

Caves in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an

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Abstract

This article deals with the caves mentioned in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. It highlights all the relevant occurrences of the Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek words for *cave*, discusses its etymologies, and provides brief details about the contexts in which it is mentioned.

Keywords: the Holy Scriptures; hiding shelters; Hebrew; Arabic.

1. Introduction

Caves were man's home before tents were pitched and houses were erected. Moreover, they were and, to a certain extent, are still used as shelters for people and animals around the world, especially from the calamities of nature, burial sites, and treasure hoards. Caves are mentioned in the sacred books of the three monotheistic faiths, primarily as hiding places where known and unknown personalities sought refuge from their enemies.

However, before we discuss the references to caves in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, it is appropriate to say a few words on the etymologies of the various terms used to indicate caves in Hebrew, Arabic,



and subsequently as the burial place of Sarah, Abraham's wife (Gen 23:19), Abraham (Gen 25:9), Isaac, his wife Rebekah, Jacob's wife Leah (Gen 49:31), and Jacob (Gen 50:13).

In the Book of Joshua, caves are mentioned nine times. Of these, eight are in connection with the story of the five Amorite kings who hid in a cave in Makkedah after being defeated by the Israelites. Joshua ordered that they be killed and their bodies sealed inside the cave with big stones (Josh 10:16–27). The ninth mention of the word *cave* is as a toponym: Cave of the Zidonians (Josh 13:4; see also *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, s.v. מערה).

The Book of Judges recounts that, for fear of the Midianites, the Israelites built dens, caves, and strongholds in the mountains (Judg 6:2).

The Book of 1 Samuel has seven references to caves. When the Philistines assembled an army “as countless as the sand on the sea-shore” (1 Sam 13:5, NEB), the scared Israelites abandoned king Saul and hid “in caves, thickets, rocks, strongholds and pits” (1 Sam 13:6, my translation).⁵ David hid in the cave of Adullam after he was refused shelter by Achish, the king of Gath (1 Sam 22:1). A cave is also mentioned four times as the hiding place of David and his men, who were fleeing King Saul (1 Sam 24:3, 7, 8, 10).

The Book of 2 Samuel tells us that King David met some of his military chiefs at the cave of Adullam before one of the battles against the Philistines (2 Sam 23:13).

The Book of 1 Kings describes how Obadiah, who was King Ahab's butler, hid one hundred prophets in probably two caves (fifty people in each cave) and cared for their needs after Jezebel, Ahab's wife, had killed many of their peers (1 Kgs 18:4, 13). The book also recounts the hiding of the prophet Elijah in a cave after Jezebel threatened to kill him (1 Kgs 19:9, 13).

Isaiah refers to caves twice in his prophecies, where he foretells that people will go into caves in the rocks and crevices in the ground for fear of God and the splendor of His majesty (Isa 2:19). He also predicts that destroyed palaces and deserted fortresses will turn into hiding caves for wild and domestic animals (Isa 32:14).

Jeremiah uses the word *cave* metaphorically when he addresses the people of Israel, whom God blames for turning His temple into a cave or den of robbers (Jer 7:11).

Ezekiel, in one of his prophecies of doom, states that those who are sheltered in strongholds and caves will die of pestilence (Ezek 33:27).

⁵ When the NEB translation is unnecessarily verbose, I chose to use a shorter translation.

The Book of Psalms refers to caves in two verses. The first is in the title of Psalm 57, stating that it was composed when David was hiding from King Saul in a cave (Ps 57:1). The second is also in the title of a Psalm composed as a prayer inside a cave. No reference to the exact cave or the reason for hiding is given (Ps 142:1).

In 1 Chronicles, the Cave of Adullam is mentioned as David's meeting place with three of his army chiefs during the war against the Philistines (1 Chr 11:15).

3. Caves in the New Testament

Caves are mentioned only three times in the New Testament.⁶ In the Book of John, Jesus ordered the removal of the stone that sealed the entrance to Lazarus's tomb. He then went inside and brought Lazarus back to life (John 11:38–44).

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of people wandering "over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth" (Heb 11:38, my translation). The Revelations of John describes Doomsday, when "kings of the earth, magnates and marshals, the rich and the powerful, and all men, slave or free, hid themselves in caves and mountain crags" (Rev 6:15, NEB).

4. Caves in the Qur'an

The Qur'an uses three words for *cave*: كهف, غار, and مغارة. *Lisan al-'Arab* explains that كهف is bigger than مغارة while غار denotes a small cave. Quoting *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ* dictionary, *Lisan al-'Arab* states that كهف also means "a house which is hewn in the mountain" and that the word is also used metaphorically for denoting *shelter* (Ibn Manzur 1956).

Caves are mentioned in the Qur'an eight times (see Abd al-Baqi 1364H). Of these, two are derivatives of the root غور. One is غار, a cave where two people found shelter (Qur'an 9:40),⁷ whereas the other is مغارات, caves in which wealthy people would rather find shelter to avoid fighting for God or making donations (Qur'an 9:57).

The six remaining references use the word كهف and are all in Sura 18, which itself is named الكهف (i.e., the cave). The story in the Qur'an echoes the medieval legend about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. These boys were Christian lads that

⁶ A doubtful fourth case is the word 'pit' which is only used metaphorically as "the dark pits of hell." See the Second Letter of Peter (2:4, NEB).

⁷ According to a Muslim tradition, the two people were the Prophet Muhammad and his friend Abu Bakr who took refuge in a cave near Mecca on their way to Medina (cf. Rubin 2005: 158 f.n. 40).

escaped Roman persecutions ca. 250 CE. They hid in a cave with their dog and fell asleep for hundreds of years. When they woke, they found that Christianity had become the common faith and, therefore, were saved.⁸ The Qur'an considers the story a tale of one of God's miracles and regards the lads as devout believers saved by God. It also mentions that the lads could not say precisely how long they spent in the cave and that their exact number is indeterminate, varying between three, five, and seven plus their dog (Qur'an 18:9–25).

5. Conclusion

The holy scriptures of the three monotheistic religions—the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an—mention caves mainly as hiding places or shelters. The Book of Genesis is the only source that refers to a cave used for burial purposes, although archaeological excavations and various other sources demonstrate that this was common practice in the Near East. Notwithstanding metaphorical use, caves are not referred to as hoarding or storage places either, although archaeological excavations confirm that caves were widely used to store commodities like wine and olive oil. We, therefore, may assume that caves in the ancient world had numerous functions.⁹

Finally, there is obviously more to be said about the late traditions, legends, and commentaries concerning caves and their dwellers. However, reviewing these sources is beyond the scope of this paper, whose main purpose was to highlight and discuss all references to caves in the holy scriptures themselves.

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⁸ For more details and bibliography relating to the subject, see, "Seven Sleepers" in Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Sleepers (accessed May 10, 2022).

⁹ One interpretation of *Beit Ha-Hofshit*, where the leper King 'Azaria/Uzzia spent his last days (2 Kgs 15:5), identifies it with a cave in the Qidron stream near Jerusalem (See *Encyclopedia Biblica*, s.v. *בית החפשית*). This may suggest another function for caves: a shelter for lepers, whom the Torah states should be removed from the healthy community (Lev 13:46).

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