THE MEN OF THE CAVE: 
TAFSIR, TRAGEDY AND TAFIQ AL-ḤAKĪM

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Introduction

In 1933 the Egyptian writer Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987) published a play entitled Ahl al-Kahf (The People of the Cave), which was based on the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, or the Men of the Cave (asḵāb al-kahf) as they are known in the Qurʾān [Q 18: 9-26]. In this play Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm was attempting “to insert the element of tragedy into an Arab-Islamic topic” (idḥāl ‘unsur al-tarāǧiḏiyā fi mawdū‘ ʿarabī islāmī).1 His stated intention was “not merely to take a story from the Noble Book and set it in dramatic form but rather to look at our Islamic mythology (asāfīrinā l-islāmiyya) with the eyes of Greek tragedy and to bring about a fusion of the two mentalities and literatures.”2 These are interesting goals, but they raise the question of what exactly this “topic” consists, and what is meant by “Arab-Islamic” as opposed to “Greek tragedy”?

The present article is an attempt to insert the element of qurʾānic studies into the topic of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, or more broadly, to bring about a brief “fusion of the two literatures” of scriptural interpretation and modern literature. I will focus on the modern appropriation of a narrative from Islamic salvation history, and specifically on the form in which such narratives are preserved. That is, can we identify the “raw

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2 Ibid., p. 38. From an orthodox perspective, the use of asāfīr (sing. asūrā) to include a story from the Qurʾān is highly problematic, as the word is used in the scripture itself (Q 6:25; 8:31, etc.) to indicate ancient fables or legends that contrast with the truths of scriptural revelation.
materials” of such literary appropriations? In the case of *Abl al-Kahf* the question can help us to sketch the interpretive life of a qur’ānic narrative and to understand the shift from a narrative’s traditional context to that of another, very different genre. I will discuss the nature of the tale, followed by examples from the Arabic exegetical tradition that show how scholars with differing exegetical priorities derive meaning or significance from the scriptural version of the story. I will show that there is little attention to the unity of the tale, and that the exegetical points of departure for interpretation are the individual components or semantic units found in individual verses.

Moving to the play by Tawfiq al-Hakīm, I will demonstrate how it is precisely these components, rather than any other literary aspects, which al-Hakīm adopts in his play. I will also discuss his use of this qur’ānic material for tragedy, and its significance for the play. It will not suffice to regard *Abl al-Kahf* in terms of the Qur’ān. It must be approached as a literary work and analyzed on its own terms if one is to discern the echoes of scriptures and the responses of the modern author. Moreover, if we can learn about the modern appropriation of a scriptural story, then we can also learn something about the nature of the scriptural story in its earlier incarnations.

The question of the meaning or significance of the Men of the Cave story is the central issue here, and even if we do not find a theme in the usual sense, we can discern different aspects of its significance. I will argue that the matter of the “meaning” of the story as a whole remains largely unstated, and that despite Tawfiq al-Hakīm’s radical innovation in his play, his usage of qur’ānic elements remains consistent with the use of scriptural passages throughout the mainstream of the exegetical tradition.

I. Christians and Muslims: The Seven Sleepers and the Men of the Cave

The Qur’ān’s rendition of the *Aṣḥāb al-kahf*, from which the eighteenth chapter or *sūra* takes its name (*Sūrat al-kahf*), is an allomorph of the early Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. This legend exists in Latin, Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Christian Arabic, Coptic and Ethiopian versions, and is generally held to be derived from Syriac origins whose earliest mss. appear to go back to the end of the fifth century AD. The tale is set in Ephesus during the persecution of Christians by the idolatrous emperor Decius. A group of youths residing in the palace are accused of being Christians, and rather than submit to worshipping