

# THE ATTITUDE OF CHRISTIANS TOWARDS THE FIRST MUSLIM *FATH* (CONQUEST) OF ISLAMICJERUSALEM

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## Introduction

It is logical to say that the attitude of any people towards any foreign forces that come to occupy their lands can range from accepting those forces to rejecting the occupation and resisting such forces. This range of attitudes is dependent on many factors that can be political, religious, and economic in nature. In the case of Aelia (IslamicJerusalem), Muslims were able after a long campaign to conquer that region. This campaign started, as El-Awaisi (2007:42) argues, from the time of Prophet Muhammad until the second caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 24 AH/644CE) and culminated in the conquest of the Walled City of IslamicJerusalem in 16 AH/637 CE. The region was inhabited mainly by Christians. A central question arises here regarding the attitude of the Christians of Aelia towards the Muslims and their conquest. Did they welcome their new rulers? Can we say that the attitude of all Christians of Aelia was the same? It has been argued that the attitude of the Christians towards the Muslim conquest (*fath*) was all hostile and only Muslim historians and later writers of Syriac literature tend to claim that the Monophysites Christians welcomed the Muslim *fath* as a consequence of the Byzantine persecution.

This paper is an attempt to critically analyse the Christians' attitude towards the *fath* of IslamicJerusalem. It is also a response to some writers who have portrayed the attitude of the Christians towards

the Muslim *fath* as no more than hatred, rejection and resistance. An extensive use of primary and secondary sources will be utilised for this research to find out the real attitude of Islamicjerusalem's Christians to the first Muslim *fath*.

### **On the eve of the First Muslim *Fath***

The first Muslim *fath* of Islamicjerusalem by Caliph 'Umar is argued as being a turning point in the history of that region (El-Awaisi 2007: 63). This *fath*, which took place according to the majority of Muslim and non-Muslim historians in the year 16 AH/637 CE (Al-Tel 2003: 109-120), caused a dramatic change in the structure of the population of Islamicjerusalem (El-Awaisi 2007: 63). It is important to return to the pre-conquest period and briefly examine the religious status of the Christians in Aelia and the circumstances in which the Muslim army was able to conquer the city.

Aelia was mainly a Christian region ruled by Byzantines when the Muslims arrived. Most of its inhabitants had converted to Christianity after the Emperor Constantine professed his Christian faith in 312 CE. Constantine fostered Christianity throughout the empire and it became the official religion in 324 CE (Abū 'Iayān: 1993: 134). As time passed, the Christian population in Aelia increased dramatically. The Christian community in Aelia was heterogeneous. It comprised a number of sub communities, affiliated with churches and sects, which grew out of the body of the Imperial Byzantine Church (Linder 1996:122). They consisted of both Arabs and non-Arabs from various places who differed in language, culture and civilisation. Linder (1996:142) argues that one may assume that the Christian population, in the region, was divided into two classes: a high-ranking, influential and propertied upper class, marked by Greek language and culture, and lower classes who spoke Syriac. Although they shared the same religion, they were divided into many sects and groups (Abū 'Iayān: 1993: 127-133), such as Greek Orthodox (Melkites) who were the largest and most influential of all the Christian congregations in

Jerusalem (Linder 1996: 122): Jacobites,<sup>3</sup> Copts<sup>4</sup>, Aḥbāsh (Abyssinians), Armenians<sup>5</sup>, Maronites ... (Jāsir 1989: 57-73). This division into many sects and groups caused instability in Aelia's Christian community, and in the fifth century serious disagreements erupted between the Monophysites and the Byzantine emperor about the coexistence of the divine and human natures of Christ (Hamilton 2003: 103). In the seventh century, the Emperor Heraclius (610–41 CE) attempted to resolve the schism created by the Monophysites and Chalcedonians in 451 CE and suggested the compromise of Monoenergism. This combined the Chalcedonian belief that Christ had two natures with the Monophysite view that He had one "will". The definition of the term "will" was left deliberately vague. Monoenergism was accepted by the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria as well as by the Armenians, although not by the Patriarch of Aelia or by Pope Honorius I in Rome (Runciman 1987: (1) 12-13).

As a result, the Monophysite Christians in Aelia suffered religious persecution when the Emperor Heraclius tried to force his interpretation of Christianity on them (Runciman 1987: (1) 12). He also directed that the central government adopt these beliefs, but his attempts at reconciliation only increased dissension. The Christians who opposed the emperor's views suffered persecution and violence (Runciman 1987: (1) 13). Moreover, Runciman (1987: (1) 6) observes that the Christian emperors were not very tolerant. They also wished to use Christianity politically, as a unifying force to bind their subjects to the government. Thus, at the time of the

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- <sup>3</sup> The Orthodox and Jacobites shared a common heritage. Both accepted the Nicene Creed as their profession of faith and although the Jacobites rejected the Council of Chalcedon their Christology was not heretical. They called themselves Syrian Orthodox, because their worship was conducted exclusively in Syriac. The Byzantine Orthodox, or Melkites, worshipped in Greek. Hamilton, Bernard, *The Christian World of the Middle Ages*. (Stroud, Gloucs: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p.107.
- <sup>4</sup> The Copts' presence in Jerusalem can be traced back to the first Christian century. See Jāsir, Shafīq, *Tārīkh al-Quds wa al-'Alāqa Bayn al-Muslīm wa al-Masīḥiyyin Ḥatta al-Ḥurūb al-Ṣalībīyya* (Amman: Maṭābī' al-Imān, 1989), p. 65.
- <sup>5</sup> The Armenian presence in Jerusalem can be traced back to the Christian era. See Melkon Rose, John H., *Armenians of Jerusalem* (London – New York, The Radcliffe Press, 1993), p. 3.

Muslim conquest, the lives of the Christians of Aelia were rent by conflict, dispute and disagreement, accompanied by persecution for those who did not conform to the particular beliefs of the imperial regime at that time.

Before the first Muslim *fath* of Aelia, the Arabs who had emigrated from the Arab peninsula and Yemen were living in al-Shām (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) and were well established on both sides of the River Jordan. They formed the majority of the local population (Donner 1981: 95). Some Arab tribes had lived in Palestine since before 2000 BC (‘Athāminah 2000: 1). Shahid points out that the Judhām, ‘Āmilah and Lakhm tribes comprised most of the Arab population in Palestine before and after the Muslim conquest (Shahid 1984: 339). The geographical distribution of the Arab tribes in al-Shām has been extensively described by ‘Athāminah (2000: 6-9).

### **The attitude towards the Muslim fath**

Scholars have differed amongst themselves regarding the attitude of the Christians in Aelia towards the Muslims and their conquest. For instance Jāsir (1989: 117) discussed the issue briefly in his book (*Tārīkh al-Quds*) and came to the conclusion that the defeated Christians did not show any sign of welcome to the victorious Muslims. He doubts the historians who claim that the Christians welcomed the Muslim conquerors, and cites examples of Christians fiercely resisting the Muslim army prior to the conquest of al-Shām, such as at the battle of Mu‘ta (8 AH/629 CE). Jāsir goes further, asserting that the Christians of Aelia changed their attitude towards the Muslims when they realised the extent of Muslim power, and that their defeat was inevitable after the battle of al-Yarmūk (15 AH/636 CE) (Jāsir 1989: 119). On the same lines, al-Tel argues that the Christians of al-Shām in general opposed the Muslim conquest and tried their best to resist it despite their religious disagreement. He added that the Christian Arabs of al-Shām joined the Byzantine armies in all battles fought against Muslims. Al-Tel refuted the claims by Hitti and al-Shammās that the Christians welcomed the Muslim conquest by

considering that these claims are great exaggerations. He went further, saying that these accounts of Hitti and al-Shammās deal with the Muslim policy towards conquered people (Christians) after the conquest rather than the attitude of those people towards the conquest during military operations. Finally, al-Tel agreed with Jāsir that the attitude of the Arab Christians changed after the Byzantines were defeated especially at the battle of al-Yarmūk (Al-Tel 2003:232-235). The above argument by al-Tel and Jāsir is shared by Moorhead who is cited in Van Ginkel. Moorhead ruled out any Monophysite disloyalty and challenged the perception that during the Muslim *fath* the indigenous Christians supported, or at least failed to oppose, the Muslim armies. He went further, arguing that there were large numbers of Monophysites fighting against the Muslims (Van Ginkel 2006: 172).

In fact, I am in disagreement with Jāsir, al-Tel and Moorhead. I believe that generalising the attitude of the Christians of IslamicJerusalem towards the Muslim *fath* is not academically right. As I have mentioned earlier, IslamicJerusalem was inhabited by different groups of people and religious sects. To claim that all of them had the same attitude towards the Muslim *fath* as a result of participating in some of the fighting against the Muslim armies is not a justification for what Jāsir, al-Tel and Moorhead have claimed. I would argue that if some of them, especially the Arab Christians or others, did fight fiercely, this may have been demanded of them by the war situation at that time. They were also part of the Byzantine army and were compelled to become involved in military operations.

Similarly, Constantelos (Schick 1988: 220) argues that the attitude of the Christians in IslamicJerusalem towards the Muslim conquest was negative. He relied for his claim on what was reported in some of the Byzantine Greek literary sources that Patriarch Sophronious, in his sermon on the Day of the Epiphany in 636 CE had bewailed the destruction of the churches and monasteries, the sacked towns and villages, and the fields laid waste by the Muslim conquerors. Interestingly, Schick (1988: 220) rejected this claim, arguing that there is evidence that the destruction the

Muslims caused is slight and notably contradicts the hostile accounts recorded in the above sources. He went further, saying that the Muslim conquest of the region was not characterised by extensive destruction.

In contrast to Jāsir, al-Tel and Moorhead, Runciman maintains that the Christians in Aelia greatly welcomed the Muslim conquerors, as the Muslims had saved them from the persecution they had endured under the Byzantines (Runciman 1987: (1) 20). He quotes the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, Michael the Syrian, in the days of the Latin kingdoms, who reflected on the situation of his people at the time of the first Muslim conquest:

The God of vengeance, who alone is the Almighty ... raised from the south the children of Ishmael [the Muslims] to deliver us from the hands of the Romans (Runciman 1987: (1) 21-21).

Runciman adds that even with the Greek Orthodox community:

Finding themselves spared the persecution that they have feared and paying taxes that, in spite of the *jizyah* demanded from the Christians, were far lower than in the Byzantine times, showed small inclination to question their destiny (Runciman 1987: (1) 21-21).

Interestingly, al-Azdī, a well-known Muslim historian, narrates that one of the signs of welcome from the Christians was when the Muslim army reached the Jordan valley and Abū ‘Ubaydah pitched camp at Faḥl, whereupon the Christian inhabitants of the area wrote to the Muslims, saying:

O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantines, though they are of our own faith, because you keep faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes (Al-Azdī 1979: 111).

Caetani, a well-known Italian historian and orientalist, took the view that the fear of religious compulsion by the Emperor

Herculius coupled with a strong aversion to Byzantium made the promise of Muslim tolerance appear more attractive than the connection with the Byzantine Empire and a Christian government. He went further to say that after the initial terror caused by the arrival of an invading army, a profound turnaround took place in favour of the Muslim conquerors (Caetani 1910: (3) 813-814). Armstrong agrees, concluding that it was not surprising that the Nestorian and Monophysite Christians welcomed the Muslims and found Islam preferable to Byzantine rule (Armstrong 1996: 232).

Discussing the issue from a different angle, Sahas (1994: 65) asserts that the theological stance of the patriarch, who believed in the unity of Christ, versus the Byzantine emperor who believed in the Chalcedonian principle of the dual nature of Christ (both God and man), was the explanation for the surrender of Aelia to the Muslims. I am also inclined to believe that the religious dispute between the patriarch and the Byzantine emperor, outlined above, was among the reasons for surrendering to the Muslims, as it enabled the Patriarch to remove Byzantine supremacy. The chronicler Theophanes asserted his disagreement by saying:

... Sophronios [sic] died after adorning the church of Jerusalem by word and deed and struggling against the Monothelete heresy of Heracleios [sic] and his companions Sergius and Pyrros. (Theophanes 1997: 471-472)

Moreover, Sahas argues that Sophronious considered the Muslims and caliph 'Umar to be protectors of Aelia and its holy places from the domination of the Jews, who were the enemies of the Christians (Sahas 1994: 71). He claims that the conquest of Aelia led to an opportunity for the Christians to contain the Jews, with the help of the Muslims, through the concessions granted to them in 'Umar's Assurance of Safety. (Sahas 1994: 54) However, this claim has been flatly rejected in the latest study of 'Umar's Assurance, by El-Awaisi (2007: 103).

Hitti takes a different approach, claiming that the Christians of al-Shām in general, and Aelia in particular, saw Islam as a new Christian sect and not as a religion. The controversy among Christians towards Islam was therefore based on rivalry rather than on a clash of fundamental principles (Hitti 1957: (2) 143). For this reason, Butler quoted Ibn al-'Ibrī when he was describing the extent of intra-Christian disagreement and the ensuing Christian optimism towards the Muslim armies:

When our people complained to Heraclius [sic], he gave no answers. Therefore the God of vengeance delivered us out of the hands of the Romans by means of the Arabs. Then although our churches were not restored to us, since under Arab rule each Christian community retained its actual possessions, still it profited us not a little to be saved from the cruelty of the Romans and their bitter hatred against us. (Butler 1978: 158)

Butler comments how melancholy it was to read that the welcome by Christians of Muslim rule was seen as providential and a deliverance from the rule of fellow Christians. He adds that this in itself shows how impossible the emperor's scheme was for church union, and that it contributed to his downfall (Butler 1978: 158-159).

Runciman discusses how, after the first Muslim conquest, Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews all became *dhimmis* under Muslim rule. They were allowed freedom of religion and worship in return for paying *jizyah*. He adds that each denomination or sect was treated as a "semi-autonomous community" in Islamic Jerusalem, with the religious leader of each being responsible for the group's good behaviour under the caliphate (Runciman 1987: (1) 21). Armstrong goes further, contending that the Muslims established a system that enabled Jews, Christians and Muslims to live together in the city for the first time (Armstrong 1996: 246). She states this was a result of the inclusive vision developed by the Muslim rulers of Islamic Jerusalem, a vision that did not deny the presence and devotion of other religions, but respected their rights and celebrated plurality and coexistence (Armstrong 1997: 19). On the same lines, El-Awaisi argues that:

The Muslims liberated the Christians from the Byzantine occupiers of the Aelia, rid the Jews of the Byzantine oppression, restored their presence in that region... (El-Awaisi 2007: 105)

Among other commentators, Karlson (1996: 14) agrees that the Christians welcomed the Muslims. He says that the Christians favoured living under the rule of their "cousins", with whom they shared the same language, customs, etc., rather than living under the authority of the Greeks, Romans or Persians. Al-Ḥamārneh (1999: 77-78) argues that the Christians, especially the Arab Christians, aided the Muslims in the war, seeing them as rescuers from Byzantine oppression. He claims that the Jacobite movement, which had been very active against the injustices of Byzantine rule, suddenly became quiescent. Al-Ḥamārneh attributes this to the Muslim conquest, and says that Muslim rule brought peace and tranquillity to the eastern Christians, who for a long time had been under persecution from the state and suffered a high tax burden. Moreover, Hamarneh (n.d.: 4) discussed the attitude of the Nabateans (who were Christian Arabs) towards the Muslim *fath*. He argues that the Nabateans did not only consider the Muslims as their liberators but they allied themselves with the Muslims. He added that the Nabateans worked as spies for the Muslims against the Byzantines and concluded that the reason behind their attitude is the fact that the Romans and later the Byzantines were that ones who destroyed the Nabateans' state and influence.

Hourani (2002: 23-24) agrees that the Christians welcomed the Muslim conquerors, but for different reasons. He claims that for most of the Christian population it did not matter much whether they were ruled by Persians, Greeks or Muslims, provided that they were secure, lived peacefully and were taxed at a reasonable level. He goes on to say that for some, the replacement of Greeks and Persians by Muslims even offered advantages. This was because those who opposed Byzantine rule for theological reasons might find it easier to live under the Muslims, who were mostly Arabs like themselves. Shams al-Dīn (2001: 5) and Fletcher (2003: 16)

believe that the Muslims could be seen as saviours of the persecuted Monophysite Christians of al-Shām. Tibawi (1969: 11) agrees, and adds that the Christians who benefited from Islamic tolerance welcomed the Muslims as heaven-sent. Jāsir (1989:71) added the Armenians to those who welcomed the Muslim *fath*. He went further on to say that the Armenians considered this conquest as grace as it saved them from the continuous conflict between the Byzantines and the Persians. In addition, the Muslim *fath* stopped the Byzantine church interference in their religious matters. Finally, Watson (1912: 140) commented on the good treatment the Christians of IslamicJerusalem have received from Muslims by saying that during the early years of the Muslim rule over IslamicJerusalem the Christian inhabitants in that region appear to have lived on excellent terms with the Muslims. On the other hand, Linder (1996: 152) affirms this good treatment by saying that each community in IslamicJerusalem maintained its unique theological and linguistic-social character. He added that none could exercise any means of oppression or coercion against the others. He concluded that, as a result of these factors, mutual tolerance was generally the rule between the different Jerusalem communities.

Interestingly, al-Azdī (1979: 169) discussed this issue and brought forward new details; he relied in his discussion on information presented by a Byzantine soldier with the name Jurja, who converted to Islam, and told the Muslims that the attitude of the people of that region taking into consideration their language and their ethnicity is as follows: the first group were the Byzantines who were obligated to fight the Muslims as the latter were seen as enemies to Christianity. They also had to protect their territories from being occupied by the Muslims. Therefore, the attitude of this group was very negative towards the Muslim conquest. The second group consisted of Christians from Arab origins. Jurja divided them into three sets: the first were neither Christians nor Muslims, but their attitude was positive. The second set were Christians by religion and Arabs by origin but they preferred the Byzantines and therefore helped to fight the Muslims. Finally, the third set were Christians by religion and Arabs by origin, but for

them supporting people who shared the same ethnicity was more important than supporting the Byzantines who shared the same religion with them. This set adopted a neutral stance and as Jurja reported, they welcomed the Muslim conquest. Commenting on al-Azdi's account, Abū al-Rrub (2002: 144) added that the set who adopted a neutral stance were the Arabs who believed in Monophysite doctrine, whereas those who participated in fighting with the Byzantines against the Muslims were the Arabs who followed the Chalcedonian principle. This classification and the different attitudes towards the Muslim *fath* of that region clearly show why Muslims, for example, have favoured the Jacobites over the Melkites, who had a connection with the Byzantine state (Kennedy 2006: 334). Nevertheless, Kennedy (2006: 334) refutes that the Muslim preference for the Jacobites was a result of the latter's positive attitude to the Muslim *fath*. He argues that the relationships between the Byzantines and the Melkites were severely weakened in the early Islamic period, firstly by the Monothelite and then by the iconoclast controversies. He added a number of reasons which had contributed to the bad relations between Muslims and the Melkites, such as the urban nature of the Melkites Church, the wealth of the Melkites and the 'great splendour of their buildings inherited from the imperial posts. In contrast, Kennedy argued that the Jacobites were poor and had a rural style of life; therefore Muslims left them alone in their villages.

I am inclined to believe that the attitude of a considerable number of Christians in al-Sham in general, and in Islamicjerusalem in particular, was welcoming towards the Muslims, especially when they experienced favourable treatment from them. Al-Balādhūrī (1987: 187) reported that the Christians preferred the Muslims because of their tolerant attitude, and that they were prepared to help them against the Byzantines. Furthermore, al-Balādhūrī says that the Muslim armies were unable to provide full protection to some cities in al-Sham and had to withdraw after realising that the Byzantines were preparing to attack. Because of their inability to provide protection, the Muslims returned the *jizyah* they had collected to the *dhimmis*. I would argue that historical, cultural and

ethnic affiliations played a substantial role in the Christian acceptance of their Muslim conquerors, in addition to the socio-political and religious situation they were living in under the Byzantines.

Not only that, I would argue that 'Umar's Assurance of Safety which was granted to the people of Aelia clarified to the Christians of IslamicJerusalem the way the Muslims were going to treat them. This treatment was based on respect and security, and laid the foundation for future policy. Any other behaviour would have violated the fundamental understanding between the two faiths. The Assurance's main points are: personal and financial security, freedom of belief and worship, the right to be protected and defended by the Muslim state, and freedom of movement.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, 'Umar's Assurance is a reference text for relations between Islam and Christianity not only in the era of Muslim expansion, but for later centuries and, by inference, for the future, and shows how positively 'Umar viewed this.

On the same line, El-Awaisi (2007: 55) argues that 'Umar's Assurance significantly contrasts with the destruction, killing, and displacement that had characterised the region's history until then. He describes the Assurance as the jewel of the first Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem, and the beacon for developing IslamicJerusalem's unique and creative vision. (El-Awaisi 2007: 55)

## Umar's arrival into IslamicJerusalem and the Christian attitude

It is historically proved that Sophronious, the patriarch of Aelia, insisted on the presence of Caliph 'Umar when he surrendered the city. It is clear that the patriarch rejected negotiations with 'Umar's commanders during the Muslim siege of the city. As life in Aelia became more difficult, Sophronious informed his people that he would surrender the walled city to the Muslims if the caliph had

<sup>6</sup> Hamami, Jamil, 'Islamic-Christian Relations in Palestine in a Civil Society: An Islamic Point of View', 1 March 2000. <http://www.al-bushra.org/latpatra/hamami.htm>.

the name 'Umar and fitted a certain description (Al-Wāqidī nd: (1) 322). His reason was that he had read this in Christian holy books. Caliph 'Umar arrived in Aelia, with the simplicity and humility of appearance and manner that was characteristic of early Muslims, to receive in person the submission of the holy city. He was advised that his demeanour would not impress locals who were used to seeing kings and emperors richly dressed and well guarded (Al-Wāqidī nd: (1) 333).

The arrival of 'Umar to the walled city of Islamic Jerusalem was covered by non-Muslim historians. Below are two descriptions of the way in which Sophronious saw the Muslims and the Muslim *fath*, according to two well-known non-Muslim historians Eutychius and Theophanes. Eutychius (1905: (2) 17-18), an early historian who recorded the event, states that as soon as the gate of Aelia was opened, 'Umar entered with his companions and was escorted around the city by the Greek Orthodox patriarch. They then went and sat in the atrium of the church of the Holy Sepulchre. When the time for Muslim prayer came, 'Umar told Patriarch Sophronious, "I wish to pray". The patriarch replied, "Amīr of the faithful, pray in the place where you are". 'Umar replied: "I shall not pray here". Therefore the patriarch led him to the church. But 'Umar told him, "I shall not pray here either", and he went out onto the stairway before the door of the church of St Constantine, in the east. He prayed alone on the stairway. Then, having sat down, he told Patriarch Sophronious, "Do you know, O Patriarch, why I did not pray inside the church?" "Prince of the faithful," said the patriarch, "I do not know why." 'Umar replied, "If I had prayed inside the church, it would have been lost by you and would have slipped from your power; for after my death the Muslims would take it away from you, together saying, "Umar prayed here". But give me a sheet of paper so that I may write you a decree, and 'Umar made a decree in these terms: "The Muslims shall not pray on the stairs, unless it be one person at a time. But they shall not meet there for the public prayer announced by the prayer call." Having written this decree, he gave it to the patriarch.

On the contrary, according to Theophanes (1997: 471) "In this year Oumaros [ʿUmar] invaded Palestine and, after invading the Holy City for two years, took it by capitulation; for Sophronios [ʿsri], the bishop of Jerusalem, received a promise of immunity for the whole of Palestine. Oumaros entered the Holy City dressed in filthy garments of camel-hair and, showing a devilish pretence, sought the temple of the Jew -the one built by Solomon- that he might take it as a place of worship for his own blasphemous religion. Seeing this, Sophronios said, "Verily, this is the abomination of desolation standing in a holy place, as has been spoken through the prophet Daniel".<sup>7</sup>

From the above one can see that, Euty chius for example portrayed a good relationship between the two important figures i.e. ʿUmar and Sophronios. This way of writing reflects a welcoming attitude towards the Muslim conquerors during the time of ʿUmar. Conversely, it is quite clear that Theophanes had a rather biased hostile attitude reflected throughout his Chronicle against Caliph ʿUmar and the Muslims and Islam in general. Theophanes' hostile tone contradicts the Christians' insistence on the condition that Caliph ʿUmar should come in person to conclude the capitulation of Aelia.

## Conclusion

The delay of the *fath* of IslamicJerusalem until 16 AH (637 CE) and the long period of the siege led against the Walled City of IslamicJerusalem clearly show that the political authority in Aelia represented by the Byzantines was against the conquest. Nevertheless, there were Christians who did not support the Byzantines and had a positive attitude towards the Muslim *fath*. The majority of these Christians were Arab origin. For the Arab majority the shared ethnicity was ultimately more important than their religious affiliation with the Byzantines. The Christian Arabs had more social and cultural affinity with Arab culture than with Byzantine culture. More importantly, these Christians perceived

<sup>7</sup> The Bible, Matthew 24:15. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

the first Muslim *fath* as liberation from the domination of unsympathetic groups of their own co-religionists – the Byzantines. In this conquest, this was primarily related to the bitter theological disagreement between Aelia's Christians and the Byzantine emperor, and they looked to the Muslims to restore their religious privileges.

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