Adam J. Silverstein*

Q 30: 2–5 in Near Eastern Context

https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2020-0002

Abstract: This article aims to contextualize a short Qurʾānic passage – Q 30:2–5 – with reference to Jewish and Christian materials that have not hitherto been deployed for this purpose. The article builds on the findings of recent scholarship, which reads this passage eschatologically rather than historically, and argues that there are, in fact, two texts that require contextualization: 1) The Qurʾānic verses themselves (which refer only to the fate of "the Romans"); and 2) The early exegetical traditions on these verses (which often add "the Persians" to the eschatological drama). Furthermore, it is argued that the Biblical book of Daniel, and its interpretation in late antiquity, contributed both to the verses themselves and to their exegesis.

Keywords: Qurʾān, Sūrat al-Rūm, Byzantines, Romans, Persians, Tafsīr, Eschatology, Apocalypse, Book of Daniel, Jewish sources, Talmud

The aim of this article is to offer a selection of pre-Islamic materials that help illuminate a short passage in Q 30 (*Sūrat al-Rūm*).[1] This passage has recently benefited from serious scholarly attention, particularly the studies of Tommaso Tesei and Stephen Shoemaker, whose aim, similarly, was to shed light on the meaning of the verses by contextualizing them with reference to Judeo-Christian sources.[2] In Arberry's translation, the passage reads as follows:

> [2] The Romans have been vanquished
> [3] in the nearer part of the land; and, after their vanquishing, they shall be the victors
> [4] in a few years. To God belongs the Command before and after, and on that day the believers shall rejoice

1 I would like to thank Isaiah Gafni for discussing aspects of this article with me, and Sean Anthony for commenting on an early draft of the article.

2 T. Tesei, "'The Romans will win!': Q 30:2–7 in Light of 7th c. Political Eschatology", *Der Islam* 95.1 (2018): 1–29; S. Shoemaker, "The Reign of God Has Come: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam", *Arabica* 61 (2014): 514–558; S. Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Philadelphia, 2018.

***Corresponding author: Adam Silverstein**, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, adam.silverstein23@gmail.com

> [5] in God's help; God helps whomsoever He will; and He is the All-mighty, the All-compassionate.

The Muslim exegetical tradition generally treated these verses as referring to historical events of the 7th century, specifically the wars between the Byzantine and Sasanid Empires, whose outcome the Qurʾān predicts here (correctly).[3] Hence, the verses have taken on especial importance for their miraculous content: As these are traditionally categorized as "Meccan" verses, there is no way the Qurʾān could have known the eventual outcome of the Byzantine–Sasanid rivalry, which ended in 628, when Heraclius retrieved the relic of the True Cross that the Sasanids had stolen in 614, and a peace treaty was signed between the two sides.

Tesei and Shoemaker have shown that these verses are to be read within the context of early 7th-century Judeo-Christian eschatology. They adduce a number of sources that demonstrate that the Byzantine-Sasanid wars of 602–628 were interpreted apocalyptically and argue that it is within the context of these near-contemporary Jewish and [mainly] Christian texts that our Qurʾānic passage is to be read. There is, in my opinion, little doubt that their work has brought the discussion forward and I will not rehash their arguments in detail here, nor will I requote the passages on which they draw. The following is merely an overlong, unsolicited footnote to their work, building on their impressive findings and complementing them with a selection of hitherto untapped materials.

Tesei and Shoemaker do not agree on all aspects of this passage and, reflecting a dilemma shared with traditional exegetes, they take opposite views on whether the verbs in verses 2–3 are to be read as passive and then active (hence, "they have been vanquished … they shall be the victors") as Tesei and much of the Muslim traditions holds, or active and then passive ("they have vanquished … they shall be defeated"), as an alternative reading has it. Clearly, the meaning of the verses changes dramatically based on which reading one opts for: In the former case (passive–active), the Byzantines will eventually emerge victorious; in the latter case, despite their early triumphs, the Byzantines will eventually be defeated (by the Muslim armies). In either way, the Meccan verses are prophesying something that happens in a later period; from a traditional, Muslim perspective, then, the miracle is retained regardless of the vocalization of the verbs. For modern, Western scholarship, however, a historical contextualization of the passage requires choosing one reading (and its resulting contex-

3 N. M. El-Cheikh, "*Sūrat al-Rūm*: A Study of the Exegetical Literature", *JAOS* 118 (1998): 356–64.

tualization) over the other. As stated, Tesei and Shoemaker choose different readings.

Adopting the eschatological reading of these verses does help answer some questions that can arise from a plain reading of the verses: Why, if the Byzantines are eventually to be victorious (reading, as the majority of Muslim exegetes did, the initial verb as a passive), will the Muslims ("the believers" of verse 4) rejoice? Muslim tradition answers this question by depicting a situation in which the Byzantine-Sasanid rivalry was being followed by the pagan Meccans and the monotheist Muslims in Arabia; the Meccans siding with the dualist Sasanids, the Muslims with the Christian Byzantines. However, the wars of 602–628 were not a sporting match that Arabians could watch from a Hijazi stadium, rooting for their team and rejoicing when it won. Tesei, therefore, argues that the verses reflect Byzantine-Christian eschatological texts that were transmitted by Arab allies of the Byzantines who joined the nascent Muslim community as it expanded in eschatologically-imbued conquests. The words "on that day the believers will rejoice", according to his argument, do not refer to the Byzantines' victory against the Sasanids, but rather to the rejoicing of Muslims with the advent of the *eschaton* that will shortly follow the Byzantines' victory. Support for this comes from the phrase "on that day" (*yawma'idhin*), which has an eschatological connotation elsewhere in the Qurʾān.

While solving some questions about these verses, this reading creates others. First, as both Tesei and Shoemaker admit (unapologetically),[4] reading the verses through the prism of Christian texts that postdate the 628 victory over the Sasanids requires us to abandon the "Meccan" *chronology* that both Muslim tradition and Nöldeke-Schwally assign to these verses. Second, the reference to "the nearer part of the land" in verse 3 convinces Tesei and Shoemaker that we must abandon the "Meccan" *geography* that is assigned to these verses. In fact, even a "Medinan" time and place of revelation would not explain why Greater Syria (or, more specifically, the Holy Land or Jerusalem) would be deemed "near" for the Qurʾān's author: When – following the exegetical tradition – Jerusalem is alluded to in the Qurʾān (Q 17:1), its mosque is specifically qualified by the term

4 Shoemaker 2018, 152: "One suspects that a longstanding prejudice … that the entire Quran must be assigned to Muhammad is at least to some degree responsible for the traditional version's favor in much scholarship. Nevertheless, it is long past time that scholarship should dispense with the encumbrance of this dogmatic fossil, leaving open the possibility that this passage (Q 30:2ff. – AS), as well as others, may in fact have originated within the community of the Believers even after Muhammad's death." Tesei 2018, 26: "Let me conclude by emphasizing that the dating, contextualization and reading of the prophecy in Q 30 proposed in this study imply a revision of the historical circumstances usually assumed for the genesis of the Quranic text."

"the *remotest*"; it seems unlikely that the same city in our passage would be qualified by the word "nearest." Thus, in their view, we must assume that these verses came from somewhere to the north of the Hijaz. In other words, their solution to the relatively minor question of this passage's meaning requires us to abandon received wisdom regarding the time and place of the Qurʾān's emergence. This strikes me as something of a false economy.

Two more aspects of Tesei's and Shoemaker's readings provoke questions. First, having rejected the entire traditional framework of the Qurʾān's emergence that the exegetical literature provides, why do they follow the traditional sources in assuming the Persians are relevant to these verses?[5] To be sure, they have indeed identified 7th-century texts that relate to the Byzantine-Sasanid rivalry in eschatological terms, but these texts are only important if the Sasanid Persians are involved in the events, and it is the *tafsīr* tradition rather than the Qurʾān itself that mentions them altogether.

Second, and more crucially in my mind, is an implication that both scholars make about the Qurʾān's message, namely that the Qurʾān must merely be relating another culture's materials (in Arabic), rather than engaging critically with these materials and tweaking their contents. In other words, Tesei and Shoemaker have identified Christian apocalyptic texts from the Byzantine Empire that bear similarities with Q 30:2–5 (and its exegesis), and have thus read these verses in light of the non-Muslim texts. Can it not be the case that the Qurʾān is disputing what Jews and Christians were saying about "Rome's" fate and the End of Times? After all, despite announcing repeatedly that it is a confirmation in the Arabic language of previous scriptures, the Qurʾān frequently and consciously takes issue with Jewish and Christian ideas.

Thus, while Tesei and Shoemaker have undeniably advanced our understanding of this short passage by drawing our attention to its eschatological context and undertones, these advances have come at a high cost: We are forced to assume that the Qurʾān did not emerge where or when Tradition (and much of Western scholarship) believes it to have emerged, and that it must merely be transmitting in Arabic the ideas of others. And even if we accept these costs, we

5 Another, recent treatment of this topic (D. A. Beck, "Anti-Sasanian Apocalypse and the Early Quran: Why Muḥammad Began his Career as a Prophet who Genuinely Prophesied", Forthcoming) takes a similarly "revisionist" approach to the Qurʾān and the exegetical tradition, yet assumes – with the exegetes – that the passage must be about the Roman-Persian rivalry: "Q 30:2–4 proclaims that the Romans have been defeated in a nearby land, but will later prevail against an unnamed enemy, which is certainly the Sasanian Empire under Khusrow II (reigned 590–628 CE)."

are still left unsure about the passage's actual meaning, as Tesei and Shoemaker opt for contrasting readings of the crucial verbs.

Rehabilitating the traditional historical framework

There is a way to accept Tesei's and Shoemaker's postulate that the context of Q 30:2–5 is eschatological, while retaining the broad contours of the traditional narrative of Islam's origins. Rather than seeing the verses as referring to Byzantine-Sasanid rivalries in the Holy Land of the 7th century, we can turn to political events in South Arabia from the second half of the 6th century, where the two empires fought proxy wars in Yemen and its environs.[6] Aside from the fact that relocating the verses' focus in this way allows us to retain a Meccan periodization for the *sūrah* and does away with the need to reimagine the geographical context of the Qurʾān's emergence, there are two reasons to privilege a 6th century South Arabian context for these verses.

First, other *Sūrah*s appear to refer to South Arabian events of the 6th century, namely Q 85:4–7 (the episode of *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*, which the exegetes generally relate to the martyrdom of Christians at Najrān, ca. 523 CE) and Q 105 (which the exegetes relate to Abraha's plan to use an elephant to attack Mecca, in ca. 570 CE). Moreover, according to the *Sīrah*, when the Meccan pagans threatened the early Muslims the latter chose to flee in a "Hijrah" *southwards*, to Ethiopia,[7] rather than northwards, to Greater Syria. It would appear that in the Meccan period the nascent Muslim *ummah* was "oriented" (for lack of a better word) to the south rather than to the north.

Second, some of the 7th century apocalyptic sources that have been adduced in contextualizing Q 30:2–5 may in fact date to the 6th century. *Sefer Zerubbabel*, for instance, is generally thought to date to the 630 s, although Newman has forcefully argued for a 6th-century dating, which even those who prefer the tra-

6 The classic work on the political events in 6th century Arabia is S. Smith, "Events in Arabia in the Sixth Century A. D.", *BSOAS* 16iii (1954): 425–468. See now also G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*, Cambridge Mass., 2017; idem, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*, Oxford, 2013; and Ch. J. Robin's numerous studies on pre-Islamic Yemen.

7 Note also that the Ethiopian Christian rulers in the fifth century CE advertised themselves as the "new Constantines," claiming for themselves Byzantine imperial discourse (A. Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2011, 4).

ditional, 7th-century option have not rejected out of hand.[8] Similarly, chapters 34–37 of the *Pesiqta Rabbati* (to which I return below) are generally attributed to the 630s, but here too there are those who see the text as a 6th century work.[9] Both of these sources include prognostications about the Rome–Persia rivalry that will precede the messianic era, and are therefore pivotal to the Tesei–Shoemaker contextualization. Even more significantly, perhaps, is the fact that the Syriac *Alexander Legend*, which Reinink (followed by Tesei, and most others) dates to ca. 630, and which is deemed to be of direct relevance to both Q 18:83–102 and Q 30:2–5, may in fact originate in the early 6th century, a theory that Shoemaker himself has vigorously argued for.[10]

In other words, there was a Roman–Persian rivalry in a land "nearer" than Greater Syria,[11] and in a period that predates the traditional chronological limits of the Qurʾān's emergence, and which spurned Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings. Moreover, there are precedents for records or recollections of 6th century South Arabian events finding their way into the Meccan *Sūrah*s of the Qurʾān. We may thus accept Tesei's and Shoemaker's arguments without rejecting received wisdom about the earliest decades of Islamic history.[12]

And yet, this solution, too, is problematic. Most scholars do prefer an early 7th-century dating for *Sefer Zerubbabel*, and as the most relevant passage in *Pesiqta Rabbati* refers to the Arabs as joining the fighting between Rome and Persia, we must, following Bamberger and Schäfer, place at least this passage

8 A 6th century date for *Sefer Zerubbabel* is argued in H.I. Newman, "Dating Sefer Zerubavel. Dehistoricizing and Rehistoricizing a Jewish Apocalypse of late Antiquity", *Adamantius* 19 (2013): 324–336. M. Himmelfarb (*Jewish Messiahs in a Christian Empire*, Cambridge Mass., 2017, 31–34), argues for a 7th century dating but accepts the possibility that Newman is correct.

9 For a 7th century dating, see B. J. Bamberger, "A Messianic Document of the Seventh Century" *HUCA* 15 (1940): 425–431, and P. Schäfer, "Die messianischen Hoffnungen des rabbinischen Judentums zwischen Naherwartung und religiösem Pragmatismus," in Cl. Thoma, ed., *Zukunft in der Gegenwart* (Bern-Frankfurt a.M., 1976), 96–125. For the earlier dating see R. Ulmer, "The Contours of the Messiah in *Pesiqta Rabbati*", *Harvard Theological Review* 106 (2013): 115–144, who see several distinct stages in the composition of this work, beginning in the first century, and with the "core" of the work dating from *the 5th and 6th centuries*. See also Himmelfarb 2017, 184–185 n. 1.

10 Shoemaker 2018, 83.

11 Admittedly, South Arabia is only slightly "nearer" to the Hijaz than Greater Syria is. But, as mentioned, the first Hijrah to Ethiopia, and the [possible] references to Najrān and Abraha, indicate that ideationally South Arabia was nearer for Meccans than Syria was.

12 To clarify, I do not insist that the Traditional account of the Qurʾān's history or the rise of Islam more generally is to be followed dogmatically, regardless of the evidence. I simply do not see the point in privileging interpretations of Qurʾānic materials that contradict the Traditional account if there are equally plausible interpretations that allow us to retain it.

in the 7th century too. The same goes for the Syriac *Alexander Legend* and *Alexander Poem* (which was influenced by the former text). Moreover, recent scholars have argued (convincingly, in my view) that neither does Q 105 refer to Abraha's elephant[13] nor does Q 85 refer to the Martyrs of Najrān.[14] Our two historical precedents for the influence of 6th century, South Arabian events on Meccan *Sūrah*s are, therefore, inadmissible as evidence in this case. In fact, the recent studies of Q 85 and Q 105 read much earlier, Second-Temple Jewish sources (such as the *2* and *3 Maccabees*, *1 Enoch*, *Daniel*, and others) into the Meccan passages. It will be argued below that Q 30:2–5 may be illuminated with recourse to just such materials as well as other sources that they spawned in late antiquity.

In what follows, I do two things. First, I draw attention to those ancient and late antique materials on the Rome-Persia rivalry that I believe underpin the *tafsīr* traditions to Q 30:2–5, and may also relate to the Qurʾān verses themselves. Second, I focus on the ancient and late antique materials that focus on Rome's role in the *eschaton*, materials that I deem to be indispensable to our understanding of Q 30:2–5, this being a passage that – as stated at the outset – focuses on "Rome" to the exclusion of Persia or the Sasanids.

Contextualizing the *tafsīr* traditions: The *Daniel*-ic materials

Most, if not all, of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic materials that have been deployed in seeking to contextualize our passage have their ultimate origins in the Biblical book of Daniel (hereafter: *Daniel*).[15] It is generally recognized that *Daniel* is divided into two halves, with different contents, authors, and provenances. Chapters 1–6 comprise of a series of Near Eastern court tales, set in ancient Babylonia or Achaemenid Iran. Although, in their current form, the tales date to the mid-second century BCE, they have been shown to derive from considerably older materials – ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, and

13 D. Beck, "Maccabees not Mecca: The Biblical Subtext and the Apocalyptic Context of *Sūrat al-Fīl* (Q 105)" (Forthcoming).

14 A. J. Silverstein "Who are the *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd*? Q 85:4–10 in Near Eastern context", *Der Islam* 96.2 (2019): 281–323.

15 J. C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader*, Atlanta, 2005, 12–13, explains that the Four Kingdoms scheme found in *Daniel* 2, 7, and 8, "forms the textual basis for its subsequent elaboration in both the Jewish and Christian interpretative traditions…"

others.[16] Chapters 7–12, by contrast, comprise of a series of apocalyptic visions and their interpretation. From internal evidence, it has been shown that these chapters originate in Judea of the 160 s BCE. Much of what interests us in *Daniel* is also what interested late antique Jews and Christians, namely the visions contained in the latter half of the book: Although already chapter 2 deals with the unfolding of political history, with predictions about the rise and fall of four kingdoms, it is in chapters 7–12 that we find more direct references to the sort of prophecy that informed the imperial apocalypses discussed here. Curiously, *Daniel* contain ideas and language that we encounter in the Qurʾān, such as the notion that prophecy has a "seal" (*Daniel* 9:24, where the Hebrew term employed is a cognate of the Arabic *khātam*),[17] that it is the angel Gabriel who communicates with God's messenger (*Daniel* 8:16), and that God is referred to as *al-ḥayy al-qayyūm* (Q 2:255; cf. *Daniel* 6:27, where God is *ḥay we-qayyām*),[18] none of which occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and there is other evidence that the stories from chapters 1–6 left their mark on the Qurʾān's contents.[19]

Chapter 7, echoing chapter 2, deals with the theory of the Four Kingdoms (represented by beasts from the sea) that will sequentially rule the world, followed by the End of Times and the messianic era. It should be stressed that in late antiquity both Jewish and Christian authors came to see Rome as the fourth and final kingdom[20] (or, in some cases, as a special, fifth kingdom).[21]

---

16 T. L. Holm, *Of Courtiers and Kings: The Biblical Daniel Narratives and Ancient Story Collections*, Winona Lake, Ind., 2013; P. A. Beaulieu, "The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3", *JBL* 128 (2009): 289–306; and S. M. Paul, "The Mesopotamian Background of Daniel 1–6", in J. J. Collins, ed., *The Book of Daniel, Volume 1: Composition and Reception*, Leiden, 2014, 55–68.

17 U. Rubin, "The Seal of the Prophets and the Finality of Prophecy: On the Interpretation of the Quranic Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33)", *ZDMG* 164i (2014): 65–96, at 91–92; and H. Bobzin, "'The Seal of the Prophets': Towards an Understanding of Muhammad's Prophethood", In A. Neuwirth and N. M. Marx, eds., *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, Leiden, 2010, 576–577.

18 G. S. Reynolds, *The Qurʾan and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, New Haven, 2018, 99 *ad* Q 2:255.

19 A. Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 152–153; A. J. Silverstein, "Unmasking *maskh*: The transformation of Jews into "apes, driven away" (Quran 7:166) in Near Eastern context", *JSAI* (Forthcoming); etc.

20 The classic treatment of this topic is J. W. Swain, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire", *CP* 35 (1940): 1–21. See also N. Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict*, Leiden, 1994, 205 ff. ("The Four Kingdoms in Jewish Interpretation").

21 Particularly important in this context is the fact that *Daniel*'s naming of "Greece" as the rival to "Persia" could be seen as referring to Byzantium/Rome, thereby unlocking the potential of

Chapter 8 contains the vision of "the Ram and the Goat," in which a ram with two horns (representing Media and Persia; v. 20) spreads through conquest only to be defeated by a goat from the west (representing Greece; v. 21). The goat's horn then breaks into four smaller horns, and a particularly evil ruler ("horn") desecrates the Temple (v. 11), halting sacrifices for 2300 mornings and evenings, after which the Temple is cleansed. As there were two daily sacrifices in the Temple, the disruption of the sacrifices lasted 1150 days, or just over three years.

What we have here, in other words, is a rivalry between "Persia" and "the Greeks," with a period of a "few" years during which things hit rock bottom for Jews and their Temple, only for sacrifices to be restored. We shall see below that in late antiquity the rabbis interpreted the ram as the Persian empire and the goat as the Roman one, and that the description of the evil ruler as being "of fierce countenance" (*ʿaz panīm*, v. 23) will recur in 6th- or 7th-century Jewish apocalypses.

Chapter 9 contains the vision of "seventy weeks," which deals with Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews will suffer 70 years of Temple-less subjugation (*Jeremiah* 25:11 and 29:10). In *Daniel*, Gabriel explains that the "70 years" mentioned by Jeremiah are, actually, 70 "weeks of years," that is to say, 490 years.

In chapter 10, we learn that there are heavenly representatives of each earthly power, and these angels play a role in determining the fates of their imperial representatives. The chapter refers to the angel (lit. "prince," *sar*) of Persia replacing or detaining the angel who was sent to Daniel (presumed to be Gabriel, based on chapters 8–9). The angel of the Persians managed to detain Gabriel for 3 weeks (v. 13), until the angel of the Greeks managed to take over (v. 20). Here, too, we have a Persian-Greek imperial rivalry, with the added details that the earthly events are merely reflecting Heavenly ones, and that the Persians manage to dominate only temporarily, for a period of "three weeks." While admittedly the text makes it clear that the Persians dominated for three weeks rather than three years, both the evidence of the previous chapter (where *Jeremiah*'s "70 years" became *Daniel*'s "70 weeks of years") and the fact that in both *Daniel* 8 and 12 (as we shall see), a period of three years or so is specified, we might cautiously wonder whether some read the "three weeks" here as "three weeks of years". In fact, Khusrō II's prophecy about the future Byzantine-Sasanid war, as recounted

Daniel's visions for those in late antiquity who wished to read their own reality into the visions of Daniel. The Syriac *Alexander Legend*, so pivotal to the eschatological contextualization of Q 30:2–5, clearly states, "so shall the power of the kingdoms melt away before the might of the kingdom of the Greeks, which is that of the Romans…" (in Shoemaker 2018, 84; emphasis mine).

by Theophylact Simocatta, specifies that the Persians (lit. "Babylonians") will dominate the Romans for just such a period:

> Be assured that troubles will flow back in turn against your Romans. The Babylonian race will hold the Roman state in its power for a *threefold cyclic hebdomad of years*. Thereafter, you Romans will enslave Persians for a fifth hebdomad of years. When these very things have been accomplished, the day without evening will dwell among mortals and the expected fate will achieve power...[22] (Emphasis mine.)

This passage, which is central to Tesei's and Shoemaker's arguments, has exercised modern historians, who have sought to fit the 21-year period mentioned into the scheme of Byzantine-Sasanid wars of the late-6th and early-7th century: Some calculated that the period started in 603/4, in which case it ended in 624/5; other suggested 591–612 as the relevant years. But, as Shoemaker states, none of the options proposed fit the historical events.[23] In my view, the reason the years do not add up is that they are topological rather than literal, reflecting a period of "three weeks of years" during which the Persians will temporarily hold the Romans/Greeks in their power, as a conscious echo (fulfilment?) of *Daniel*-ic language and ideas.

Chapter 11 of *Daniel* continues with the Persian-Greek rivalry (v. 2), including a rivalry between kings of the south and the north, the latter of which will desecrate the Temple and abolish sacrifices (cf. *Daniel* 8 and 12). Finally, in chapter 12, the End of Times is described, beginning with a period of enormous distress, from which those from Daniel's nation who are righteous (lit. "inscribed in the book," v. 1) will be delivered.[24] There will be a resurrection of the dead, reward (for the righteous) and punishment (for the wrongdoers), and the time remaining until the End is revealed to Daniel: For 1290 days the Temple rituals will be interrupted (v. 11), and whosoever perseveres until 1335 days are over will rejoice (v. 12).

To summarize thus far: It is clear that *Daniel* (particularly chapters 7–12) contains all of the elements found in Q 30:2–5, as it was understood by Muslim exegetes: We have a rivalry between Persia and Greece/Rome, a temporary period – of three weeks (chapter 10) or three to four years (chapter 8) – during which the Persians will manage to usurp power, only for the Greek empire to replace them, or a temporary period – of just over 3 years – during which the Temple will be unusable by the Jews (chapter 12). The End of Times will entail a period of just

22 Shoemaker 2018, 76; and Tesei 2018, 7.

23 Shoemaker 2018, 77–78.

24 Note that *Daniel* 12 opens with the words ובעת ההיא, this being a Biblical Hebrew equivalent of Q 30:4's *yawma'idhin*.

over three years during which religious observance will be hindered, but after which believers (those who survive the chaos) will rejoice.

Crucially, the contents of *Daniel* 7–12 continued to inform both Jewish and Christian authors in late antiquity.[25] For example, the 7th century apocalypse, *Sefer Eliyahu*, on which both Tesei and Shoemaker draw in their contextualization of Q 30:2–5, tells us that:

> The last king who rules Persia shall come up against the Romans three successive years until he expands [his gains] against them for twelve months...On the twentieth [day] of Nisan, a king shall come up from the west, ravaging and horrifying the world. He shall encroach upon *'the holy beautiful mountain' (Daniel 11:45)* and burn it. Most cursed among women is the woman who gave birth to him: *that is 'the horn' that Daniel foresaw, and that day will be one of torment and battle against Israel*.[26] (Emphasis mine.)

Similarly, in the Babylonian Talmud we find numerous references to the fact that the rabbis in Sasanid Iraq related the *Daniel*-ic materials to their own situation.[27] It is to the Talmudic evidence that we now turn.

Contextualizing the *tafsīr* traditions: The Talmudic materials

Even disregarding *Daniel*, the rivalry between Persia and Rome was a natural concern and topic of discussion for Jewish late antiquity. The assumption amongst [many] Jews in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam is that all Jewish people lived either under Roman or Persian rule. A good illustration of this comes from the fifth- or sixth-century *3 Enoch*, where we are told that,

> Every day Satan is sitting, together with Sammael, the Prince of Rome, and with Dubbiel, the Prince of Persia, and they write the iniquities of Israel on writing tables which they hand over to the Seraphim, in order that they may present them before the Holy One, blessed be He, so that He may destroy Israel from the world. But the Seraphim know from

25 For the Christian evidence, see Shoemaker 2014, 540 ff. The Talmudic evidence will be discussed below.

26 Reeves 2005, 33; quoted in Tesei 2018, 8; deployed in Shoemaker 2014, 551; and Shoemaker 2018, 92–94 and 96.

27 E. g. *Avodah Zarah* 2a-b; *Yoma* 77a; *Yoma* 10a. See generally, R. Raviv, "The Talmudic Formulation of the Prophecies of the Four Kingdoms in the Book of Daniel" *JSIJ* 5 (2006): 1–20 (in Hebrew).

> the secrets of the Holy One, blessed be He, that he desires not, that this people Israel should perish.[28]

As seen already in *Daniel* 10, the empires had Heavenly representatives, and here it is only the representatives of Rome and Persia who "write the iniquities of Israel" down for God's consideration. In an interesting Talmudic passage (*Yoma* 77a), *Daniel* 10 is quoted, while the "angel" of Persia, who is anonymous in *Daniel*, is referred to by the rabbis as "Dubbiel." Not only does Dubbiel (and his Persian nation) take control of Gabriel (and his western lands) for 21 days, but the rabbis add that Dubbiel was given 21 "kings" to rule his lands (as well as a seaport). The addition of this seemingly incidental detail brings the *Daniel* text into line with Sasanid geographical realities, as the division of Persian lands into 21 regions continued to be reflected in the "Balkhī" school of cartography, which represented pre-Islamic Iranian geographical traditions and produced an atlas of 21 annotated maps.[29]

The division of the world's Jewry into Persian ("Babylonian") and Roman ("Land of Israel") was expressed in other ways too, as the respective empires had Talmudic academies that were often in open competition with each other for primacy and prestige. Thus, the Babylonian rabbis formalized their superiority through the concept of "Babylonian of Pure Lineage." The idea was that the Roman authorities interfered in the lives and religious activities of their Jewish subjects to such an extent that "pure" Judaism could not be maintained there, and it is the Babylonian rabbis who preserved the untainted tradition.[30] The superiority complex had practical implications ("inter"-marriage with "Land of Israel" Jews was discouraged, for instance), but also symbolic ones: The idea of a brain-drain of Babylonian Talmudist to the Land of Israel academies was so outlandish that it was deemed to be a sign of the Messiah's imminence. As the 3rd-century scholar Rabbi Abba b. Kahana is quoted as having put it, "If you see benches in the Land of Israel filled with Babylonians, you may expect [to hear]

28 H. Odeberg, ed./trans., *3 Enoch or The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, Cambridge, 1928, 26.12.

29 G. R. Tibbetts, "The Balkhī School of Geographers," in J.B. Harley and D. Woodward, eds., *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, part 1*, Chicago, 1992, 108–155 at 114.

30 See A. Oppenheimer, "Purity of Lineage in Talmudic Babylonia," in *Manières de penser dans l'Antiquité méditerranéenne et orientale*, Leiden, 2009, 145–156; idem, "The Genealogical Boundaries of Jewish Babylonia, *Zion* 50 (1985): 173–187; and, most recently, G. Herman, "Babylonia of Pure Lineage: Notes on Babylonian Jewish Toponymy," in M. Piotrkowski, G. Herman and S. Doenitz, eds., *Sources and Interpretation in Ancient Judaism: Studies for Tal Ilan at Sixty*, Leiden, 2018, 191–228.

footsteps of the Messiah."[31] Jewish scholars thus saw their own world as divided between Persia and Rome, with their own micro-version of the imperial rivalry. What Abba b. Kahana's statement demonstrates is how quickly even this "academic" rivalry could accrue an eschatological flavoring.

More interesting for our purposes is the evidence that the Talmudic rabbis were well aware of the imperial rivalry itself and its potential apocalyptic resonances. Two passages, one from *Avodah Zarah* (2a–b) and the other from *Yoma* (10a), are worthy of our close attention in this regard.

The discussion in *Avodah Zarah* begins with exegesis of *Isaiah* 43:9: "All the nations are gathered together, and the peoples are assembled; who among them can declare this, and announce to us former things? Let them bring their witnesses, that they may be justified; and let them hear, and say: 'It is truth'." The rabbis explain that, in the End of Times, God will demand that each empire proves itself deserving of reward for promoting Torah study, and that the Roman Empire will enter into God's presence first, basing this on *Daniel* 7:23 and equating the Romans with the fourth kingdom. We are then told that God will ask the Romans what they have done to deserve the reward. Their claim – that their various building projects were undertaken to help encourage Torah study – will be rejected and the Romans will leave God's presence disappointed. Whereas in *Daniel* 12 at the End of Times the righteous will be judged and will rejoice, here the Romans at the End of Times will be judged and will emerge disappointed.

The Talmud then states: "The Roman Empire leaves and the Persian Empire will enter after it. What is the reason [that the Persians are second]? [It is] that after [the Romans, come the Persians] in importance. As it is written: 'And behold another beast, a second, like a bear' (*Daniel* 7:5). And Rabbi Yosef teaches: These are the Persians, as they eat and drink as a bear, and they are fleshy like a bear, and they grow hair as a bear, and they never rest, like a bear."[32] Here, again, God will ask them what their claim is, and they, too, will stress their building and other activities and claim that they aimed at promoting Torah study. God will object that they too did all this for their own purposes. The Persians will also leave disappointed.

---

31 *Lamentations Rabbah* 1:43. This text is commonly thought to date to the 6th century. It is perhaps relevant that Rabbi Abba b. Kahana himself had made the transition from Babylonia to the Land of Israel.

32 The equation of the Persians with "bears" is also hinted at in the name of the Persians' guardian angel, "Dubbiel" (lit. "the bear of God"). Note, however, that in Syriac traditions on *Daniel*, the "bear" was equated with the Medians, whereas "Persia" was compared to a panther (see K. D. Jenner, "Syriac Daniel," in J. J. Collins and P. W. Flint, eds., *The Book of Daniel, Volume 2: Composition and Reception*, Leiden, 2014, 608–637 at 633.

Following this, the Talmud asks: "But once the Persian Empire sees that the Roman Empire is completely ineffective, what is the reason [that they] come forward [with the same arguments]? [The Talmud answers] They say that [the Romans] destroyed the Temple and we built it."

The Talmud continues that other nations will come forward and go through the same motions, with the same result. Naturally, the rabbis wonder why they bother to do so, but it is a different question that puzzles them even more: The rabbis ask: "What is different about these [two empires] which were singled out [by name], and what is different about those [other, subsequent empires that approached God] that were not singled out [by name]? [The Talmud answers] *Because these (Rome and Persia), their kingship extends until the coming of the Messiah*." (Emphasis mine.)

This extended discussion is relevant for our purposes in three ways. First, it demonstrates the endurance of *Daniel*'s influence on the worldview of Jews in late antiquity. Second, it contrasts the Persians, famous amongst the rabbis for aiding in the construction of the Temple (under Cyrus), with the Romans, infamous amongst the rabbis for their destruction of the Temple (more on this below). Third, the Roman and Persian Empires are assumed by the rabbis to be the two powers that will survive until the messianic era. This tallies with Tesei's and Shoemaker's interpretation of [the *tafsīr* traditions on] Q 30:2–5: Either the Romans will defeat the Persians or vice versa, followed by the *eschaton*.

The second Talmudic discussion, in *Yoma* 10a, is perhaps even more closely related to Q 30:2–5 and its exegesis. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said [that] Rabbi [Yehudah ha-Nasi] said:

> "Rome is destined to fall into the hands of Persia, as it is stated: 'Now hear the plan that the Lord has devised for Edom, and the thoughts He has considered for the resident of Tayman. Surely the youngest of the flock will drag them away, surely their habitation will be appalled due to them.' (*Jeremiah* 49:20)." Rabba bar Ulla strongly objected to this. "Where[from] is it inferred that this [phrase] 'Youngest of the flock' is Persia? It is as it is written, 'The ram that you saw sporting two horns are the kings of Media and Persia' (*Daniel* 8:20), [and the ram is a member of the flock]. [And yet, how is that proof?] And say [perhaps, instead, that the 'youngest of the flock'] refers to Greece, as it is written, 'The goat is the king of Greece' (*Daniel* 8:21)."

Here, we have a *prediction* that Persians will defeat the Romans, based on *Scriptural* interpretation, with answers coming particularly from *Daniel* 8. The discussion about the precise interpretation of the Biblical verses continues:

> When Rabbi Ḥaviva b. Surmaqei ascended [from Babylonia to the land of Israel], he stated [this difficulty] before a certain one of the Sages. [He] said to him: "One who does not know how to interpret verses raises an objection to the opinion of the great Rabbi [Yehudah

> Ha-Nasi]? What is 'The youngest of the flock'? [It means] the youngest of the brothers [hence, a reference to Persia], as Rabbi Yosef taught, 'Tiras, [the youngest of Japheth's sons], that is Persia'."

In this passage, more scriptural proof is given for the prognostications about relations between Rome and Persia. Another rabbinic opinion is then brought, which confirms the prognostication (that Rome will be defeated by Persia) but arrives at it through logical inference:

> Rabba bar Ḥanah said [that] Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Elai: Rome is destined to fall into the hands of Persia. [This is derived by means of] an *a fortiori* [inference]: Just as the First Temple, that the descendants of Shem built it and the Chaldeans destroyed it, [and in turn] the Chaldeans fell to Persians, the Second Temple, that the Persians built it and the Romans destroyed it, is it not right that the Romans will fall into the hands of the Persians?

Thus far, we have the rabbis agreeing on the eventual outcome of the imperial rivalry (Persia will win), having reached the conclusion through different methodologies. Now, the discussion turns to an alternative opinion regarding the Rome-Persia rivalry, in a short passage that bears striking resemblance to Q 30:2–5 (as these verses are refracted through the exegetes' lens):

> [In contrast], Rav said: Persia is destined to fall into the hands of Rome. Rabbi Kahanah and Rabbi Asi, said to Rav: The builders [will fall] into the hands of the destroyers? [Is that justice?] He said to them: Yes, that is the King's decree (גזירת מלך היא). Some say that he said to them: They, too, are destroyers of synagogues (and are thus no better than the Romans).

The point of view attributed to "Rav" here is even more interesting to us than it might seem at first glance.[33] Recent scholars have demonstrated that the second reason for the Persian's future defeat at the hands of the Romans (namely, that the Persians, too, are synagogue-destroyers), is a later interpolation.[34] Rav's statement is thus pared down to just two parts: First, he predicts that Rome will defeat Persia; then – to explain why this should be allowed to happen despite Persia's fame as the Temple's builders and Rome's infamy as its destroyers – he explains that this will happen simply because it is a decree of God. Put another way, Rav is saying, "Rome will defeat Persia, because God said so." Returning to

33 On this discussion in general, see I. Gafni, "Concepts of Periodization and Causality in Talmudic Literature," *Jewish History* 10i (1996): 21–38 at 27.

34 R. Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine*, Oxford, 2006, 122–129.

Q 30:2–5, we find that this is precisely the message conveyed by the verses, which I requote, highlighting the points of overlap with Rav's statements:

> [2] *The Romans* have been vanquished
> [3] in the nearer part of the land; and, after their vanquishing, they *shall be the victors*
> [4] in a few years. *To God belongs the Command* before and after, and on that day the believers shall rejoice
> [5] in God's help; *God helps whomsoever He will;* and He is the All-mighty, the All-compassionate.

The Talmudic phrase "the King's decree" parallels the Qurʾān's "to God belongs the Command" (*lillāh al-amr*). Shoemaker has argued that *amr* in this context refers to God's "reign," conforming to his eschatological reading of the verses,[35] but this seems to me to be an over reading of the phrase, bearing in mind the closer, more literal Talmudic parallel. In fact, the Talmudic prognostications about the Rome-Persia rivalry end with another statement attributed to Rav, which implies that the apocalyptic associations of this topic that Tesei and Shoemaker argue for were already on the minds of the Talmudic rabbis:

> That was also taught [in a *baraita*]: Persia is destined to fall into the hands of Rome. ...[36] [I]t is the King's decree that the builders [will fall] into the hands of the destroyers, as Rabbi Yehudah said that Rav said: The son of David will come only when the wicked kingdom of Rome spreads [its dominance] throughout the world for nine months, as it is stated: "Therefore He will give them up until she who is to bear has borne; then the remnants of his brethren will return with the children of Israel" (*Micah* 5:2).

Again, the Talmud quotes Rav's statement that Rome will come to defeat the Persians because such an outcome is God's decree, but this time it adds another statement attributed to him, to the effect that Rome's [temporary] triumph is a prerequisite for the advent of the messiah ("the son of David").

A number of points emerge from the foregoing survey of Talmudic materials. First, and least obvious of all to the non-specialist, is how *early* the Talmudic statements regarding Rome and Persia are. "Rav" (full name: Abba b. Aybo; 175–247 CE) was a 3rd-century *Amora*; Yehudah ha-Nasi (135–217 CE) was a *Tanna* active in the late-2nd century. While their statements are recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, redacted ca. 500 CE, it is clear that prognostications about the Rome–Persia rivalry and its relevance to Jews and the End of Times were circulat-

35 Shoemaker 2018, 151.

36 I have removed the statement about Persians destroying synagogues since, as mentioned, it has been shown to be a later interpolation.

ing for centuries before the rise of Islam, both in Roman lands (Yehudah ha-Nasi) and Persian ones (Rav). Second, the *Daniel*-ic perspective on the past, present, and future of empires – particularly the Persian and Greek/Roman ones – continued to yield influence amongst rabbis on both sides of the Babylonia/Holy Land divide. Third, in their debate as to whether Rome will eventually be conquered by Persia or vice versa, the rabbis were anticipating the *tafsīr*'s discussion of Q 30:2–5 by centuries. That many of the Qurʾānic exegetical works were compiled in Syria and, especially, Iraq, a stone's-throw away from the Jewish academies, might tempt us to relate the Talmudic materials to *tafsīr* on Q 30:2–5, but I will cautiously resist that temptation and will simply draw attention to the fact that both the *Daniel*-ic materials and the Talmudic ones deserve to be admitted to any discussion of Q 30:2–5's context.

As stated above, the foregoing *Daniel*-ic and Talmudic materials are mostly relevant to our Qurʾānic passage for their predictions about the Rome–Persia rivalry, a rivalry that is not actually mentioned in the Qurʾān. The verses themselves focus exclusively on the fortunes of "Rome," on God's hand in determining Rome's ultimate fate, and on the fact that all will end well for "the believers." The following section demonstrates that just such a convergence of ideas is to be found in various, influential (mostly Jewish) sources from antiquity and late antiquity.

Contextualizing Q 30:2–5 without *tafsīr*: "Rōmī" in Late Antiquity

Assuming, following Tesei and Shoemaker, that Q 30:2–5 is an eschatological passage, and that the Romans are described as eventually emerging victorious, it is odd that the defeated party in the conflict goes unmentioned in the verses. This omission stands out particularly in the context of Near Eastern apocalyptic literature, where at least as much attention tends to be focused on the villains as on the heroes:[37] Of course we are told that a Messiah, a Teacher of Righteousness, or some other divinely dispatched savior will emerge, but the most detailed descriptions are often reserved for the Antichrist, the Devil, Satan, Gog and Magog hordes, the tyrannical empire, or other villain(s), whose defeat is a prerequisite

37 Similarly, assuming – as both Muslim tradition and the bulk of Western scholarship does – that these are "Meccan" verses, it should be recalled that Meccan materials focus on the downfall of unbelievers in "punishment stories" and the like; we would therefore expect here, too, for the focus to be on the Persians being defeated for not believing, rather than on the Byzantines winning for believing.

for the advent of the messianic era. It is not simply that the evil character arrives, is defeated by the savior, and peace is achieved; more often than not, the savior's foil enjoys impressive successes before finally being defeated. Thus, again, we are left to wonder why Q 30:2–5 does not even mention the Romans' adversary.

The obvious solution to this is that the evil party is indeed mentioned and it is the Romans themselves. Reading Q 30:2–5 as a Near Eastern eschatological text may, thus, yield the following interpretation: The evil Romans have had some successes, but these will be temporary (lasting *biḍʿ sinīn*), after which the Romans will be defeated by God's decree, and the believers shall rejoice. We shall see in this section that such a reading is entirely consistent with numerous Jewish materials from the centuries preceding the rise of Islam. Such a reading presupposes that the verbs are active (*ghalabat*) and then passive (*sayughlabūna*), which is a minority view. Alternatively, the Qurʾān may be engaging critically with the prevalent Jewish view, consciously reversing its message, an interpretation that would allow us to preserve the more common reading (passive-active).

Rome and the Jews in the *Sibylline Oracles*

In the mid-2nd century BCE, Jews in both Judea and Alexandria were composing eschatological prophecies that sought to make sense of past empires and make End of Times predictions about the fate of world rulers. The Judean version of this, recorded in *Daniel*, has already been discussed. *Daniel*'s author lived during the reign of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Ephiphanes (r. 175–164 BCE), who persecuted un-Hellenized Jews, and harbored no ill-will towards the Roman Empire. In fact, the Maccabees formed an alliance with Rome against the Seleucids and, as such, were allies rather than enemies.

In Alexandria, by contrast, Jews living under Ptolemaic rule at around the same time had come to despise the Roman Empire for interfering in internal Egyptian affairs in support of a rival to the ruler. It is against this backdrop that starkly anti-Roman attitudes were recorded in the oldest parts of the *Sibylline Oracles* (hereafter: *Sib.Or.*). The *Sib.Or.* is a complex text, consisting of a diverse collection of materials – Jewish, pagan, Gnostic, Christian, and others – that accumulated from the second century BCE until the 6th century CE, from when the collection, as we now have it, dates.[38] Scholars have been able to disentangle the various layers of the collection, and it is now generally accepted that *Sib.Or.* 3 contains

38 In general, see J. J. Collins, s. v. "Sibylline Oracles", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, 1992, 6:2–6.

the oldest materials. The first two oracles of *Sib.Or.* 3 date from the first half of the second century BCE and are of interest to us for their attitudes to Rome. The first oracle (vv. 97–161) lists a sequence of eight kingdoms, from Egypt to Rome, which will be followed by an inferred, final eschatological kingdom. The second oracle (vv. 162–195) also contains a list of kingdoms – this time beginning with Solomon's reign – but devotes much of its discussion to a condemnation of the Romans. In its fourth oracle (esp. vv. 652–656), *Sib.Or.* 3 predicts that the Romans will come to be defeated by an Egyptian ruler, reflecting the pro-Ptolemaic patriotism of the oracle's Alexandrian author.

Sib.Or. 3 also contains later interpolations: In a passage deemed to date from the first century BCE, vv. 350–380 prophesy that "Asia" will take vengeance against Rome. This, and the previous references to Rome in *Sib.Or.* 3, undoubtedly reflect the author's antipathy towards the Roman Empire, but sincere though this antipathy may be, it is still relatively tame compared to the tone adopted in passages that date from the reign of Nero (r. 54–68) onwards. In another interpolation, dating from the late first century CE, vv. 63–74 of *Sib.Or.* 3 contains a thinly-veiled equation of Nero with "Beliar" (an alternative spelling of Belial), a personification of cosmic evil referred to in contemporaneous (and earlier) texts from the Second Temple period, including the Qumran Scrolls. The intense hatred of Nero stems from the fact that he was deemed responsible for the events that led to the destruction of the Temple.[39] In destroying the Temple, the Roman Empire became not merely a political enemy but an eschatological one: virtually all Jewish eschatological texts that postdate 70 CE expect the Messiah to undo the Romans' act and rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple: you can become a *Christ* through involvement in the Temple's construction (hence, the Persian Cyrus's epithet "God's Messiah" in *Isaiah* 45:1) and an *Antichrist* through involvement in the Temple's destruction (hence Nero's equation with Belial).

Nero's status as an eschatological adversary is detailed in the second oracle of *Sib.Or.* 5 (vv. 111–178), which is dated to just before the Great Diaspora revolt of 115–118 CE. In this passage, Rome's destruction of the Temple is highlighted (vv. 162–178), and Nero's future return as a sort of Antichrist figure is predicted. His appearance will be followed by the emergence of a Savior (vv. 179–285), who will descend from Heaven. These passages may be contrasted with the earlier ones in *Sib.Or.* 3, which predict Rome's demise and the emergence of an Egyptian ruler

39 In later, rabbinic texts it is Titus (r. 79–81) who, as military commander in charge of the first Jewish-Roman war, came to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, and is accorded the status of mega-villain. Nero's odd rehabilitation may be due to (or reflected in) the rabbinic belief that Nero eventually converted to Judaism, and was the ancestor of the famous 2-century *Tanna*, Rabbi Meir (Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 56a).

as the savior-figure. In *Sib.Or.* 5, both the Roman ruler and the savior-figure are eschatologized: Beliar-Rome will be defeated by a Divine messiah of sorts, a shift that brings us closer to Q 30:2–5, where we hear only of Rome and those whom God chooses to support. The eschatological return of Nero-Belial is repeated in later sections of *Sib.Or.*[40]

The *Sib.Or.* were known to ancient Jewish authors, and the Qumran *War Scroll* (1QM 11:8) bases its prediction that the current era of wickedness will come to an end and that God would intervene to destroy Belial and his supporters on the authority of "seers of things appointed," a reference to the sort of oracles preserved in *Sib.Or.* (if not to the *Sib.Or.* oracles themselves). Interestingly, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which has been dated between the late-1st and early-3rd centuries CE, provides an exact prediction of the length of Belial's reign: It will last for three years, seven months, and twenty-seven days (*Mart.Is.* 4:12), which is tantalizingly close to the length of the period after which, according to *Daniel* 12:12, the righteous will rejoice.

It is early Christian authors, however, who took a particular interest in the *Sib.Or.*, largely because they are thought to provide "pagan" testimony to the emergence and truth of Christianity. In this context, the work of Lactantius (wr. 303–311) is particularly interesting.[41] Writing in Rome, but before the conversion of Constantine that led to the merging of "Roman" and Christian interests, Lactantius tells us that, despite the apparent wealth and strength of Rome, the empire is destined to fall. In a chapter entitled "Of the devastation of the world and the change of empires," Lactantius predicts that in the near future,

> [A]ll the earth will be in a state of tumult; wars will everywhere rage; all nations will be in arms, and will oppose one another; neighbouring states will carry on conflicts with each other; and first of all, Egypt will pay the penalties of her foolish superstitions, and will be covered with blood as if with a river.

Lactantius shares with contemporary rabbis the notion that the End of Times will be immediately preceded by all-out wars between the imperial powers.[42] It is the fate of Rome, however, that has a special status in these events:

---

40 E. g. *Sib.Or.* 4, v. 138; 8, *Sib.Or.* 8, vv. 65–74, and 141 (the latter verses date from the late-second century CE). In general, *Sib.Or.* 8 opens with a long section of political prophecies (vv. 1–216), mainly directed against Rome.

41 Quotations from Lactantius are adapted from: W. Fletcher (trans.), *Lactantius, Divine Institutes*, in A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7*, Buffalo, NY, 1886.

42 Hence, e. g. *Genesis Rabbah* 42.4: "If you see the empires provoking one another then expect the Messiah's arrival."

> Then the sword will traverse the world, mowing down everything, and laying low all things as a crop. And – my mind dreads to relate it, but I will relate it, because it is about to happen – the cause of this desolation and confusion will be this; because *the Roman name, by which the world is now ruled, will be taken away from the earth, and the government return to Asia; and the East will again bear rule, and the West be reduced to servitude.* Nor ought it to appear wonderful to any one, if a kingdom founded with such vastness, and so long increased by so many and such men, and in short strengthened by such great resources, shall nevertheless at some time fall. (Emphasis mine.)

Interestingly, this political chaos and the fall of the Roman Empire will be followed by an "Asian" takeover. These ideas may be indebted to some extent to the prophecies in *Daniel*, and particularly to their interpretation in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam. In fact, the passage continues with a description of four kingdoms rising and falling, before the Roman Empire came to rule:

> Thus also other kingdoms in former times, though they had long flourished, were nevertheless destroyed. For it is related that the Egyptians, and Persians, and Greeks, and Assyrians had the government of the world; and after the destruction of them all, the chief power came to the Romans also. And inasmuch as they excel all other kingdoms in magnitude, with so much greater an overthrow will they fall, because those buildings which are higher than others have more weight for a downfall.

Although his verdict on Rome here seems almost simplistic in its "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" logic, Lactantius immediately explains that his confidence in Rome's imminent demise is based on none other than the *Sib.Or.*:

> Nevertheless the Sibyls openly say that *Rome is doomed to perish*, and that indeed *by the judgment of God,* because it held His name in hatred; and being the enemy of righteousness, it destroyed the people who kept the truth. (Emphasis mine.)

Thus, in language not dissimilar to Q 30:2–5, Lactantius here quotes the prophecies of the Sibyls regarding Rome's fate and God's control over it. It is interesting that Rome's demise is not, in this case, part of an End of Times scenario, but a direct consequence of the Empire's misbehavior towards believers, which in the original context of *Sib.Or.* referred to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, but here must resonate with Lactantius on account of Rome's persecution of early Christians.

Later in Book VII, in a chapter concerning "Of the Last Times and the City of Rome," Lactantius returns to the Sibylline prophecies about the Roman Empire, connecting God's destruction of the Empire to the *eschaton*:

> The subject itself declares that the fall and ruin of the world will shortly take place; except that while the city of Rome remains it appears that nothing of this kind is to be feared. But when that capital of the world shall have fallen, and shall have begun to be a street, which the Sibyls say shall come to pass, who can doubt that the end has now arrived to the affairs of men and the whole world?

Thus, at the turn of the 4th century CE, the *Sib.Or.* prophecies about God's destruction of the Roman Empire as part of an eschatological drama, endured amongst some Christians. Within a matter of decades, however, the Eastern Roman Empire would be Christian without shedding its "Roman" identity. The *Sib.Or.* would not be ignored, of course, but "Christian" attitudes to the Roman Empire would come to be adjusted and updated as the Romans were increasingly supporters of the religion rather than persecutors of its followers.[43] In some cases, the *Daniel*-ic framework is retained, but the Romans are reimagined as the fifth empire set up by God (as per *Daniel* 2:44), rather than as the fourth of four transient polities.[44] This is not to say that all Christians were pro-Roman/Byzantine, and the imperial establishment of theological orthodoxies (e. g. at Nicaea and Chalcedon) necessarily produced disgruntled groups of Christians whose dogmas were rejected.[45] On the whole, however, it was no longer the case that the Roman Empire was equated with tyranny, unrighteousness, and cosmic evil in Christian eyes. For the endurance of just such attitudes to the Romans in late antiquity we must turn to Jewish communities in both the Holy Land and Babylonia.

Rome and the Jews in late antiquity[46]

Whereas the trajectory of Christian-Roman relations generally went from negative to positive, it would appear that for Jews in Judea things went in the opposite direction. The Babylonian Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 8b) records what may be an

43 A good illustration of this may be seen, for instance, in Aphrahat's pro-Byzantine attitudes, despite living in Sasanid lands (Tesei 2018, 11).

44 Book VIII of *Sib.Or.*, v. 10 has Rome as the fifth empire. *Sib.Or.* 8 is obviously a Christian composition. For other Christian sources for this idea, see Shoemaker 2014, 540 ff. (quoting the 6th century Kosmas Indikopleustes). For Jewish sources on Rome as the fifth empire, see Raviv 2006, 5; and Sivertsev 2011, 12.

45 According to Tesei 2018, 22–23, it is just such heterodox Arab Christians who transmitted to the early Muslim community the Syriac materials that would become Q 30:2 ff.

46 The classic treatment of this topic is N. de Lange, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, eds., *Imperialism in the Ancient World,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, 255–281, 354–357.

echo of Jewish-Roman collaboration against the Seleucids in Maccabean times, attributing to Rabbi Dimi the statement that the Romans waged 32 battles against the Greeks, but could not defeat them until they formed an alliance with the Jews. The Talmudic passage then tells us that after 26 years of cooperation, the Romans enslaved their Jewish allies.

As seen, the Alexandrian perspective on the Roman Empire was intensely negative already in the second century BCE. Even in the Holy Land, however, attitudes began to sour long before the Romans committed the unforgivable crime of destroying the Temple: In the Qumran text *Pesher Habbakuk*,[47] the Romans (codenamed "Kittim" in the text) are repeatedly criticized and their abhorrent behavior is deemed to be a prelude to the Final Age and the advent of the "Teacher of Righteousness." Shortly after the destruction of the Temple, *4 Ezra* – a Jewish apocalyptic text that remains canonical for the Ethiopian church – also predicts the ultimate destruction of the Romans.[48] And from Hadrian's rule onwards (r. 117–138), when the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136) was brutally suppressed, the Roman Empire was routinely referred to in rabbinical texts as "the evil empire," a phrase that required neither elucidation nor justification.[49] It was no longer simply that specific Roman rulers were evil, on account of specific sins, but that the Roman Empire itself was the cosmic adversary, whose rise, iniquitous behavior, and ultimate demise were all part of a Divine plan that will lead ultimately to the messianic era. Hence, the sort of Antichrist figure that *Sib.Or.* identifies with Nero becomes, in later texts, "Armilos" ("Romulus"), signifying that from its very creation the Roman Empire has been Evil.[50] The vilification of the Romans as an eternal enemy is also related to the rabbinic equation of Rome with "Edom"/"Esau,"[51] which further establishes the antiquity, depth, and unambiguity of the

47 1QpHab, esp. column 9. This text is dated to the first century BCE.

48 *4 Ezra* 11:40 ff. From around the same time, we also have Josephus's statement (*Antiquities* 11.7) that, "our nation suffered these things under Antiochus Epiphanes, according to Daniel's vision; and what he wrote many years before they came to pass. In the very same manner Daniel also wrote concerning the Roman government; and that our country should be made desolate by them." Similarly, in the near-contemporaneous *2 Baruch* 40:1–2, we hear that at the End of Times, the last Roman emperor will be bound, tried, convicted, and killed by the Messiah.

49 DE LANGE 1978, 269. The phrase "the evil [empire/Rome]" is ubiquitous in rabbinic sources from late antiquity. See, more recently, HIMMELFARB 2017, 27 ff.

50 In HIMMELFARB's words: "Rome, embodied in Armilos, is treated as the greatest of the eschatological enemies." (HIMMELFARB 2017, 28).

51 This may be underpinned by the fact that in the Hebrew Bible Edom takes an active part in the destruction of the first Temple (*Obadiah* 1:11–14; *Psalms* 137:7), for which reason they are condemned by the prophets (e. g. *Jeremiah* 49:7–22), just as the Romans were responsible for the destruction of the second Temple. On Esau = Rome, see SIVERTSEV 2011, 9 ff.

dichotomy between the good (Jacob, the Jews) and the bad (Esau, the Romans). Importantly, the identification of Rome with Esau and, hence, as the Jewish people's imperial antagonist, occurs in late antique sources, such as the midrashic collection *Genesis Rabbah*, a text whose contents have long been known to be relevant to the Qurʾān.[52] These ideas continued to circulate in the lead-up to the emergence of Islam: The 6th-century *Leviticus Rabbah*, for instance, interprets the list of unclean animals provided in *Leviticus* 11:4-–8 as a code for the four world empires that will dominate Israel (following the *Daniel*-ic scheme), with Rome as the fourth empire, equated with pigs.[53] In another passage (elaborating on *Genesis* 28:12, Jacob's dream), the rabbis list the four kingdoms as Babylonia, Media, Greece, and "Edom" (Rome). We are told that each empire reached a certain level, but that Rome continued to climb, worrying Jacob. God, therefore, comforted him, with a promise that no matter how high it ascends, Edom will eventually fall.[54] Seventh century Jewish apocalypses continue the trend, with the *Pesiqta Rabbati* interpreting the words "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation" (*Isaiah* 61:10) as referring to the "garments that the Holy One blessed be He wore from the Creation of the world until its liberation from evil Edom (= Romans)."[55] The 7th century *Sefer Zerubbabel* also describes Rome as the final empire, with the Messiah slaying "Armilos" by breathing on his face.[56] Similar traditions endured into the early Islamic centuries, often echoing *Daniel* 8:23 in describing the villain as "fierce of countenance" (*ʿaz panīm*).[57]

Two points concerning these sources are of particular importance to us here. First, there is an apocalyptic thread running through these anti-Rome materials – it is not simply the case that the Roman Empire has mistreated the Jews more than other rulers, nor that Jews dislike the Romans most, but rather that the Roman Empire will play an indispensable role in the unfolding of the End of Times drama. Hence, the *Pesiqta Rabbati* records an interpretation of the words

52 On this, see recently M. Morgenstern, "The Image of Edom in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 2 (2016): 193–222. On *Genesis Rabbah* and the Qurʾān, see the indexes to Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, H. Speyer's *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Hildesheim, 1931, and other such works, where *Genesis Rabbah* features prominently.

53 *Leviticus Rabbah* 13.5.

54 See N. Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict*, Leiden, 1994, 207.

55 *Pesiqta Rabbati* (ed. M. Ish-Shalom), ch. 37, 163.

56 Himmelfarb 2017, 154 ff. *Sefer Zerubbabel* (Himmelfarb 2017, 149) echoes the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98a) in stating that the Messiah is bound in Rome, awaiting suitable conditions for his emergence. *Targum Jonathan* to *Isaiah* 11:4 also has the Messiah slaying Armilos, not by breathing on his face, but "by the words of his mouth."

57 E. g. Reeves 2005, 85 (*The Secrets of R. Šimʿon b. Yoḥai*), 155–156 (*Pirqe Mašiaḥ*).

"I will greatly rejoice (*sōs asīs*) in the Lord" (*Isaiah* 61:10), according to which the Jewish people will rejoice at the downfall of the evil Romans (*rōmī ha-resha'ah*).[58] The eschatological rejoicing of the Jewish people is over the defeat of the Romans, an idea found in other 7th century Jewish materials.[59]

Second, the foregoing sources – from the *Sib.Or.* through Second Temple texts, rabbinic midrashim, and apocalyptic materials – demonstrate that Jewish anti-Roman ideas and prophecies permeated various periods, regions, and genres of Jewish thought on the eve of Islam, *without* reference to the Persian Empire, or to any other imperial party to the drama. As seen in our contextualization of the *tafsīr* on Q 30:2–5, there are important Jewish sources – from *Daniel* to the Talmud – that imagine the End of Times drama including a Rome-Persia rivalry. But there are also copious materials that describe an eschatological scenario that involves the Roman Empire's fluctuating fortunes, God's control over the events, the *eschaton*, and a rejoicing of the believers (Jews), to the exclusion of other participants, just as Q 30:2–5's verses themselves do.

Re-assessing Q 30:2–5

How do the foregoing materials advance our understanding of Q 30:2–5? As it has been made clear at the outset of this article, in my view we must in this case separate the Muslim exegetical tradition to Q 30:2–5 from the Qurʾānic passage itself. In their current forms, the two originate in different regions and periods of Near Eastern history, and were thus almost certainly informed by different ideas and materials.

The exegetical tradition on our passage, in presupposing (for the most part) that the Romans were winning or losing against the Persians, has much in common with the various Talmudic discussions that saw these two empires as the only ones that will endure until the End of Times, and engaged in predictions about which empire will, ultimately, defeat the other. If Rome is to be the

58 *Pesiqta Rabbati* ch. 37, 162.

59 The *Sefer Zerubbabel* (Himmelfarb 2017, 155) describes the End of Times scenario, with the Messiah defeating Armilos, the 10 kings with him, and Gog and Magog: "After all this has come to pass, Menahem b. Ammiel will come… [and] *there will be great joy for Israel.*" The passage then ends (ibid., 156) by quoting *Zechariah* 9:9 "*Rejoice greatly,* daughter of Zion!" (Emphasis mine.) Moreover, the penultimate lines of the 7th century *piyyut* by ha-Qallir, *Ha'et Lig'or*, quotes *Isaiah* 51:3, "Joy and gladness shall be found therein" (in E. Fleischer, "Solving the Qiliri Riddle", *Tarbiz* 54iii (1985): 383–427 at 427 l. 8). It is interesting that ha-Qallir (ibid., 426, l. 265) refers to God as *ḥay ve-qayyām* (cf. *Daniel* 6:27 and Q 2:255).

victor (despite their having destroyed the Temple), it is only because God decreed this. In addition, the *Daniel* 7–12 materials repeatedly mention that the Persians will temporarily dominate the rivalry with the Western empire, specify a period of just over three years during which the fortunes of the righteous will suffer, and promise – in the book's climax – that those who endure the low point will rejoice. Both the Talmudic and the *Daniel*-ic materials date from centuries before the rise of Islam, and their contents were popular and influential throughout late antiquity.

A final point to make is that although Tesei and Shoemaker convincingly argue that Q 30:2 ff. has eschatology (rather than mere "current events") in mind, and although the Talmud's discussions of the Rome–Persia rivalry also relate it to the *eschaton*, it should be stressed that the Muslim exegetes did not read the verses in this way, preferring instead to see them as an accurate (and hence miraculous) prophecy about events in the 7th century Near East.

Turning to the Qurʾānic verses themselves, and focusing on the Roman Empire's role in ancient and late antique Judeo-Christian thought, to the exclusion of the Persians, we have seen that, from the second century BCE onwards, Jews in Alexandria came to despise the Romans and authored predictions about the Empire's downfall, which they related to the End of Times. What is worth stressing here is that in one of the *Sib.Or.* texts, the heroic ruler who will put an end to Roman rule was *not* a "Persian" but rather a [Ptolemaic] Egyptian ruler, and in other *Sib.Or.* texts it was a divinely dispatched Savior rather than an earthly figure altogether. In other words, it is not a given that when Q 30:2–5 mentions "Rome" triumphing or being defeated that their earthly foil will be Persia. Some of the late antique sources on Rome's role(s) in the eschatological drama presuppose that before their defeat the Romans will manage to triumph. Whatever the case may be, for their role in destroying Jerusalem and the Temple, the Romans were perceived as an enemy of cosmic dimensions, far more important than a mere mundane rival could ever be. The Romans were Edom or the sons of Esau, and thus a long-standing, pre-Mosaic antagonist of the Israelites or Jews. And so long as the Temple was in ruins, the Jews had an open account with them. It is thus in Rome (or its outskirts) that the Messiah awaits, and it is Rome's defeat that is a prerequisite for his arrival. These ideas are reflected in the Talmud, late antique midrashim, and other sources from both sides of the Euphrates and from pre-Christian times until the eve of Islam (and beyond).

How these materials relate to Q 30:2–5 can only be answered with two caveats in mind, as stated at the outset of this article. First, we cannot be certain about the vocalization of the crucial verbs in our passage, a dilemma that has a decisive impact on our understanding of the passage. Furthermore, to the passive–active or active–passive options that have divided both Muslim exegetes and, recently,

Tesei and Shoemaker, we may add Kropp's recent suggestion that the initial verb be read in its passive form (*ghulibat*), but as a curse – "May the Romans be defeated!" – a reading that suits the Jewish perspective on the Roman Empire particularly well.[60] It is impossible to contextualize a text whose basic, literal meaning is elusive or ambiguous. Second, we cannot be certain whether the Qurʾān in this passage is transmitting a Judeo-Christian idea or is arguing against it. This dilemma, too, has a decisive impact on our understanding of the passage. As we cannot solve either of these problems with any measure of confidence, let alone certainty, we must resist the urge to draw firm lines between any source or group of sources from late antiquity to the Qurʾān. Instead, we can collect the ancient and late antique evidence relating to the theme of prognostications concerning Rome circulating amongst Jews and Christians, which allows us to draw a general picture of the ideological backdrop to Q 30:2–5.

Accordingly, drawing together the materials surveyed above in elucidating both the exegetes' perspective on these verses, and the verses themselves, I would like to propose some interpretative options for two elements in Q 30:4: 1) the phrase "in a few years" (*fī biḍʿi sinīn*) and 2) the idea that "the believers shall rejoice."

"In a few years"

The phrase *biḍʿ sinīn* also occurs in Q 12:42, where it relates that Joseph is forgotten by the butler and remains in prison for *biḍʿ sinīn*. In the Biblical version of the story (*Genesis* 41:1) this same period is specified as lasting two years. On the assumption that the Qurʾān is not adjusting the Biblical period to refer to some other time span (for there is no apparent theological ramification of doing so) we may thus infer that this phrase in Q 30:4 refers to a two-year period. However, the earliest Muslim exegetes (the earliest being Zayd b. ʿAlī, *ca*. 740 CE), interpret the phrase as meaning either "three to five years" or "three to nine years".[61] The sources discussed above may account for the difference.

60 M. Kropp, "Commentary on Q 30:2–6", in M. Azaiez, G. S. Reynolds, T. Tesei, and H. Zafer, eds., *The Qurʾan Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Analysis of 50 Select Passages*, Berlin, 2016. According to this reading – which has precedents in the Quran, where *qutila* is used as an invective ("May he/they perish!") in Q 51:10; 80:17; 74:19–20; and 85:4 – the second verb, too, is to be read as a passive ("May the Romans be defeated ... they will be defeated").

61 El-Cheikh 1998, 358 n. 11.

We have seen that in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98b), Rome is predicted to spread for "9 months", based on a prophecy in *Micah* 5:2, that refers to the period of a pregnancy. Extrapolating the time span of Rome's future (temporary) triumph on the basis of a Biblical verse is a legitimate exegetical ploy, but – perhaps under the influence of *Daniel*-ic ideas – it came to be updated in the direction of three or more years. In Hai Gaon's (d. 1038) calculation, "Rome (lit. 'Edom') will rule over Israel for a period not less than nine months and no more than three years."[62] The 1150-, 1290-, or 1335-day periods mentioned in *Daniel* 8 and 12 all relate to a temporary suffering that will be followed by salvation, and all equal just over three years. Similarly, the *Ascension of Isaiah* (4:12) has 3 years, 7 months and 27 days for Beliar's reign. The *Pirqe Mashi'aḥ*, similarly, describes the End of Times events unfolding as follows:

> Before Edom falls, they will devastate ten places... A king, 'strong of face' will arise and issue harsh decrees throughout his kingdom. A great king will go out to encamp against Alexandria, and there will be horrible trouble in the world. He will rule for *three and a half years* and then he will rebel. The prince of Edom will fall: ten battles will take place and then Israel will prevail over all the nations, 'and I shall wreak My vengeance against Edom' (Ezek 25:14).[63] (Emphasis mine.)

Bearing in mind this array of sources, we are in a position to contextualize the phrase "in a few" years and understand the *tafsīr*'s inclination to favor a period over three years (rather than the two-year span implied by Q 12:42), even if we cannot decisively draw a line between any one of these sources and Q 30:4 or its exegesis.

"The believers shall rejoice"

As seen, the Muslim exegetes tend to interpret this phrase as a reference to the Muslim believers in Mecca rejoicing at the news that their fellow monotheists, the Byzantines, have prevailed over the dualist Zoroastrians in Greater Syria. Tesei and Shoemaker, following the lead of earlier generations of scholars, doubt that this is indeed what the Qurʾān is referring to here. Rather, Tesei dissociates the Byzantines' triumph from the believers' rejoicing, suggesting that the latter is a

62 Reeves 2005, 134, quoting from Hai Gaon's *Responsum on Redemption*.

63 Reeves 2005, 155–156. On this source, see now H. Spurling, "The Biblical Symbol of Edom in Jewish Eschatological and Apocalyptic Imagery", in J-P. Monferrer-Sala and A. Urban, eds., *Sacred Text: Explorations in Lexicography*, Frankfurt, 2009, 271–299.

reference to rejoicing in the End of Times. Again, the sources referred to above provide a backdrop. *Daniel* 7–12 concludes (12:12–13) with a promise that following the 3–4 year period, he who perseveres will be "happy." The last lines of ha-Qallir's 7th century *piyyut*, and the *Sefer Zerubbabel* also, as seen, end their descriptions of the End of Times with reference to Biblical verses on the rejoicing of the righteous. And perhaps most crucially of all, the 6th or 7th century *Pesiqta Rabbati* parses the words "I will greatly rejoice" (*Isaiah* 61:10) by explaining specifically that this is the rejoicing of the Jewish people over the downfall of the evil Roman Empire.

Jewish or Christian?

From the foregoing, it should be clear that the overwhelming majority of sources adduced in this article have been "Jewish," just as the lion's share of materials employed by Tesei and Shoemaker are "Christian." These categories are, of course, highly problematic, especially in the context of late antique sources, for a number of reasons. Often, "Biblical" sources written originally by Jews for other Jews were adopted and deployed more widely by Christians in subsequent centuries. I suspect that any quantitative study of the use of *Daniel* 7–12 by Jewish and Christian authors respectively will reveal that Christians took a greater interest in Daniel's visions than their Jewish counterparts. Moreover, there are sources, such as *Sib.Or.*, that are hybrid Jewish-Christian texts. Conversely, when it comes to late antique apocalyptic materials, it would appear that Jewish authors were heavily Christianized.[64] And in any event, the immense effort necessary in disentangling "Jewish" from "Christian" materials in this and other sources yields almost no discernible results as far as we are concerned.

And yet, there are still reasons to suggest that the Qurʾān and early Muslim community took a "Jewish" approach to Rome and to eschatology more generally. First, there is a selection of early *ḥadīth*s that reflect an anti-Roman perspective.[65]

64 This is a major argument of both Sivertsev 2011 and Himmelfarb 2017.

65 On this topic, see O. Livne-Kafri, "Some Observations on the Migration of Apocalyptic Features in Muslim Tradition" *Acta Orientalia* 60iv (2007): 466–477 at 468–469 (section on "*al-qustantiniyya al-zāniya* and the Great Whore Image"), dealing with early *ḥadīth*s that portray Constantinople/Byzantines negatively. These materials appear to draw on NT *Revelation* 14:8 where "Babylon" the whore came to be identified as "Rome" and then was reimagined as Constantinople. Livne-Kafri says that this sort of *ḥadīth* "might express Jewish sentiments" or early Christian attitudes to Rome (before Constantine's conversion). The point is that, despite no longer reflecting mainstream Christian ideas about "Rome," the *ḥadīth* found its way into

In one, we are told, the Prophet said, "The Dajjāl (Antichrist) will not appear until the Byzantines are vanquished." This has a close parallel in R. Ḥama b. Ḥanina's prediction that "The Messiah will not come until the contemptuous kingdom (i. e. Rome) will cease from the Jewish people" (*Sanhedrin* 98a).[66] In other *ḥadīth*s, the Romans/Byzantines are compared to the "sons of Esau" or the "sons of Edom," thereby echoing Jewish precedents.[67]

Moreover, there is one obvious way in which a crude distinction can be clearly made between the Jewish and Christian perspectives on the End of Times, specifically their respective attitudes to the Holy Land. For Jews, since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, there has been a continuous hope and expectation that Jerusalem and its Temple will eventually be rebuilt, an event that is generally associated with the Messianic era. Jesus and early Christianity, by contrast, neutralized Jewish messianic expectations about rebuilding the Temple by spiritualizing it. While Jews expected a physical Kingdom of God on earth and the rebuilding of a physical Temple in Jerusalem, Christians had relocated the Kingdom to Heaven; the Temple was metaphorized, and Jerusalem and its Temple-mount were consciously neglected by Christian rulers, precisely because they knew how offensive such neglect was to Jews. When, according to near-contemporary sources, the early Muslim armies sought to reconquer the Holy Land for the descendants of Abraham, they were enacting the End Time scenario as it was imagined by Jews, a point accepted by Shoemaker,[68] and it would not be surprising if in Q 30:2–5, too, the Qurʾān was adopting the Jewish-apocalyptic perspective on "Rome's" fate. In a hackneyed but still important passage on the rise of Islam, [pseudo-]Sebeos relates that Byzantine Jews fled towards Arabia where,

> [The Jews] called [the Arabs] to their aid and familiarized them with the relationship they had through the books of the [Old] Testament. Although [the Arabs] were convinced of their close relationship, they were unable to get a consensus from their multitude, for they were

Muslim thought centuries later. M. Kister ("A Comment on the Antiquity of Traditions Praising Jerusalem", *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, 1 (1981): 185–186) has shown that this tradition is very early indeed, dating from the first Islamic century.

66 Compare, also, the anecdote about Rabbi Yose b. Qisma's students asking him when the Messiah will arrive: He replied, that when the Gate of the city of Rome falls twice and is rebuilt each time, it will fall again but will not be rebuilt until the messiah arrives (*Sanhedrin* 98b). Obviously, the *ḥadīth* specifies that it is the Anti-Messiah rather than the Messiah who will only arrive when the Romans/Byzantines are defeated. It should be recalled that in many accounts the arrival of the Antichrist is a prerequisite to the Messiah's advent.

67 In O. Livne-Kafri, "Some Notes on the Muslim Apocalyptic Tradition", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 17 (1999): 71–94 at 93–94 esp. n. 140 for Muslim use of "Sons of Esau" and "Sons of Edom" with reference to the Byzantines.

68 Shoemaker 2014, 557–558.

> divided from each other by religion. In that period a certain one of them, a man of the sons of Ishmael named Muhammad, a merchant, became prominent. A sermon about the Way of Truth, supposedly at God's command, was revealed to them, and [Muhammad] taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially since he was informed and knowledgeable about Mosaic history. Because the command had come from On High, he ordered them all to assemble together and to unite in faith. ... He said: "God promised that country to Abraham and to his son after him, for eternity. And what had been promised was fulfilled during that time when [God] loved Israel. Now, however, you are the sons of Abraham, and God shall fulfill the promise made to Abraham and his son on you. Only love the God of Abraham, and go and take the country which God gave to your father, Abraham. No one can successfully resist you in war, since God is with you."

This text tells us that Jews fleeing what they might call "the evil Roman empire" had a formative impact on some of the earliest dogmas of emerging Islam, that conquest of the [physical] Holy Land in a realization of the Biblical promises was central to earliest Islam, and that Muhammad saw his new community as a sort of New Israel, just as Christians had centuries earlier.[69] Thus, in the one aspect of Muslim apocalyptic thought that we can judge to be either "Christian" or "Jewish" in approach, Muhammad was clearly following the Jewish one.[70] As the New Israel's scripture, the Qurʾān may conceivably have translated Jewish apocalyptic ideas about rejoicing over Rome's eschatological defeat (ideas that may have been indebted to Christian texts), and referred instead to the new community of "believers" rejoicing (Q 30:4).[71]

---

69 See Livne-Kafri 1999, 85 n. 82, for early Islamic sources on the *ummah* seeing itself as the successor to the Banū Isrāʾīl.

70 Tesei, by contrast, reconstructs the historical context of Q 30:2 ff. by imagining that Christian Arabs who abandoned Byzantium and joined the early Muslim community imported a de-propagandized version of Byzantine imperial eschatology, which was recast in Arabic in a form that, ultimately, implied that "the believers" were rejoicing over a Byzantine victory. In other words, even disregarding the circuitousness of this reconstruction and the need to abandon the traditional framework of the Quran's emergence, the Quran's attempt to shed the Byzantine identity and inclination of these verses resulted in a clumsy failure. It is my view that the materials introduced in this article allow for more a more elegant historical reconstruction.

71 It is highly unlikely that the phrase "the believers" in Q 30:4 refers to Christians. Thus, Geiger (*Judaism and Islam*, 152–153, regarding Q 85:4–7), states that "the appellation 'believers' as applied to Christians has no parallel elsewhere in the Quran." And although Q 5:82 tells us that the Jews and pagans of Mecca are the most intense in their animosity towards the believers (*alladhīna āmanū*) and that the Christians as the closest in affection to the believers (*alladhīna āmanū*), the clear implication is that "the believers" refers to neither Jews nor Christians. For a recent, imaginative interpretation of "believers" (*muʾminūn*) in the first century of Islam, see F. Donner, From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community", *al-Abḥāth* 50–51 (2002–3): 9–53.

Conclusions

In this article, I have approached Q 30:2–5 as *two* separate texts that require full contextualization: The first is the Qurʾānic passage itself, representing ideas in 7th-century Arabia, which focuses on "Rome's" role in the *eschaton*; the second is the exegetes' understanding of this passage, representing ideas in 8th–9th century Fertile Crescent, which focuses on the Rome–Persia rivalry. It has been argued that our understanding of both "texts" may be illuminated considerably with recourse to the sources introduced here.

It was also stressed that our interpretations of Q 30:2–5 are necessarily speculative and tentative: We do not know how to read the crucial verbs, nor can we know whether the verses are reflecting Judeo-Christian ideas or rejecting them, adopting them wholesale or adapting them consciously. All I proposed to do here is lay out on the table a selection of Jewish and Christian materials and interpretations that, in my view, in part or in whole, help us understand the rich literary and religious background to both the Qurʾānic verses and Muslim exegesis on them. The idea that the elements that make up Q 30:2–5 originate in 7th century Judeo-Christian apocalypses, and that such texts provide sufficient contextualization for this Qurʾānic passage, is simply untenable in light of the varied materials surveyed in this article.