

# THE QURANIC PROPHECY OF THE DEFEAT AND VICTORY OF THE BYZANTINES

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Byzantine-Persian wars in the seventh century received substantial coverage from the early Muslims in Makkah together with their Pagan counterparts. The interest in such far-off conflict when the Muslims were under persecution reflected their empathy with those closer to them in faith, as well as the importance of the location this was taken place in, particularly Jerusalem. This paper engages with both the historical narrative as well as Muslim coverage of events particularly within exegetical works, both classical and modern. The paper also illustrates how early Muslims capitalised on knowledge of the political situation in later conquering these lands and bringing it within the Islamic realm as well as vindicating the authenticity of the Quran.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Quran, Prophecy, Tafsir, Exegesis, Byzantium, Persia, Heraclius.*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

At the time when Islam emerged, there were two rival superpowers in the wider region, the Persians and the Byzantines (Romans), which had been at loggerheads for many centuries. Their final encounters took place in the early seventh century not far from where Muhammad was preaching. Muslims paid great attention to these encounters: they are the only contemporary events referred to in the Quran that took place outside the Arabian Peninsula. Also, it was the location where Prophet Muhammad had told his followers to face in their prayers, and where many Quranic and Biblical prophets were believed to have dwelled.

The crucial battles between these two great empires occurred during the early stages of Islam. The Byzantines were defeated during the early Makkan stage of Islam (610-622CE) but eventually victorious during the period in Madinah (622-632). The Byzantine ruler, Heraclius (610-641CE), came to power in 610, the year in which Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation. The Persian ruler, Chosroes II (591-628CE), had ascended the throne with the help of the Roman Emperor Maurice (582-602CE) twenty years before Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation.

There is a lack of historical research on the Byzantine-Persian campaigns in the light of the Qur'anic prophecy. This may be due to the fact that there are many contradictions and confusions in Muslim exegetical literature.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this article will be on the historical events and the exegesis of the verses related to the final wars between the Persians and Byzantines. Discussing the authenticity of these texts would go beyond the scope of this paper. Accordingly, this article will be divided into three main sections, covering a number of different exegeses of the Qur'anic prophecy, the historical narrative, and a comparison between both.



## PROPHECY IN THE QUR'AN

To Muslims, the Qur'an is the divine word of God, which governs most aspects of life. It is a well-known fact that the Makkan tribe of Quraysh initially rejected the whole message of Islam. They were asking the prophet for miracles in order to prove that he was a messenger of God (Quran 17:90-93). The Qur'an established that miracles had occurred among various nations yet they still denied them and thus they were only sent as a warning (Quran 17:59). The Qur'an moreover produces many signs that attest its authenticity (Quran 4:82), one of which is prophecies relating to the future (al-Asbahani 1986: 351-352). There are a few examples of such prophecies in the Qur'an that relate to the conquests of the Prophet (such as Qur'an 61:13, 48:27). However, what is unique about the prophecy on the Persian-Roman wars is that it came at a time when the Muslims were persecuted in Makkah. In spite of that, it drew their interest to this international conflict, encouraging them to side with those closer to them in faith. With

regard to this specific event, very little is written in the *Sirah* genre, the most probable reason for this being the confusion and contradictions in the different narrations, even though it is a very important event, and many scholars have used it as evidence of Muhammad's prophethood. On the other hand, exegetes have paid much attention to this event in their exegesis of Surat al-Rum. Exegetes use a number of methodologies which can be divided into four main methodologies (Al-Qatan 2000: 325-377):

1. Traditional: the exegesis by al-Ma'thour (which include interpreting: 'Qur'an by Qur'an', 'Qur'an by Sunnah' and the sayings of the prophet's companions).
2. Rational: the exegesis by individual opinion.
3. Juristic: using Qur'anic verses to support their argument for a juristic ruling.
4. Modern: mostly uses the previous methods and try to implement it in our present time.

For the purpose of this article, a small number of complete exegeses were chosen, that cover all the above methods. Al-Tabari (d. 310AH/ 922CE) and Ibn Kathir (d. 774AH/ 1372CE) were selected to represent the traditional school's methodology. Al-Razi (d. 606AH/ 1210CE) was chosen for the rational approach. Al-Qurtubi (d. 688AH/ 1289CE) was chosen for the juristic exegesis. As for modern exegesis, Qutub and al-Zuhaili were chosen. Works of other scholars and exegetes such as the commentaries of al-Zindani will be also adduced and where necessary, there will be references to *Asbab al-Nuzul* (reasons for revelation).

## VERSES

The prophecy that is the subject of this article is found in the thirtieth chapter of the Qur'an, which was named after this event, *Surat al-Rum* (the Romans). The chapter starts with a mention of the defeat and later victory of the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire. Although the Quran does not indicate by whom they are defeated and over whom they are victorious, there is unanimous agreement that it refers to their wars with the Sasanian Empire or the Persians. At the time of the revelation of this prophecy, during the Makkan period of 610-622CE, the Persians had invaded the

Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and had later even besieged its capital Constantinople. The verses read as follows:

الم \* غَلَبَتِ الرُّومُ \* فِي أَذَى الْأَرْضِ وَهُمْ مَن بَعْدَ غَلَبِهِمْ سَيَغْلِبُونَ \* فِي بَضْعِ سِنِينَ لِلَّهِ الْأَمْرُ مِن قَبْلُ  
وَمِن بَعْدُ وَيَوْمَئِذٍ يَفْرَحُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ \* بِنَصْرِ اللَّهِ يَبْصُرُ اللَّهُ تَبَصُّرًا مِّن يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ \* وَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَا يُخْلِفُ اللَّهُ  
وَعْدَهُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ.

*Alif-Lam-Mim.* The Romans have been vanquished in *adna al-Ard*, but they, after their vanquishing shall be the victors within a few years. To God belongs the decision, in the past and in the future, and on that day, the believers shall rejoice with victory of God. He gives victory whomever He will; and He is the All-Mighty, the Most Merciful. [It is] the promise of God; God does not fail His promise, but most people are not aware. (Quran 30:1-6)

The chapter begins with three letters, –آلم– *alif lam mim*, which are called *al-Huruf al-Muqatta'ah*, the Abbreviated Letters, as several chapters of the Quran do. A number of explanations have been proposed as regards their meaning but no consensus has been achieved. Thus, it is agreed by most scholars of traditional exegesis, that *only God knows best what they mean*. The second verse mentions the Byzantine defeat as well as a particular location for this defeat. Then it immediately prophesies the Byzantines' victory over their enemy, and gives the maximum number of years that it will occur in. It then adds that the believers (i.e. Muslims) will rejoice on that day. Lastly, it speaks of the manifestation of Divine power as it is only the will of God that gives victory to whomsoever He wishes, stressing the fact that He is the All-Mighty and at the same time the Most Merciful. Furthermore, it is stated that God never departs from His promise but that most humans do not understand this; again this is reiterated at the end of chapter al-Rum.

### Reason and place of revelation

While it is generally accepted that the whole chapter was revealed in Makkah some scholars such as al-Razi (d. 606AH/ 1210CE) and al-Alusi (d. 1270AH/ 1854CE) have excluded verse 17 because they believe that it was revealed in Madinah (al-Razi 1990:84-88; al-Alusi 1994:18-24). Most scholars agree that the chapter was revealed before the migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah in

September 622. A closer approximation can be obtained from Al-Zuhri (d.124AH/ 742CE) who classified the order of the chapters revealed in Makkah, and declared that chapter thirty Al-Rum was the third last chapter before the migration (*hijra*) to Madinah, or eighty-third chapter from the start of Revelation (al-Zuhri 1988:37-42). It comes thirty-four chapters after chapter al-Isra was revealed, which means that it was revealed before the *hijra* and after the ‘Night Journey and Ascension’, which took place about two years before the *hijra*. This view cannot be considered very accurate, because there is a difference of opinion about the dating of the time of revelation. Indeed, there are many more chapters in-between. If the date of the revelation of one chapter were known, then it would give us a better approximation of when this chapter was revealed. There will yet be another problem to solve, which is that the chapters were not always revealed as a whole, sometimes it was only one verse, other times a few more verses, and sometimes one whole chapter was revealed at once. Accordingly, this has to be taken into consideration before one can arrive at any conclusion. Al-Diyarbakri in his *Tarih al-Khamis* mentions that these verses were revealed during the eighth year of the Prophethood (i.e. 617-618CE) in Makkah (Al-Diyarbakri nd, vol.1: 298).

Al-Suyuti (d. 911AH/ 1505CE) gives two completely different reasons and places of revelation for these verses (al-Suyuti 2002: 201). In the first opinion, the place of revelation is Makkah, he adduces a narration passed down through Ibn Abi-Hatim (d. 327AH/ 890CE) from Ibn Shihab (d. 124AH/742CE), that has been related to him:

The pagans of Makkah used to argue with the Muslims while in Makkah, before the migration of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, saying “the Romans are People of the Book, and have been defeated by the Zoroastrians, and you claim that you will defeat us with the book which has been revealed to your prophet. So how did the Zoroastrians defeat the Romans who are People of the Book. We will therefore defeat you as the Zoroastrians have defeated the Romans”, then Allah revealed ‘*alf lam mim, the Romans have been defeated... ..*’ (Ibn Abi-Hatim 1997:3087; Al-Wahidi 1998: 288)

In his other opinion, he gives a very different meaning according to the *Qira’a* (method of recitation) that these verses were revealed

after the migration to Madinah, as narrated by al-Tirmidhi (d. 279/892CE) with his chain of narrators going back to Abu-Sa'id (d.74AH/693CE):

During the battle of Badr, the news arrived that the Romans have defeated the Persians, and Muslims were so happy, then Allah revealed {*آلم، غلبت الروم، في أدنى الأرض، وهم من بعد غلبهم سيغلبون،.....*} "The Romans have been victorious in adna al-Ard, and they, after their victory, will be defeated within a few years."

Al-Wahidi (d.486 AH/ 1093CE) also quotes this exact same narration, which is authenticated by al-Tirmidhi (Al-Wahidi 1998: 288, Ibn al-Arabi 1997, v.6: 47-50; Ibn Abi-Hatim 1997:3087). Al-Suyuti mentions that this reading is also mentioned by al-Tabari from a range of sources and he comments that this reading is true because the Romans were victorious over the Persians and they will then be defeated by the Muslims, otherwise it would not make much sense (al-Suyuti 2002: 201).

As we will see in the following, most scholars reject the opinion that this verse was revealed other than in Makkah, but some argue that it could have been revealed twice. Indeed, al-Razi and al-Alusi mention that there are two readings for these verses and each was revealed separately. With the first revelation taking place in Makkah, after the defeat of the Byzantines, which is the most common reading, *ghulibat* (غلبت), were defeated, and *sayaghlibun* (سيغلبون), shall be victorious. While the second reading revealed in Madinah at the Battle of Badr, narrated by al-Tirmidhi as, *ghalabat* (غلبت), triumphed and *sayoghlabun* (سيغلبون), shall be defeated. The second reading would thus mean that after the Byzantines triumphed defeating the Persian, within the following few years the prophecy would be fulfilled through the Muslims defeating the Byzantines. The vowelizing here is crucial as it changes fundamentally the meaning and interpretation of the verses (El Cheikh 1998: 357). El Cheikh presents a number of opinions that support the second reading, mainly that of Ibn 'Umar and a reading of the people in al-Sham amongst others (El Cheikh 1998: 358).

Al-Zarkashi asserts that verses could be revealed more than once, in some circumstances, and he gives examples of verses or

chapters that were revealed more than once, sometimes once in Makkah and later again in Madinah (as cited in al-Qatan 2000:84). Accepting the argument presented by both al-Razi and al-Alusi here removes much confusion over the places and timing of this particular revelation. Ibn Abi-Hatim narrates that al-Zubayr al-Kilabi said: “I witnessed the victory of the Persians over the Romans and then I witnessed the victory of the Romans over the Persians and I then witnessed the victory of the Muslims over both the Romans and the Persians and conquering all of al-Sham and Iraq, all this happened in a period of fifteen years” (Ibn Abi-Hatim 1997:3087).

## EXEGESIS

### AL-TABARI (D. 310AH/ 922CE)

Al-Tabari has the oldest full exegesis of the Qur’an preserved until today. In his exegesis, he favours the reading *goulibat* (غَلِبَتْ) with dhama (vowel mark), and considers the consensus of most Qura’a (Qura’nic reciters) as evidence for the validity of this reading. He claims it is the only correct reading, but still gives a few traditions that support the other claim. He comments that the reading of *galabat* (غَلَبَتْ) should always be accompanied by *sayoglaboon* (سَيُغْلَبُونَ) since otherwise it would not make any sense (Al-Tabari 1999, vol.10: 162). Al-Tabari narrates over twenty different accounts, some of which are conflicting, and offering very little analysis. These accounts give opinions of Ibn Abbas, Ibn Umar and Ibn Masoud amongst the companions, as well as a group from the generation of *Tabeen*.

Al-Tabari narrates from Ibn Abbas and Qatadah that the initial wager was for five years and the promise was not fulfilled and the wager was increased and the second time it was realised. However, one is associated with Badr (624CE) and the latter with Hdaybiyah (628CE). A similar narration from Abdullah ibn Mu’qil states that the wager was for seven years and then increased for another two years, and these two years did not pass until the news of the victory of the Romans came.

Another narration from Ibn Abbas gives a different reading, that after placing the wager Abu-Baker consulted with the prophet who asked him to be more cautious and increase the number of years. A



similar narration al-Tabari recounts from 'Ikrimah, that Abu-Baker's wager was for three years and after consulting the prophet it was increased to nine years. Whereas Ibn Zayd's narration mentions it was initially four or five years and it was increased following the consultation with the prophet.

Attempting to identify al-Tabari's strongest narration, proved difficult as it would require delving into the chain of narrations and *ilm al-Rijal* (Science of Hadith narrators), which would divert the argument away from its aims. Moreover, other exegetes have relied and favoured one or more of al-Tabari's narrations, as will be observed later.

Still, al-Tabari in his *Tarih* seems to favour the narrations passed down through 'Ikrimah (d. 105AH/ 723CE), and retells them all again, the main narration being:

'Ikrimah said: the Romans [i.e. Byzantines] and Persians fought in *adna al-Ard* (nearer part of the land), and this then was Adthri'at, where the two armies met, and the Romans defeated. This news reached the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions while they were in Makkah, which caused them distress. The Prophet (PBUH) disliked the victory of the Zoroastrian gentiles (*Ummiyin*) over the People of the Book; the Romans. The pagans of Makkah were delighted and taunted. When they encountered the companions of the Prophet (PBUH) they said: you possess a [divine] Book, and the Christians also have a Book, and we are unbelievers. Now our brethren from the Persians have defeated your brethren from the People of the Book, and if you fight us we will certainly defeat you. At that point God revealed '*alif lam mim...* (up to verse 7)'. Abu-Baker al-Siddiq went forth to the pagans and said: are you rejoicing the victory of your brethren over ours! Don't rejoice, may God never give comfort to your eyes! I swear by God, the Romans will be victorious over the Persian, our prophet has told us so. Ubayy ibn Khalaf al-Jumahi stood up to him and said: you lie, O Abu-Fusayl!<sup>3</sup> Abu-Baker replied you are the liar, O enemy of God. He added: I wager you ten of my young she-camels, and ten of yours, if the Romans are victorious over the Persians, you lose and if the Persian win, then your victorious to a period of three years. Then Abu-Baker went to the Prophet (PBUH) and informed him. The Prophet replied: this is not what I have told you, the [term] *bid'* (few) is a number between three and nine, so increase your wager and extend the period of



time. Abu-Baker went out and met Ubayy who said to him: maybe you regretted [the wager], he replied not at all; Come on, I will raise the wager and extend the period of time; make it one hundred young she-camels for a period up to nine years. Ubayy replied I accept. (Al-Tabari 1999, vol.2: 151, 164; Al-Tabari 1967: 184-185)

One tradition that only al-Tabari mentions in his exegesis that stood out but which is not mentioned or quoted by the other commentators is a tradition passed down through al-Shu'bi who says regarding those verses that:

The Prophet (PBUH) told the people of Makkah that the Romans would be victorious. He said: then the Qur'an was revealed with this. He added that the Muslims preferred the Roman's victory over the Persian, because they were from the people of the Book. (Al-Tabari 1999, vol.2: 165)

This shows that the prophet either predicted or was informed about this before the revelation of those verses, which would have been a prophecy in itself, but not much attention was paid to this. It also shows that the prophet was paying attention to this international conflict before revelation came down in the Quran affirming his interpretation of events.

### **IBN KATHIR (D. 774AH/ 1372CE)**

Ibn Kathir commented on this verse, stating the reason behind the revelation. Although he reproduces the same tradition mentioned by al-Tabari, he quotes them directly from the books of Hadith. He adds that those verses were revealed when the King of Persia Sabur defeated the Romans and drove them out of al-Sham, Mesopotamia and the outlying regions of the land of the Romans. Heraclius the Emperor of the Romans was forced to flee to Constantinople, where he was besieged for a lengthy period, before regaining the upper hand over the Persians and defeating them. He mentions seven narrations, some of which are also mentioned in al-Tabari. Ibn Kathir unlike al-Tabari, offers his conclusion after giving the different narration. For the place of the battle he suggests that it was between Adhri'at and Busra, quoting Ibn Abbas and 'Ikrimah, he presents the opinions of Mujahid that it was in Mesopotamia, but he is inclined to the first opinion.

As for the period, he states clearly that it was nine years, quoting a number of narrations stating that initially Abu-Baker set the number of years to less than nine and after the time agreed had passed and consulting with the Prophet it was increased and the Romans were victorious and the believers rejoiced. He narrates another account that suggests seven years was the period through Abu-Hatim who states that Abu-Baker set the years to six and lost the bet, but the following year the Romans were victorious and Muslims rebuked Abu-Baker for choosing six years, but many people accepted Islam as a result of this prophecy being fulfilled. Ibn Kathir rules out that this was during the time of al-Hudaibya, claiming that it took place earlier, most probably during the time of Badr and presents a number of arguments to refute the other claim. He mentions the rejoicing of the believers about the victory of the Romans because they were closer in faith and also because it is the God's law to give victory to those closer to the truth (Ibn Kathir 1994; Vol.3: 560-566 & 2000; Vol.7: 517-525).

#### **AL-RAZI (D. 606AH/ 1210CE)**

Al-Razi takes a completely different approach to start with. He links the verses of the prophecy to the previous chapter, which has as its subject matter the People of the Book and the idolaters of Makkah (Al-Razi 1999, vol.25: 79). This approach is supported by some Muslims scholars, most recently Abdurauf (2002), who believes that the Qur'anic order of verse and chapters is divine and a verse which is one chapter, would in one way or another always refer to one of the previous verses.

He refers to the abbreviated letters and says that they have been used in this chapter because they are only used when a revelation or a miracle will follow in the following verse and in this chapter, the miracle being a prophecy of what is unknown. As for the place of defeat, he takes it from a linguistic point of view and explains that the *al* (definitive article) used in *al-Ard* the land, here refers to the land which is known to them, in this case, the land of the Arabs. This would mean that the Romans were defeated in the part of their land that is closest to the land of the Arabs.

For the period, he argues that God mentioned the term *bid'* (between three and ten) due to the arrogance of the disbelievers, that they may dispute with the believers the exact timing. He adds the prophet was well aware of this and knew the exact time it would take place to the hour, as he sent Abu-Baker to increase the wager to seven years. Regarding the rejoicing of the Muslims about the defeat of the Persians, he argues that this would not have been possible on the same day of Badr, since it takes time for news to travel from one place to another, and the rejoicing of Muslims was not for this reason, but because of their own victory over the pagans of Makkah during Badr (Al-Razi 1999, vol.25: 79-81).

### AL-QURTUBI (D. 688AH/ 1289CE)

Al-Qurtubi refers to the same traditions, quoting books of Hadith directly (Al-Qurtubi 1998, vol.7: 3-8). He uses a linguistic approach; giving all the opinions for the readings and concludes that it should be *goulibat* (غُلبت), and *sayagliboon* (سَيَغْلِبُونَ), i.e. Byzantines defeated and later they will be victorious. He mentions a number of narrations on the place of the first defeat of the Romans, al-Sham, Mesopotamia, Jordan, Palestine, Busra and Athra'at. He tries to explain the term *adna* according to all the opinions, but it seems that he prefers the latter and supports it with a line of poetry by Imru' al-Qais (d. 565CE), which he quotes from Ibn Atiya (Al-Qurtubi 1998, vol.7: 6):

تَوْرَاتِهَا مِنْ أَدْرَعَاتٍ وَأَهْلُهَا      يَيْثِرِبَ أَدْنَى دَارِهَا نَظَرِ عَالٍ.

This explains that what is meant here is the nearest land. He refers to Athra'at (Daraa) as being the nearest land to the Arabs in Arabia and Makkah in particular.

As for the number of years, he recounts different narrations that it was seven and also nine, but seems to prefer it was seven years. He narrates that when Abu-Baker wanted to migrate, Ubayy ibn Khalaf asked for a guarantor and he provided his son's name who stayed in Makkah. Later when Ubayy died (625E) Abu-Baker took the wager from his inheritors.

As for the time of rejoicing, al-Qurtubi is undecided, whether it was during Badr or Hudaybiyah, and quotes Ibn Attiyah that both were victories for the believers. He gives several reasons for rejoicing, some of which have not been motioned by earlier exegetists, one he quotes also from Ibn Atiya in which he has a vision of the future,

They [i.e. Muslims] wanted the smaller army to win, because if the larger army wins then there are more reasons to be afraid, with the vision of the Prophet to spread Islam and have the upper hand over all nations...  
(Al-Qurtubi 1998, vol.7: 7)

Al-Qurtubi concludes that he accepts all of them, that the Muslims rejoiced for three reasons: their victory over their enemies (in Badr), the victory of the Romans, and because God has fulfilled his promise.

#### **QUTUB (D. 1386AH/ 1966CE)**

As for the meaning of “*alif lam mim*” Qutub argues that it is to get the attention of the audience that this is the Qur’an. As for the place and reason of revelation he agrees that it was in Makkah and uses one of the traditions of al-Tabari, that:

Abu-Baker betted with the disbelievers of Quraysh on four young camels for a period of seven years and he lost, he then told the prophet, who asked them what the word *bid’* meant to them, they replied any number below ten, He then told Abu-Baker to increase the bet and the period. Before the two years were over, the news came that the Romans were victorious over the Persians, So the believers were delighted. (Al-Tabari 1999, 165-166)

He then tries to draw conclusions from the occasion that deviate from any historical facts or the tradition itself, but are rather based on the connections with the People of the Book, and the current Muslim situation and the Divine law (Qutub 1981 Vol5: 2753-2758). At the end of the chapter, he reiterates that God starts the chapter with the promise of the Roman victory within a few years and then that of the believers and commands his prophet to be patient until these promises are fulfilled (Qutub 1981 Vol5: 2778).

**AL-ZUHAYLI (D.1436AH/ 2015CE)**

This is a recent exegesis of the whole Quran, but it is rather brief. Al-Zuhaili gives the years in which these events took place, which none of the above scholars have done. He claims that the verses were revealed in the year 622CE, a few months before *hijra* (September 622CE). As for the place of the defeat of the Byzantines he is undecided and mentions the opinion of 'Ikrimah that it took place on the borders of al-Sham close to the Arabs, which means that *adna al-Ard* would be Athra'ât. He also mentions the opinion of Mujahid that it could be in al-Jazeera (Mesopotamia) between Iraq and Syria (Map 1), the nearest land to Persia. As for the wager, he claims that it was placed for five years and that within this period the Romans were victorious in 627CE in Nineveh. This is contrary to the narrations mentioned by earlier exegetes. This victory caused the Persians to withdraw their siege on Constantinople, and not very long after Chosroes II was killed by his son in 628CE. The Muslims rejoiced because the Romans had a Book, and the Persians were idolaters (Al-Zuhaili 2001 vol.3: 1982-1985).

**OTHER CONTEMPORARY EXEGESIS**

Amongst modern Muslim scholars, who concentrate on the scientific interpretation of the Qur'an, al-Zindani, al-Najjar and al-Nabulsi bring another dimension to this discussion. They refer to another linguistic meaning of *adna* namely 'lower' rather than 'closer'. Thus, *adna al-Ard* would refer to the lowest part on earth, that is, the Dead Sea basin (al-Zindani 2004: 93; al-Musslih 2008: 193-198; al-Nabulsi 2014: 107-1), a place close to Jericho where this decisive would then have taken place. Al-Zindani claims that the *adna al-Ard* means the lowest land and tells a story of how he came to find this through a discussion with a distinguished scholar in the field of geology in America. He adds that in the verse the word "close by" has been interpreted by former interpreters as having two meanings, the first meaning is "more near" and the second meaning is "lower". They gave importance to the first meaning because it expressed to them the sense of geographical proximity to the Land of Arabs. However, the land which is described as "more near" "lower" is the lower areas of the Dead Sea. He adds that this proves the infallibility of the Quran as it brings forth

geological facts fourteen centuries before their modern discoveries (al-Zindani nd; Al-Rehaili 1998: 36-38). Al-Nabulsi relates the same argument and adds what does *adna al-Ard* mean here when the earth is round, thus excluding the meaning of closer or nearer as within the round shape of the earth there is no nearer (or further) land. This he argues only leaves us with the meaning of lower and the lowest point of earth is the gulf of Miriana, 12,000 meters below sea level. Moreover, the lowest *land* on earth is the area of the Dead Sea 392 metres below sea level. He questions it was not possible for humans to know this before geological sciences advanced, this can only be through direct revelation from the divine, who is aware of the lowest land on earth.

Those modern scholars who are interested in the scientific interpretation of the Quran try to develop this idea further. Yusuf Al-Hajj Ahmad, in his encyclopaedia of Scientific Miracles in the Qur'an and Sunnah, argues that *adna al-Ard* was also read *adaani al-Ard*, meaning lowest of the earth. He quotes the tafsir of Abu al-Soud and al-Alousi, who mention this as one of the *qiraat* (readings) as recorded by al-Kalbi. Another modern scholar, Raid F. Jabareen, explains that the Quran is very particular about using the term *al-Ard*, and that it is generally used in the Quran to refer to the Holy Land and not the whole earth.<sup>4</sup> This understanding would take this argument further, to mean that it is the lowest or nearest part of the Holy Land, which is again the Dead Sea basin.

From the above accounts and exegesis, it is clear that there is no consensus amongst classical and modern exegetes on the sequence of events apart from the prophecy taking place in Makkah. Classical exegetists agree on the site of the battle and number of years after which the Byzantines had the upper hand. Al-Tabari narrates numerous accounts without favouring one in his exegesis, while in his history he seems to prefer that this battle took place in Adhri'at and the victory of the Byzantines took place nine years later. Ibn Kathir on the other hand, suggests the battle taking place between Adhri'at and Busra and again that the victory of the Byzantines took place after nine years. The same is reiterated by al-Qurtubi. By contrast, al-Razi does not specify the location, but seems to think that it is the closest land to the Arabs,

thus agreeing with the others on the location as well as the number of years. Modern exegetes, such as al-Zuhayli, are quite definite about the sequence of events without considering the historical narrative. Qutub draws his conclusions away from the historical sequence of events, leaving the door open to modern scientific exegesis based on the Quranic wordings and applying modern geological understating of the lowest area on earth to support their claims without much historical backing to their argument.

## HISTORICAL EVENTS

It is very important to look at the historical background around the period in question, to understand the events and their causes, and to try to then understand them along with the verses of the Qur'an. Scholars of Byzantine history such as George Ostrogorsky, point out that there is a great deal of sources on the period of Justinian, but when it comes to the seventh century there is very little, especially on the period of Heraclius. Ostrogorsky names the only Greek historical sources for that period, dating to the ninth century, which are the chronicles of Theophanes (d. 202AH/ 818CE) and Patriarch Nicephorus (d. 213AH/ 828CE) (Ostrogorsky 1956: 79-83). On the other hand, these wars are mentioned in early Arabic sources from the seventh and eighth century. It is important to note that these early Arabic sources are not first-hand, and this explains the inconsistencies regarding some events and the dates of some narrations. Other narrations are very detailed and give details that are not mentioned in any of the sources studied. Kaegi however argues that *“the Arabs learned more, as local observers, either directly or vicariously through reports from other friendly Arabs and from local inhabitants of towns and villages in the vicinity of the manoeuvring and fighting, with whom they may have discussed the fighting while engaging in commerce”* (Kaegi 1992 :115). This tallies with early Muslim accounts on the eagerness of early Muslims in Makkah and their pagan counterparts to take sides in this conflict. Indeed, it is well known that the Arabs of Hijaz and Iraq were associated with Persia, while the Arabs of al-Sham were associated with Byzantium (Ibn Ashour 1984, vol.21:40). Here the early Muslims have deviated from the traditional



association of the Arabs in Hijaz with Persia, to Byzantium which was closer to them in faith. This became a reason for following the news of these wars and placing bets on who might be victorious based on the Quranic revelation, and thus a reason for their interest in this conflict. As Kaegi argues this would have helped Muslims later as well as the Byzantines in drawing up strategies for war two decades later when these powers clashed in the same area, such as the battle of Yarmouk (Kaegi 1992:115)

The two Empires, of Rome and Persia, have during most of their existence been at war; only rarely were they at peace. During the sixth century, two great Emperors ruled most of the world. The Byzantine emperor was Justinian (d. 565CE), while the emperor of Persia was Anaushirwan (d. 579CE). After Justinian passed away, he was finally succeeded by Maurice (582-602). In Persia, Anaushirwan was succeeded by Khusro Perwez (Chosroes II). Chosroes II was overthrown in a military coup in 590 by Barham. Chosroes II took refuge with Maurice, the Byzantine emperor. With Byzantine help, Chosroes II was restored to the Persian throne. This led to very strong relations between the two Empires. Maurice regarded Chosroes as a son, and he married him to his daughter Mary (al-Tabari 1999: 146-149, Ibn Khaldun 1999 Vol.2: 215, Khan 1992: 132-134), whereas Chosroes was surrounded by Byzantine bodyguards (Jenkins 1966: 19).

It is important to mention that there were Arab buffer states. When the two empires expanded, they came to include territories, which were populated by Arabs. It was the policy of both empires to set up these Arab buffer states at their borders and to let them rule themselves. In the sixth century, a Ghassanid Arab state was set up in Syria under Al Harith bin Jabala. In the Persian Empire, a Lakhmid state was set up in Iraq. The Ghassanids and the Lakhmids were often at war with each other. With the ascent of Islam, the situation of these Arab buffer states changed. In Syria, after the death of their King Al Harith bin Jabala, the Ghassanid State split into fifteen principalities. In Persia, Chosroes II took over the Lakhmid State's territory and it came under his direct rule.

At the end of 602CE, the Byzantine army revolted against Maurice. Maurice was killed and mutilated along with four of his sons, and Phocas (602-608 CE) was crowned emperor. After the death of Maurice, the friendship between the two empires was over, and war started again, allegedly to take revenge for the murder of Maurice. Phocas ruled for eight years, and during the last years, the Empire was falling apart. There were foreign threats as well as internal threats. The Persians were attacking and Phocas was losing many battles and many places, such as Dara in 605. The people under his rule were dissatisfied with him, and there were many revolts and conspiracies against him, which failed and led to the death of thousands of people (Jenkins 1966: 19-20; Ostrogorsky 1956: 76-78).

A successful military coup was led by Heraclius, the son of the military governor of the *Exarchate* of Africa or of Carthage, who was able to get the support of Phocas' top military leader Priscus despite the fact that he was married to Phocas' daughter, and of Sergius I who then became patriarch. He arrived in Constantinople by sea and was warmly welcomed by its inhabitants in October 610. He executed Phocas and was crowned emperor (Ostrogorsky 1956: 78; Jenkins 1966: 20).

### **CONSTANT DEFEATS**

In this section, only the defeats that the Byzantines suffered from the Persians will be discussed. When Heraclius became emperor, he found that the empire was on the verge of collapse. Much was in ruins, in nearly every aspect, militarily, financially and politically. The Slavs and the Avars were snatching parts of the Empire from one side, and the Persians were advancing from the other, reducing Heraclius in a later stage only to the walls of Constantinople.

Heraclius tried to stop the constant advances of the Persians into his territories, to start rebuilding the country, he even thought to abandon the city and move back to Carthage in Northern Africa, where it would be possible to reorganise the Army away from all trouble. This move was opposed very much by the Patriarch Sergius, who offered him a loan with interest from the treasures of

the church (Ostrogorsky 1956: 84; Durant nd. Vol.9: 76, 77, 152-156, Vol.12: 294-304). He sent a delegation to Chosroes within his first year, asking him to sign a peace treaty, but Chosroes did not accept and instead sent his army (Ibn al-'Ibri 1992: 90-92; Kaegi 2003:83). Heraclius forced them to evacuate Caesarea in 611 and launched a counter-attack on them in Armenia and Syria, which achieved nothing at all. He was forced to withdraw when confronted by an army led by Sahin. Heraclius's army was then badly defeated in 613CE at Antioch, losing the city and further to the north large parts of Cilicia as well. To the south, the Persians captured Emessa (Homs), followed by Damascus. The Arabic sources also talk of a battle between Adhri'at and Bostra or Busra al-Sham, most probably around this period, but the sources do not specify a date (see earlier sections). Kaegi mentions that this was where the decisive battle for Palestine took place, in the vicinity of Adhri'at and Bostra between the years 613-614. He notes that not much was destroyed during the invasion of the whole area but where the Persians encountered stiff military or civilian resistance they were brutal as was the case at Adhri'at and Jerusalem (Kaegi 1992:45). Adhri'at seems to have been an important centre for trade, transportation, and communications, a situation that did not change during the Persian occupation, especially as it dominated the north-south communications east of the River Jordan. Kaegi adds that it would have been the natural place to attempt to halt an invasion of Palestine, due to the strategic importance of this area for defence and offence as well as for communications (Kaegi 1992: 115, 122). The Persian general who commanded the Persian forces at Adhri'at was Shahrbaraz, but very little is known about the assembled Byzantine army and their Arab Ghassanid allies (Kaegi 1992:115; Shahid 2009:38). At this battle, the Byzantines were defeated and this according to Kaegi, *"left a permeant resonance amongst the nascent Arabs and reportedly is the occasion for the Qur'anic Surat al-Rum"* (Kaegi 2003:78).

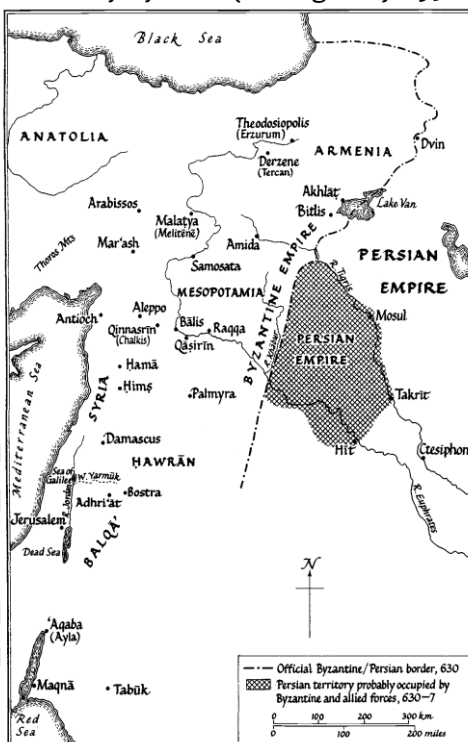
The greatest loss was the holy city of Jerusalem, whose citizens submitted to the Persians and presented gifts to the invading army. Yet after a few months, they rebelled and killed the officers of the Persian king (Sebeos 1999: 68-69). The eye-witness Antiochus Strategios says that the later Patriarch of Jerusalem,

Abba Modestos, went out to Jericho where he gathered Byzantine troops stationed there (Conybeare 1910: 505). When the Byzantine troops saw the irresistible Persian army, they fled. According to Omar, the Persians sent an army towards Jericho and this might have been the last standoff before sacking Jerusalem, which could be the place to which the Quran refers (Omar 2009: 39-40). Different sources mention that this was followed by a siege on Jerusalem that lasted around 20 days, after which the city fell, incurring heavy losses; thousands were murdered, the church of the Holy Sepulchre and other holy Christian sites were burnt. The most precious relic of the Christians, the Holy Cross, fell into the hands of the Persians and was sent to Ctesiphon, and the patriarch Zachary was taken prisoner and tortured (Conybeare 1910: 511). The following year, fresh troops were sent to Asia Minor. They reached Chalcedon, which is extremely close to Constantinople. Then the conquest of Egypt started and was soon complete, which endangered the corn supply of Constantinople (Ostrogorsky 1956: 85-86; Jenkins 1966:21; Al-Tabari nd: 146-149). From 613CE and up to about 620, there is no mention of Heraclius's military offensives at all in the available literature. It seems somewhat incongruous that Heraclius as a military man would sit and watch his Empire falling city after the other, especially after the fall of Jerusalem and the loss of the Holy Cross, as it is known that he was a devout man. But the circumstances might have prevented him from doing so, or he may have been preparing an assault.

### **PREPARING FOR VICTORY**

After the continuous defeats and the loss of most territories, Heraclius announced that he was leaving for Carthage, from where he would prepare a counter-attack on Egypt. The people of Constantinople were outraged, and the Patriarch Sergius took it upon himself to convince Heraclius to give an oath that he would never desert Constantinople. Heraclius took this opportunity to impose harsh taxes upon all, and was able to raise enough for a whole new army, and start a new military training programme. Heraclius left Constantinople under the leadership of his son Constantine and he set off to Asia Minor and started training his troops there. He instigated many reforms, and some accounts

claim that he invented a new military system (Ostrogorsky 1956: 86-87; Jenkins 1966:22-23; Baynes and Moss 1948: 10-11).<sup>5</sup> By autumn 622CE the Byzantines were able to launch a counter attack against Persia. They invaded Armenia and crushed the army of Sharabarz, forcing him to withdraw. Heraclius returned to Constantinople before moving again towards Armenia. He destroyed many cities on the way, such as Dvin. Then he directed his troops to one of the religious centres of Persia, in Genzak, where Chosroes was at the time. He destroyed its fire temple in retaliation to their aggression in Jerusalem. He moved back north for the winter and re-launched attacks in 625, but these were not conclusive (Veyonis 1967: 59-60; Ostrogorsky 1956: 91-92). Most Muslim sources portray Heraclius as a devout, God fearing man (El Cheikh 1999), who would be found worshipping and praying many times. This was also the case in many Christian sources; George of Pisiddia a poet chronicler describes how on the eve of the first encounter between Heraclius and Sharabarz and contrasts how they spent their night before the battle (Veyonis 1967: 60):



Map1: Based on Kaegi 1992: 49, adapted from *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients B VII 2*.

Cymbals and all kinds of music gratified the ears of Shahrbarz and naked woman danced before him, while the Christian Emperor sought delight in psalms sung to mystical instruments, which awoke a divine echo in his soul.

After the many attacks of Heraclius in the heart of the Persian territories, Persia was on the offensive again. In August 626, they attacked the capital together with their allies, the Avars, Slavs and Bulgars. They agreed that the Persians would attack from the east, and the others would attack from the west and the sea. The Byzantine navy was still strong and was able to defeat the enemies' fleet, and then defeat the Persian land forces. The Persians allies were also defeated, which meant that the Persian invasion had failed, and the Persian troops were forced to retreat to Syria. In the autumn of 627, the decisive battle took place in Nineveh, in which the Persian army was completely destroyed. Heraclius continued his victories and at the beginning of the year 628, he occupied Dastagerd, and the final event that halted the fighting was the murder of Chosroes by his own son Kavadh-Siroe in spring 628, and Persia surrendered and asked for terms. By the terms of the peace treaty, Persia abandoned all the conquests that it had made earlier in the second decade of the seventh century. Kavadh-Siroe died within a year. After him, there was complete disorder in the Persian Empire, and during the next four years, there were a dozen kings, including two women. Indeed, within a few years the Persian Empire fell into the hands of the rising Muslim nation. This was also reported in many of the Hadith to have been predicted by Prophet Muhammad, especially after Chosroes II rejected and tore up his letter. The Byzantine Empire on the other hand enjoyed a measure of stability under Heraclius. He recovered the Holy Cross, and travelled to Jerusalem on foot, after a pledge he made (Ostrogorsky 1956: 92-94; Durant nd:296; Jenkins 1966:23-24; Al-Tabari nd: 60). This state of affairs did not last for long as Prophet Muhammad sent armies into Byzantine territory soon after Heraclius received a letter inviting him and his people to Islam while in Aelia (Jerusalem).

Some of the narrations that were mentioned in the Arabic sources conflict with what is found in other historical sources. The main issue mentioned in many of the historical chronicles, such as Ibn-Asakir, is that during the time of the second Caliph Umar, one of the Persian rulers al-Hurmzan accepted Islam, and the Caliph asked him, how did the Romans defeat them, in which al-Hurmzan narrates a story that the Persian commanders turned against

Chosroes and helped Heraclius defeat him, and the Persians to kill him (Ibn Manzur nd:140-142). A similar narration is mentioned in al-Tabari's History, through a different chain of narration, but with the same argument (Al-Tabari nd:152). Other sources show, in contrast to these narrations, that the Persian commanders fought till the last minute.

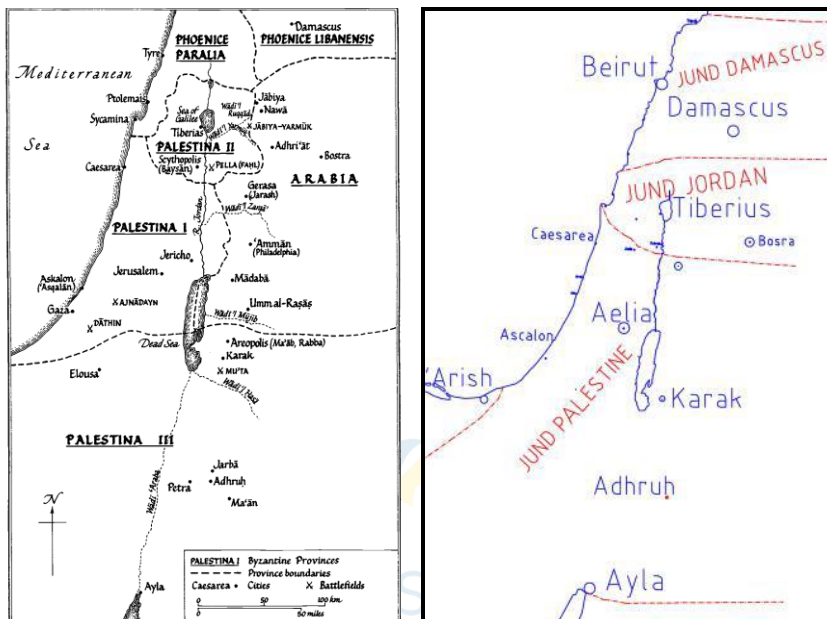
## CONSIDERATIONS

Both exegetical and historical accounts give a number of different possibilities concerning the series of events. Possible locations of the initial Byzantine defeat range across the whole of the Byzantine territories. Moreover, the Quran specifies the terminology *Adna al-Ard*; the exegesis on this brings forth three classical opinions, and one modern interpretation of where this would have taken place:

1. Al-Jazeera, Mesopotamia, the nearest land of the Byzantium to Persia.
2. Adhri'at (Dara'a), the land between Arabia and Syria, and is the nearest land of Byzantium to the Arabs.
3. Jordan and Palestine (The Byzantine provinces of Palaestina I and II).
4. The Dead Sea basin and Jordan Valley (Palaestina I)

Linguistically the second opinion is preferable, especially as the Qur'an was addressing the Makkans, and the land to them is their own, therefore it would be the closest land of the Byzantines to theirs. This is the view of the majority of exegetists and is supported by the line of poetry, which was composed in the pre-Islamic period. These two ancient cities are located in the South of modern Syria, close to the Northern borders of modern Jordan, and are located within the Byzantine Arabia province. Adhri'at has many names, in the Old Testament it is mentioned as Idrā'āi, while Arab geographers call it Adhri'at, and today it is **Daraa** (Map 2). Bostra or Busra is an ancient city and keeps its name until today, only a new part has been added to the name *al-Sham* to distinguish it from Basra in Iraq, therefore it is now known as **Busra al-Sham** in Arabic sources (Map 2).





Map 2: showing the location of Adhrī'at and Bostra and the area of the Dead Sea, within the Byzantine provincial boundaries (left) and the early Muslim provincial *Ajnad* boundaries (right). Source: Kaegi 1992: 48; El-Awaisi 2007:247.

The first and third opinions focus on Mesopotamia as the region that witnessed numerous battles between the Byzantines and Persians. But this seems rather to be in keeping with the victory of the Byzantines over the Persians, especially around 627-628. As for Jordan and Palestine, it is important to note that they do not overlap with the modern areas associated with these names; since boundaries and names of these regions have been altered significantly in the last two centuries. Jordan or al-Urdun in the seventh century Arabic sources refer to Palaestina II, later extended to include parts of the Arabia province and particularly Adhrī'at. Thus when the name al-Urdun is used it can also be in reference to Adhrī'at. As for Palestine or Filistin, it would have referred to mainly Palaestina I and also III, later joined to form *Jund Filistin*. This would have anywhere from the city of Jerusalem to the Dead Sea basin.

As for the fourth opinion, that *adna* means the lowest, there is some logic in the linguistic interpretation of the term. Looking up

some verses in the Qur'an that use the same term, it can be seen that in most cases it means 'nearest' such as verses Quran 53: 8-9, in other verses it means 'less' such as Quran 58:7, and other uses it means 'low' Quran 2: 61 and 7:42. Geologically the Dead Sea and its basin is the lowest area on earth (McColl 2005: 236). The important question here is, did the Persians defeat the Byzantines in that location? Those who use this argument, say the battle happened there, but they do not present any historical evidence of this, they do not give a date or location of where this apparent battle took place. They only refer to a tradition by one companion of the prophet that it was in Bayt al-Maqdis, who differed on the location. Bayt al-Maqdis geographically is not just the city, but rather a whole region, which also includes the Dead Sea and its region (El-Awaisi 2007).

On the issue of the number of years between the Byzantine defeat and victory, the Quranic term *bid'* means few, but according to the majority of scholars, and linguists (Ibn Manzur 1999: Vol 2), it is a number under ten, some have pointed to a certain number, but the opinion that it is any number under ten is stronger.

There are some contradictions with some of the narrations, regarding the wager. It is possible that more than one wager was made. But in one of the traditions mentioned, it is stated that the victory of the Romans took place at the time of the Battle of Badr 624CE, and that Abu-Baker collected the money from Ubayy's inheritors. It should be noted that Ubayy only died after the battle of Uhud 625CE, where he was injured by the prophet and later died. There are two battles in the early period of Islam, Badr I, and Badr II 626. Therefore, what is meant here is not the first battle but the second that happened after the battle of Uhud, since there was a battle around that time in which Heraclius was victorious. But the most decisive one was Nineveh. Yet according to some tradition, it refers to the day of Hudaybiyyah in March 628, which is the time when Chosroes was killed (see table 1). However, news used to take months to travel from one place to the other, which means that the Muslims were happy because of the defeat of the Persians by the Byzantines, unless this was through revelation.

Roman – Persian	Date CE	Date CE	Arabia
Heraclius becomes Emperor	5 <sup>th</sup> October 610	10 <sup>th</sup> August 610	Muhammad becomes Prophet
(P) Antioch, Emesa, Damascus	613	620	13 years Period in Makkah Revelation of Surat al-Rum Night Journey
(P) Jerusalem	614		
(P) Egypt	617		
(B) Start of counter attacks	622	September 622	Migration to Madinah
(B) Dovin, Ganzac	624	March 624	Badr I
(B) Lazisa	626	December 625	Uhud
(P) Constantinople	August 626	January 626	Badr II
(B) Nineveh	December 627	March 627	Battle of the Trench
Chosroes overthrown and killed	March 628	March 628	Treaty of Hdaybiyyah
Battle of Mu'ta	August 629	August 629	Battle of Mu'ta
Battle of Yarmouk	634	634	Battle of Yarmouk

Key: (B) Byzantine victory, (P) Persian victory

Table 1: Comparison between events in the lands of Arabia, Byzantium and Persia.

The above table is not an exhaustive list; it only includes some of the most famous events which can be dated. There were many battles but they are only referred to without dates in the sources available. In some narrations there is reference to seven, in others to nine years. If one identifies the loss of Jerusalem in 614CE as the battle where the Romans were defeated, then it is nine years until 'Badr I', a date beyond which one should not go. But according to al-Suyuti the revelation of these verses was around 621CE, after the Night Journey, which means the victory of the Byzantines was in

the 7<sup>th</sup> year after Hijra. Al-Diyarbakri's account that the revelation of this prophecy was in the eighth year of prophethood 617-618CE would take it up to ten years at the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in 628. Those who then link it to the Muslim victory over the Byzantine add a further seven years for the victory at al-Yarmouk in 634CE. This would support the tradition narrated through Al'ala b. Alzubair al-Kalbi, who narrates from his father to have said (Ibn Manzur nd, Vol1: 143):

I saw the Victory of the Persians over the Romans, and the Victory of the Romans over the Persians, and then I saw the Muslims victorious in Levant and Iraq, and all of this in fifteen years.

This would only be accurate in this calculation, if one takes the fall of Jerusalem as the start of the Quranic prophecy and Badr I as the end of *bid'*, it works out to be the Battle of Mu'ta at fifteen years. Mu'ta was not a victory for the Muslims, rather the Muslims had to retreat from the battle, after their three leaders were killed, and were not welcomed back into Madinah until the prophet said so. Thus al-Kalbi's narration could be referring to the understanding taken by al-Suyuti, which would mean that the revelation of these verses happened around 621CE and the complete victory of the Persians whereas the following seven years saw their utter defeat. The following seven years saw the victories of the Muslims against both the Persians and the Byzantines in both al-Sham and Iraq, thus all under fifteen years. This takes us back to the opinion of al-Razi and al-Alusi, that these verses may have been revealed twice, once in Makkah when the Byzantines were defeated and a second time in Madinah.

As for why the Muslims rejoiced, al-Qurtubi's argument may be partially accepted; being for three reasons, firstly because God has fulfilled his promise, secondly the other promise will soon be fulfilled, which were conquering of Persia and Byzantium, as this only makes both sides weaker, and finally because believers of a Book have defeated idolaters who do not have a revealed book. The idea of rejoicing was also documented in Christian accounts, and this can also be a possibility as they were believers. Chronicon Paschale mentions how all the Christians rejoiced (Kaegi 1992: 26; Whitby 1989: 183);

All Christians praise and give glory and thanks to the One God, greatly rejoicing in His Name. For Chosroes, the haughty enemy of God, has fallen. He has fallen and tumbled into the depths, and his name has been obliterated from the earth. For the impious one who arrogantly and contemptuously spoke injustice against Our Lord Jesus Christ, The True God, and his unblemished Mother our blessed lady the Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary has perished resoundingly. His labor turned against him and his wrongfulness came down on his head.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, if the notion of believers is extended to the believers from the People of the Book, their rejoicing may be part of the Quranic prophecy.

## CONCLUSION

The Byzantine-Persian conflict in the early seventh century received extensive coverage from the bystanders in Arabia. This was part of a heated debate on the outcomes of these wars and to establish legitimacy of the newly emerging religion, which sought to associate itself with previous monotheistic religions. The fulfilment of God's promise of the Byzantine victory was seen as vindicated. The importance of the two holy centres for Muslims, Makkah and Jerusalem may have also played a role. The parallels of Makkah and Jerusalem as al-Tabrasi puts it was part of the Muslims rejoicing over *"the expulsion of the Persians from Bayt al-Maqdis and not for the victory of the Romans as they were infidels"* (al-Tabrasi 2006, vol.8: 35). This, however, contradicts the position of most exegetes who argue that the Byzantines were closer in faith, and stress the importance of the location of this conflict.<sup>7</sup> Modern interpretations also emphasise the event took place in modern day Palestine. To early Muslims, Bayt al-Maqdis was the place that housed Al-Aqsa Mosque, which they were facing in the daily prayers and the location where Prophet Muhammad went on his nocturnal journey as well as being the land of Prophets that the Quran emphasises constantly within its chapters. Hence, this added a further dimension to the interest in this international conflict of the early Muslims.

The classical exegetical literature centuries later tried to emphasise this incident as evidence for the infallibility of the Quran possessing

knowledge of the future. This was achieved by trying to interpret narrations of the event from Arabia together with historical events. Much focus was placed on the story of the wager of Abu-Baker with one of the leaders of Makkah. Moreover, the narrations gave two different time frames to the sequence of events and early exegetes presented the different arguments on the time and place of the event. Modern scholars have not paid the same attention to this and have sometimes selected readings that do not fit the historical narrative. The new genre of *Ijaz Ilmi* or scientific interpretation of the Quran has paved a new understanding of the location of the Byzantine defeat, again with little historical backing.

Following Heraclius' difficult struggle for nearly a decade, which rescued his empire from collapsing; he crowned his victories by walking to Jerusalem on foot to fulfil his pledge. Just as he was coming out from his victories, he was challenged once again, this time from a new rising power. It may have appeared possible to the Muslims, that Heraclius might accept Islam. Initially, Prophet Muhammad wrote to Heraclius inviting him and his people to Islam, with the hope of him acknowledging his Prophethood and thus extending the realm of the Islamic state. The delivery of the letter coincided with Heraclius celebrating his victory in the holy city of Jerusalem. Although the response was relatively positive when compared with that of the Persians, Heraclius did not accept Islam. Each side, with the way the events worked out, would have felt that God is on their side and as Shboul puts it, and the greater the confidence was, *the less avoidable their confrontation became*. Also, when the Byzantines were defeated, the Muslims were a persecuted minority in Makkah. This was reflected in the sympathy of the Muslims towards the Christian Byzantines. Yet, as the Byzantines gained the upper hand, the Muslims were also gaining the upper hand over the polytheists in Makkah. The initial sympathy did not preclude Muslims from viewing the Byzantines as adversaries later on (Shboul 1999: 124).<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Prophet Muhammad launched his first campaign against the Byzantines in Mu'ta and later led the largest army in his life to the borders of Syria, to Tabuk while on his deathbed he was insisting on the launch of the army of Usamah into Byzantine

territory. The news of Muhammad's death was delivered to Heraclius together with the news of the raid of Usamah into southern Palestine (Ibn Saad 1968 vol.4: 67). Following the death of Prophet Muhammad, these campaigns continued and within a couple of years the Muslims were at the gates of Jerusalem and soon to rejoice their victories over both the Byzantines and Persians, bringing their first *Qiblah* into their realm.

This paper has only been a drop in an ocean. Much more could be done, especially through investigating the authenticity of the traditions and contrasting them with the historical narrative, which needs also further investigation based on primary sources. Moreover, the historical geography of the area needs to be studied in order to gain a deeper understanding of what actually took place at this turning point in history.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 The main bulk of this paper was written back in 2002, during my MLitt in Islamic Jerusalem Studies, at the University of Abertay Dundee.
- 2 Nadia Maria El Cheikh has looked at different exegetical sources on this issue; see El Cheikh, N. (1998). *Sūrat Al-Rūm: A Study of the Exegetical Literature*. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118(3), 356-364
- 3 "Fusayl" meaning "baby camel kept from his mother's milk" in order to mock him.
- 4 This was in a discussion between the author and Jabareen while writing his PhD thesis at the University of Aberdeen and was later recorded at some of his lectures.
- 5 This is rejected in more recent secondary literature, for example, Haldon 2009, *Byzantium in the seventh century: The Transformation of a Culture*.
- 6 Whitby gives a different translation: "*And let all we Christians, praising and glorifying, give thanks to the one God, rejoicing with great joy in his holy name. For fallen is the arrogant Chosroes, opponent of God. He is fallen and cast down to the depths of the earth, and his memory is utterly exterminated from earth; he who was exalted and spoke injustice in arrogance and contempt against our Lord Jesus Christ the true God and his undefiled Mother, our blessed Lady, Mother of God and ever-Virgin Mary, perished is the profaner with a resounding noise. His labour has turned back upon his head, and upon his brow has injustice descended.*"
- 7 El Cheikh (1998) argues that these exegeses were influenced by the crusades and thus seeing Christians as infidels was as a result of contemporary events. Thus, trying to reinterpret the verses on the Muslim's rejoicing over a Christian victory and associating it with something else.
- 8 Some exegetical works from the period of the crusade have applied a new numerical methodology in interpreting the Quranic text and have calculated, based on the verses from *Surat al-Rum*, the Muslim victory over the crusaders and the regaining of Jerusalem (Abu-Hayyan 1999, vol.8:374).