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Sleepers Awake!

Rūmī on the People of the Cave

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Abstract

Much to its peril, the contemporary field of Quranic studies seldom regards Sufis and philosophers as major theorists of the Quran. A case in point is the great Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, whose poetry has always been seen in the pre-modern Islamic tradition as amounting to nothing short of a profoundly engaged and engaging *tafsīr*. This article will therefore outline one of the countless instances wherein Rūmī comments upon the Quran through his poetry, paying particular attention to the story of the People of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) recounted in Q 18:9–26. Showing how the tale gives rise to Mawlānā's penetrating exposition of the reality of sleep and wakefulness on the one hand, and the nature of the heart on the other, the paper will then segue into an exploration of a related theme in Rūmī's writings, namely that of the "friend of the cave" (*yār-i ghār*), which alludes to another important Quranic pericope.

Keywords

Rūmī – Sufi poetry – Quranic commentary – remembrance – awakening – heart – inwardness

1 *Kankam için*. This paper grew out of a lecture I delivered at a conference dedicated to Rūmī at the Berliner Institut für Islamische Theologie (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) in the fall of 2024. I am grateful to Professor Tuba Işık for her kind invitation. For their helpful feedback on the article, thanks are due to Taha Abdollahi and the anonymous reviewers.



O chevalier! Take these poems to be like a mirror. After all, you know that in a mirror there is no form in itself—but whoever looks at the mirror will be able to see his own form. Likewise, you should know that poetry in itself has no meaning at all—but anyone can discern his present state and own perfection from it. If you were to say that the meaning of poetry is what the poet wants it to be and that others can derive other meanings from it, that would be like someone saying, “The form of the mirror is the face of the polisher whose form first appears in it.”²



The title of this article, “Sleepers Awake!” is a reference to the famous Church cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach (d. 1750) first performed nearly three hundred years ago in Leipzig, where Bach rests. This highly spiritual cantata is inspired by the famous Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1–13, whose rich symbolism is related to the theme of awakening to the reality of the Presence of God.

Like the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, the Quranic account of the People of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) mentioned in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, verses 9–26 (Q 18:9–26), also has multiple layers of meaning. At the most basic and outward level, the story tells of a group of pious youths who fled from their people on account of their polytheism and immersion in worldliness. They sought to devote themselves to the worship of God by seeking refuge in a cave far removed from society. When in the cave, God caused them to fall asleep for 309 years, but they looked as if they were awake. This is why Q 18:18 states, *And you would have thought them to be awake, although they were asleep.*

As would be expected, there are scores of non-Sufi and Sufi interpretations of the story of the People of the Cave.³ Sufi theorists of the Quran, such as Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), view the youths as an exalted class of believers who had been singled out with the gift of *maʿrifā*, or the recognition

2 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, ed. ‘Alī Naqī Munzawī and ‘Afif ‘Usayrān, 3 vols. (Tehran: Asāṭir, 1998), 1:260.

3 See the comments upon Q 18:9–26 in Seyyed Hossein Nasr *et al.* (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 731–738.

of God.⁴ In his major Persian Quran commentary, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. ca. 520/1126) gives us a window into God's special solicitude for them. Commenting upon Q 18:14, *And We placed a tie on their hearts when they stood up and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth,"* Maybudī says the following:

We bound them with the tie of sinlessness, kept them on the carpet of recognition, and firmed them up with the cord of love. We lit the candle of kind favor for them in the streambed of solicitude. We taught them the courtesy of companionship in the grammar school of the Beginningless and they set forth in holiness itself, busying themselves in the cave with the mystery of the Haqiqah.⁵

Among Sufi poets, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) has a great deal to say about the People of the Cave; and this is but one aspect of his wider engagement with the Quran.⁶ Contemporary Quranic studies, much to its peril, would seldom regard someone like Rūmī as a major Quranic theorist. Yet this is precisely how the pre-modern Sufi tradition in particularly the Persianate world regarded him, which explains why the *Mathnawī* is known as "The Quran in Persian" (*Qur'ān dar zabān-i Pahlawī*). As a theorist of the Quran, Rūmī "sees" the story of the People of the Cave in very original ways, offering us a penetrating exposition of the reality of sleep and awakening on the one hand, and the nature of the heart on the other.

Mawlāna tells us that the 309 years of sleep experienced by the People of the Cave was on account of their having been drunk on the wine of divine

4 See the discussion in Badiozzaman Forouzanfar and Sayyid Ja'far Shahīdī, *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī-yi sharīf*, 8 vols. (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī wa-Farhangī, 1967–2000), 1:181–182. For *ma'rifa* as recognition, see William C. Chittick and Mohammed Rustom, "Recognition (*ma'rifa*)," in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., 2025: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Recognition> (last accessed: August 2, 2025) and Rustom, "Recognizing Recognition: *Ma'rifa* in Sufi Thought," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 37.1 (2026): 31–53.

5 Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, *The Unveiling of the Mysteries and the Provision of the Pious*, partial trans. William C. Chittick (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), 297. See also pp. 299–300.

6 For Rūmī's engagement with the Quran, some helpful places to start are Hādī Ḥā'irī, *Nukhbat al-'irfān* (Tehran: Ḥāqīqat, 2004), Bahā' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī and Siyāmak Mukhtārī, *Qur'ān wa-Mathnawī* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qaṭra, 2022), and Amer Latif, "Qur'anic Narrative and Sufi Hermeneutics: Rumi's Interpretation of Pharaoh's Character," (PhD Diss., Stony Brook University, 2009). Particularly apt here is the observation made by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 125: "He must in fact be ranked among the foremost of Quranic commentators (*mufasssīrīn*)."

love.⁷ These youths are therefore special intimates of God constantly in a state of spiritual inebriation. But their state of intoxication should not lead one to think that they are somehow unaware of their surroundings. As Rūmī explains, there is a world of difference between the “sleep” experienced by the People of the Cave and the sleep of ordinary individuals. The sleep of the People of the Cave is pure wakefulness (*bīdārī*); that is, the wakefulness of the heart, which cannot be explained in words, however exalted their form:

وصف بیداری دل ای معنوی
در نگنجد در هزاران مثنوی

O seeker of meaning! The description of heart-wakefulness
cannot be contained in thousands of couplets!⁸

This form of wakefulness is fundamentally characterized by divine knowledge.⁹ Another way to understand wakefulness, specifically in the context of sleep, is to look to the Friends of God (*awliyā*). Their reality can be gleaned by us from our normal state of sleep—for when we sleep, we are unaware of the world around us and move about with no conscious volition of our own.¹⁰ This is precisely how the Quran describes the People of the Cave—God *turned them to the right and to the left* (Q 18:18).¹¹ This leads Mawlānā to make the natural connection: the People of the Cave are Friends of God:

اولیا اصحاب کھف اند ای عنود
در قیام و در تغلب هم رقود

7 See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 309.

8 Rūmī, *Mathnawī-yi maʿnawī*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawī of Jalāl'uddīn Rūmī*, 8 vols. (London: Luzac, 1925–1940), 3:1228 (book 3, line 1228). All translations from Rūmī's writings are my own.

9 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 2:39.

10 See Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:3186 and 6:214–221.

11 The verse goes on to reveal that there was a dog who had accompanied the People of the Cave. For the positive and negative image of dogs in Rūmī's poetry, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāl'oddīn Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), index s.v., “Dog.” The dog's name in Sufi literature is “Qīṭmīr,” and is a symbol of purity. See Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 195–196. For the general image of dogs in Sufism, one may profitably consult Javad Nurbakhsh, *Dogs from a Sufi Point of View* (London: Khanaqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1989).

می کشدشان بی تکلف در فعال
 بی خبر ذات الیمین ذات الشمال
 چیست آن ذات الیمین فعل حسن
 چیست آن ذات الشمال اشغال تن

O obstinate one! The Friends are the People of the Cave—
 in standing and turning, *They are asleep*.¹²

Without taking it upon themselves to act, He pulls them
 to the right [and] to the left,¹³ with no awareness on their part.

What is to the right? Beautiful acts.

What is to the left? Bodily occupations.¹⁴

The Friends of God see this world as a state of sleep, for “they have gone to nonexistence, which has no door.”¹⁵ The reality of the world, all of its trappings, and our constant hankering over it are all seen as meaningless when death comes knocking at our door. This is one of the meanings of the famous Prophetic saying, “People are asleep; when they die, they awaken.”¹⁶ In his *Fīhi mā fīhi*, Rūmī likens worldly desire to a dream, the futility of which becomes clear upon awakening from that dream:

To want worldly things is like someone who wants to eat something in a dream, which is then given to him. In the end, when he wakes up, he does not at all benefit from what he ate in the dream.¹⁷

As Friends of God, the wakeful slumber of the People of the Cave entails that they are asleep not only to the world per se, but to our usual, ratiocinative ways of knowing which always implicate the thinking subject into a form of duality that entails the antipode of spiritual wakefulness, and is in fact more akin to

12 Q 18:18.

13 Q 18:18.

14 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:3187–3189.

15 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:3554.

16 For more on this tradition, see the discussion in Rustom, “Psychology, Eschatology, and Imagination in Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī’s Commentary on the *Ḥadīth* of Awakening,” *Islam & Science* 5.1 (2007): 9–22. See also Forouzanfar (ed.), *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānīshgāh-i Tīhrān, 1955), 81, for another Hadith that equates the world to a sleeper’s dream.

17 Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), 284.

sleep.¹⁸ It will be noted that the Quran says that the People of the Cave looked like they were awake, although they were actually asleep. This gives Mawlānā the perfect occasion to explain the gaping divide between the “wakefulness” of the Friends of God and the wakefulness of the rest of us:

ای بسا بیدار چشم خفته دل
خود چه بیند دید اهل آب و گل

O, many are those whose eyes are awake, but whose hearts are asleep.
But what can the eyes of the people of water and clay see?¹⁹

Even when the eyes of the Friend of God shut for sleep, his wakeful heart can still enliven and awaken those who are in spiritual slumber. The model for this kind of wakefulness is of course the Prophet Muhammad, who famously said, “My eyes sleep, but my heart is awake.”²⁰ In the following verses, Rūmī describes the contagious nature of the wakeful heart and also offers some advice:

آنک دل بیدار دارد چشم سر
گر بخسپد بر گشاید صد بصر
گر تو اهل دل نه بیدار باش
طالب دل باش و در پیکار باش

Even when his eyes are closed, the one whose
heart is awake opens up a hundred eyes.
If you are not a person of the heart, wake up!
Be a heart-seeker—go to battle!²¹

In his *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, Mawlānā clarifies what kind of “battle” he has in mind. It is nothing less than waging war against one’s ego:

بیدار شو بیدار شو هین رفت شب بیدار شو
بیزار شو بیزار شو وز خویش هم بیزار شو

18 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 6:4463–4464.

19 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:1222.

20 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, # 1155, in vol. 2 of *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth wa-l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa-l-sunan wa-l-masānīd* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Jam‘īyyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000).

21 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:1223–1224.

Awake, awake! Beware, night has passed, so awake!
 Forsake, forsake! Even yourself, forsake!²²

In his most complete exposition of the reality of the People of the Cave, namely the recognizers, Rūmī explains how physical sleep is akin to death. "Sleep is the brother of death" is the Prophetic saying that informs Mawlānā's commentary here,²³ as are Q 6:60 and Q 39:42, which speak of sleep as a kind of partial death. Our poet begins by noting that every night God releases people from their bodies and their worldly concerns. In their state of sleep, they are relatively free of care. Likewise, the recognizer, who is asleep to the world, is free of care. Her consciousness is pure not only of worldly occupations, but of the sensory, psychic, and imaginal impressions that cloud a regular person's perception of reality on both sides of sleep. The recognizer is moved by God, like a moving pen in the hands of a writer:

می‌رهند ارواح هر شب زین ققص
 فارغان از حکم و گفتار و قصص
 شب ز زندان بی‌خبر زندانیان
 شب ز دولت بی‌خبر سلطانیان
 نی غم و اندیشهٔ سود و زیان
 نی خیال این فلان و آن فلان
 حال عارف این بود بی‌خواب هم
 گفت ایزد هم رقود زین مرم
 خفته از احوال دنیا روز و شب
 چون قلم در پنجهٔ تقلیب رب
 آنک او پنجه نبیند در رقم
 فعل پندارد بجنبش از قلم
 شمهٔ زین حال عارف و نمود
 خلق را هم خواب حسی در ربود
 رفته در صحرای بی‌چون جانسان
 روحشان آسوده و ابدانشان

22 Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar, 10 vols. (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1956–1968), v. 22, 571.

23 See Forouzanfar (ed.), *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, 5. See also Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:400.

Every night, spirits are set free from this cage,
 freed from judgement, speech, and banter.
 At night, prisoners are unaware of their prison
 and sultans are unaware of their property,
 with no grief and worry over profit or loss,
 and no thought of this person or that person.
 The recognizer's state is like this, but without sleep.
 God says, *They are asleep*²⁴ but do not scorn them!
 Night and day they are asleep to the affairs of this world,
 for the pen moves by the hands of their Lord.
 One who does not see his hand when writing
 perceives its action when gliding with the pen.
 God gives people a whiff of the recognizer's state
 when they are snatched away by the sleep of the senses.
 Their spirits depart to the desert of the Howless,
 and their spirits and bodies are at ease.²⁵

Let us return to the part of Q 18:18 that speaks of the People of the Cave as appearing to be awake while they are asleep. As Mawlānā states, we encounter the People of the Cave all the time—they seem awake like the rest of us, participating in the world the way we do. In reality, however, they are asleep to our ordinary experience of the world and even to the order of time and change itself. They are perpetually awake in the blissful remembrance (*dhikr*) of God and are thus with Him,²⁶ even though they seem to be with us. We, of course, do not see them for who they are because we only see the surface of things, and thus fail to discern what is unfolding before our very eyes:

ای بسا اصحاب کھف اندر جهان
 پہلوی تو پیش تو هست این زمان
 غار با او یار با او در سرود
 مہر بر چشمست و بر گوشت چہ سود

24 Q 18:18.

25 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:389–396.

26 For a penetrating exposition of the joy-inducing nature of *dhikr*, see Atif Khalil, “The Tranquility of Remembrance,” in *I of the Heart: Texts and Studies in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Muhammad U. Faruque, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 183–198.

In this world there are many People of the Cave,
 right now, asleep next to you and in front of you.
 The Cave is with them, and the Friend is with them, speaking melodiously.
 But of what use is it to you, since your eyes and ears are sealed?²⁷

The connection announced here between the Cave and the Friend is essential to paint a complete picture of Rūmī's philosophy of awakening. He equates love with the Cave (*ghār*), which is where the Friend dwells.²⁸ And since love and God are not distinct for Mawlānā,²⁹ God is not only in the Cave, but is the Cave itself:

یار مرا غار مرا عشق جگر خوار مرا
 یار تویی غار تویی خواجه نگهدار مرا

I have a Friend, I have a Cave—I have a grieving love.
 That Friend is You, that Cave is You—O Master, protect me!³⁰

Common to traditional symbolism is the intimate relationship between the cave and the heart.³¹ Both are interior spaces that contain mysteries and divine realities, and both represent a center—the heart is situated at the center of a human being, and the cave is in the “center” of a mountain. Yet Rūmī also explicitly identifies the heart, which is the center of human consciousness and awareness, with God.³² He thus wants to say that the Cave is the Heart. The way to wakefulness is therefore clear, at least as far as Ḥaḍrat-i Mawlānā is concerned. One must enter the Cave, which means one must awaken to one's true

27 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:405–406. See also the explanation in Kenan Rifai, *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi*, trans. Victoria Holbrook (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 56.

28 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 217.

29 See Rustom, “The Ocean of Nonexistence,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 4 (2013): 188–199.

30 Rūmī, *Dīwān*, 477.

31 René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, ed. Michel Vâlsan and Martin Lings; trans. Alvin Moore Jr. (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995), 145–148.

32 See Gholamreza Aavani, *Rumi: A Philosophical Study* (Chicago: Kazi, 2016) and Rustom, “Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 1 (2010): 69–79. For the heart in the Sufi tradition, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oludamini Ogunnaiké, “The Heart (*qalb*),” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., 2024: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Heart> (last accessed: August 2, 2025).

self by turning inward, into one's heart and spiritual Center. It is there that God resides, in the interior, spaceless space that is the heart.

The search for the heart is tantamount to the search for God, whose aid is always present. Rūmī likens God to a physician who is ever-ready to heal us and bring us to wholeness. All we need to do is acknowledge our ailment, which is the lack of love:

آمد ندای آسمان آمد طیب عاشقان
خواهی که آید پیش تو بیمار شو بیمار شو

The call of Heaven has come; the Physician of the lovers has come.
Do you want the Physician to visit you? Become ill, become ill!³³

The single most memorable place in Rūmī's writings where he links the Heart, the Cave, and the need for one to withdraw into them to be with God occurs in the following haunting lines from the *Dīwān*, with which this article shall close. Mawlānā refers to the "friend of the cave" (*yār-i ghār*), a symbol derived from Q 9:40 in relation to the Prophet's Companion Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), who entered the Cave of Thawr with him in order to escape the enemies hot in their pursuit during the time of the Prophet's Hijra.³⁴ Like Abū Bakr, we too should flee from our enemies—the material world and our own egos—and enter into the *khalwa* of the cave of our hearts in order to be with our Friend:

این سینه را چون غار دان خلوتگه آن یار دان
گریار غاری هین بیا در غار شو در غار شو

Consider this breast as a Cave—the place of retreat for that Friend.
If you are the friend of the Cave, hurry and come! Enter the Cave, enter the Cave.³⁵

33 Rumī, *Dīwān*, 22,576.

34 See the commentary upon Q 18:16 in *Study Quran*, 734.

35 Rumī, *Dīwān*, 22,577–22,578.

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