercies and blessings upon them. He made the cave spacious so that it

would not feel cramped, and He frequently protected and sheltered them. This event serves as a tangible reward for the youths of Ashabul Kahfi, resulting from their steadfast obedience.

The event of the Ashabul Kahf youths hiding from their homeland to preserve their faith and beliefs represents a theological value worthy of emulation. The Seven Sleepers refused to remain in an environment that would corrupt their creed and character, as the regime of Emperor Decius was known for religious oppression and even killing those who did not obey his commands. This oppressive atmosphere led the youths of Ashabul Kahf to leave their homeland, not only to uphold their beliefs but also to save their lives.

In conclusion, leaving unbeneficial gatherings for the sake of Allah SWT is a sign of good Islamic faith. Allah will always bestow His mercy upon those who abandon anything that is harmful or unbeneficial for His sake. Like the youths of Ashabul Kahfi, because of their strong theological foundation, Allah granted them mercy and protection, saving them from the pursuit of the oppressive regime at that time. They were also given the miracle of being able to survive in their sleep for approximately 309 years, after which they were awakened again.

The Legacy of the Seven Sleepers (*Ashabul Kahfi*) as Exemplary Youth in the Midst of an Authoritarian Regime

M. Quraish Shihab believes that true faith will lead to righteous actions and provide spiritual strength to face challenges. This perspective from Shihab is crucial in instilling strong values of faith among all groups, especially the millennial generation (Zuhrotun Nafiah et al., 2022). This is similar to the example of faith demonstrated by the youths who strived to maintain their monotheism.

The Seven Sleepers, or Ashabul Kahfi, always involved Allah, the One and Only God who created the heavens and the earth, in all their affairs, being aware of the existence of Allah SWT, as outlined in Surah Al-Kahf, verses 10 and 14. The youths of Ashabul Kahfi did not believe in the gods worshiped by the ruling regime of their time because these gods were man-made and lacked divine attributes.

This awareness made their courage as strong as their faith. By declaring to the ruler and their people that their God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and that there were no other gods they worshipped except Him, they demonstrated great bravery. Although this courage had dire consequences for their lives, as they were pursued by the ruling regime, it did not diminish their resolve to uphold the declaration of monotheism on Earth.

Another exemplary trait of the Seven Sleepers is their unwavering obedience to Allah SWT. In Surah Al-Kahf, verse 16, Allah explains that He commanded the youths of Ashabul Kahf to seek refuge in the cave after they had exhausted their efforts to guide their people back to monotheism. When they fled from the persecution of the ruling regime, they did not resist but accepted the suggestion of one of them to enter the cave, as commanded by Allah SWT. This is an admirable example for us, as Allah commands in Surah Ali Imran, verse 32, to obey Him and His Messenger, and therefore we should not disbelieve in Allah's commands.

The attitude of distancing oneself from unproductive associations is

another quality we can learn from the Seven Sleepers. As explained in the Tafsir Al-Misbah, they left their homes to preserve their beliefs and faith. The youths of Ashabul Kahfi did not want to remain in an environment that would corrupt their faith and morals. They made this decision solely for the sake of Allah SWT, preferring to leave a corrupt environment in search of the truth of their hearts. This aligns with Allah SWT's guidance, as He does not favor what is unproductive.

The values outlined above serve as a lesson for future generations, especially for the young people of today who are living under governments that do not align with moral standards and are characterized by authoritarianism. In the current political climate, some policies benefit specific groups while oppressing others (such as marginalized communities) and can subtly exploit or appear to overlook the general populace.

Like the youths of Ashabul Kahfi, today's youth must maintain their ideals, particularly with regard to their core values. They should emulate the steadfastness of the Ashabul Kahfi by upholding the values of Pancasila and ensuring their effective implementation in their communities. Today's youth must also cultivate habits that are beneficial to them from an early age. Given that authoritarian regimes use technology, which can have negative effects, to diminish awareness and enthusiasm for Pancasila, it is crucial for young people to step out of their comfort zones. They must confront despotic regimes and their authoritarian policies while preserving Pancasila in the Republic.

Conclusion

From the discussions above, several conclusions can be drawn. The epic exemplarity of the Seven Sleepers in the Holy Bible and Alquran lies in their spirit of monotheism, which served as the youth movement's curriculum in resisting the oppression of Emperor Decius's authoritarian regime. The youths of Ashabul Kahf truly inherited the prophetic spirit of Prophet Isa (AS) in enacting social change. As faithful followers of Prophet Isa (AS), the Seven Sleepers maintained their integrity as organic youths, refusing to be dominated by the despotic power of Emperor Decius. Although the actions of the Seven Sleepers did not manifest as tangible social changes like those enacted by Musa, Daud, and Isa, their organic intellectual resilience was embodied in their retreat to the cave. This act symbolized their steadfast faith against the hegemonic supremacy and domination of polytheism at that time. Therefore, today's youth movements must be encouraged to emulate the integrity of the Seven Sleepers in maintaining their faith.

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