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# “The Romans Will Win!” Q 30:2–7 in Light of 7th c. Political Eschatology

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**Abstract:** This article addresses a prophecy found in vv. 2–7 of the thirtieth Qur’ānic sūra, known as *al-Rūm* (“The Romans”). These verses report on the Romans’ (*al-Rūm*) involvement in a conflict against an unnamed enemy and predict its eventual outcome. The passage refers to the conflict between the Byzantines and Sasanians that lasted for about thirty years during the first three decades of the 7th c. (602–628 CE). These verses are usually considered to be the only Qur’ānic allusion to a historical event that can be confirmed by sources external to the Islamic tradition. In this study I will argue that the prophecy on the Rūm has close parallels with other prophecies on the war that were circulating in the Middle East in the first half of the 7th c. The contextualization and comparison with other 7th c. prophecies will provide us with a better understanding of the Qur’ānic passage.

**Keywords:** Qur’ān, early Islam, *al-Rūm*, Q 30:2–7, Byzantines, Sasanians, Heraclius, Apocalypticism

In the early 20th c., the French scholar Paul CASANOVA published a monograph entitled *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l’Islam primitif* in which he argued that Muḥammad’s preaching was originally marked by strong concerns about the imminence of the Eschaton.<sup>1</sup> CASANOVA’s study is representative of a current of opinion common among his generation of scholars in early Islam, namely, that anxieties about the approaching Judgment are central to the thought of the Qur’ān’s prophet.<sup>2</sup> Mostly neglected in later scholarship, this idea has lately attracted renewed attention. Since the turn of the century, scholars have

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1 CASANOVA 1911–1924

2 On which see SHOEMAKER 2014, 515–517

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**Article note:** A Patricia (“*e u so ben t’ammii u mā ’n pò ciû au largu du dulú*”). I am grateful to David Powers and John Reeves for their useful comments.

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increasingly considered apocalyptic tendencies as a possible main feature of the early Islamic (or, more precisely, proto-Islamic) movement.<sup>3</sup> In a recent article, Stephen SHOEMAKER has brought this line of investigation a step forward and has linked the expansion of the proto-Muslim community to contemporary political apocalyptic ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Eschatological-imperialistic tendencies were current in the period immediately preceding the Arabian expansion. According to ideas spread among both Jews and Christians (but also among Zoroastrians), a chosen community of believers was destined to achieve a cosmocratic rule before the world comes to an end. This idea provided the basis for an eschatological ideology pursued by Byzantine rulers. At the same time, the dream of establishing an eschatological kingdom fueled Jewish apocalyptic imagery. Similar concepts are manifested in a flourishing apocalyptic production mostly composed during the 7th century SHOEMAKER illustrates how this complex of beliefs can provide valuable material to contextualize the rise of Islam. Ideas found in the 7th c. apocalypses may be compared to those expressed in the Qur'ān or reported in later Islamic sources. In two recent articles, Kevin VAN BLADEL and I have both argued that one of these apocalyptic works was used as a source for a pericope in Q 18:83–102.<sup>5</sup> Here I will argue that another passage in the Qur'ānic corpus, i. e. Q 30:2–7, may be traced back to contemporary apocalyptic texts.

## Q 30:2–7

[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.

[6] The promise of God! God fails not His promise, but most men do not know it.

[7] They know an outward part of the present life, but of the Hereafter they are heedless.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> DONNER 2010, 143–144; HOYLAND 2012, 1066–1067; SHOEMAKER 2013 (esp. chap. 3); CAMERON 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> VAN BLADEL 2007 and TESEI 2013–2014.

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Arberry.

## Problems for interpreters

The first issue to deal with concerns the vocalization of the verb *ġalaba* (“to vanquish”) that occurs twice in the opening verses of *sūrat al-Rūm* (vv. 2–3). The vocalization of this verb is an example of a general problem faced by scholars in Qur’ānic Studies, that is, what was the original reading of the text. The first examples of written materials identifiable as Qur’ānic have no vowel markers. The text is limited to the consonantal skeleton, which usually lacks any diacritical dots.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, many Qur’ānic passages may be read in two or more different ways. This issue puzzled readers during the early Islamic period. Several reports indicate that different readings of the Qur’ān circulated among early members of the community. Qur’ān commentaries report that a range of variant readings (*qirā’āt*) were discussed at least from the 8th c. CE. In the case of vv. 2–3 of Q 30, the commentators transmitted two main readings:

[1] *ġulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yaġlibūna*, “the Romans have been vanquished ... they will vanquish”;

[2] *ġalabat al-Rūm ... sa-yuġlabūna*, “the Romans have vanquished ... they will be vanquished”;

In addition, Qurṭubī (d. 1273) and Qummī (10th c.) acknowledged two additional minor variations.

[3] *ġalabat al-Rūm ... sa-yaġlibūna*, “the Romans have vanquished ... they will win”;

[4] *ġulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yuġlabūna*, “the Romans have been vanquished ... they will be vanquished.”<sup>8</sup>

In *qirā’āt* #3 and #4 the verb *ġalaba* is always understood in either its active or passive form. As a consequence, the scenario points to either a complete victory or to a total defeat of the Romans. The abrupt change in the outcome of the conflict in *qirā’āt* #1 and #2 is completely absent in *qirā’āt* #3 and #4.

Very different meanings can be extrapolated from the opening verses of *sūrat al-Rūm*, depending on the *qirā’a* that the reader chooses to follow. However, Q 30:2–3 presents yet another complication. In addition to affecting the meaning of the text, the selected reading also dictates the understanding of the specific his-

<sup>7</sup> As Robert HOYLAND pointed out in a private conversation, “regarding diacritical dots in Qur’ān’s manuscripts, they are not totally lacking; there is usually a sprinkling of dots even in the earliest parchment copies, though not that many and it is often unclear why they are on some letters but not others.” On this point see KAPLONY 2008 and DUTTON 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. EL CHEIKH 1998, 361.

torical events – if any – to which the Qur’ān is alluding here. Following *qirā’a* #1, the Qur’ānic passage appears to evoke the contemporaneous war between Byzantines and Sasanians, which ended with the victory of the “Romans” after several earlier defeats. But if one follows *qirā’a* #2, Q 30:2–3 may be taken as referring to the struggles between a Byzantine army and members of the proto-Muslim community somewhere in the “Roman” Middle East at an indeterminate time. In this case, the opening sentence “the Romans have vanquished” may refer to an armed engagement between Byzantines and proto-Muslims, with the former being victorious. Following the *sira* tradition, one might identify this event with the defeat of the Believers at Mu’ta.<sup>9</sup> As for the statement “but they will be defeated”, this may be either a prognostication expressing the hope of a future victory of the Believers in accordance with God’s wish, or a description *a posteriori* of a military success achieved over the Byzantines. In the second case, one wonders whether the statement refers to a particular battle or to the victory of the community during its territorial expansion in the Byzantine Middle Eastern provinces.

Qur’ān commentators have transmitted both possible understandings of the opening verses of *sūrat al-Rūm*. In the commentaries, the alternatives of defeat/victory or of victory/defeat are explained as involving either Sasanians and Romans or Believers and Romans. *Qirā’a* #1 (*ḡulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yaḡlibūna*), which is the oldest attested reading, is widely accepted. Following this interpretation, the commentators struggled to explain the enigmatic statement in v. 4 that indicates that the Believers will cheer the Romans’ victory. The most common solution is to relate this display of joy to the Byzantines’ status as *ahl al-kitāb*. The exegetes often posit a local Arabian framework in which the Believers support the Byzantines because of their monotheistic faith, while the Meccan idolaters support the Sasanians and their polytheistic religion (i. e., Zoroastrianism). In more elaborate explanations recorded as early as the 10th c., the Byzantines’ victory over the Sasanians is said to take place on the same day as the Believers’ victory over the Quraysh at Badr. This ideological explanation relies on the idea of a “holy alliance” between the Believers and the Romans, whose military successes represent the victory of monotheism over polytheism.

As for *qirā’a* #2 (*ḡalabat al-Rūm ... sa-yuḡlabūna*), this variant, which was identified as early as the 9th c.,<sup>10</sup> also has ideological connotations. Nadia EL CHEIKH has shown that *qirā’a*#2 is increasingly reported by the 11th century. She attributes the increasing popularity of this variant reading to the exacerbation of the relationships between Muslims and Byzantines during the Crusades.

<sup>9</sup> Concerning the date of the battle of Mu’ta, see POWERS 2009, 72ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. EL CHEIKH 1998.

The anti-Byzantine interpretations of the Qur'ānic passages also affect the main reading, *ḡulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yaḡlibūna*. In the commentaries, several explanations are advanced to motivate the Believers' attitude toward the Romans' victory. However, no explanation attributes to the former any sympathy for the latter. The Byzantines are now presented as polytheists, like the Zoroastrian Sasanians.<sup>11</sup> As EL CHEIKH concludes, "the commentaries do not provide enough historical information concerning the events mentioned in the sura". Rather, the study of the *tafsir* on Q 30:2–5 helps us "to disclose the conceptual framework within which the commentaries were produced".<sup>12</sup>

Most Western scholars have accepted the *textus receptus*, that is, *qirā'a #1*, and taken vv. 2–3 as a reference to the Byzantine-Sasanian war. Some researchers, however, prefer *qirā'a #2*. In his monograph *The Death of a Prophet*, Stephen SHOEMAKER argues that *qirā'a #2* should be privileged over *qirā'a #1*. In his view, *qirā'a #2* makes more sense of the statement about the Believers' rejoicing. This rejoicing would occur on the day of the Romans' defeat, not on the day of their victory, as required by *qirā'a #1*. This expression of enthusiasm was motivated by the eventual victory of the Believers over the Roman enemies. SHOEMAKER suggestively argues:

Quite possibly then, these verses were added to the Qur'ān only sometime after Muḡammad's death, as the Muslims found themselves increasingly in competition with Christianity. In this context, such a tradition may have been invented in order to have Muḡammad successfully predict future world events, as Jesus, for instance, had predicted the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44, 21:5–24).<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Manfred KROPP stresses that the expression of sympathy of the Believers in the Qur'ān is ambiguous regardless of the reading that one decides to follow. KROPP asks:

Why should early Muslims, near to heterodox Christianity or heterodox Judaism, sympathize with either of these two powers? Byzantium was the sworn religious enemy; Persia, after having conquered Jerusalem, very quickly disappointed hopes for getting back the 'promised land' and in general was not more generous to both confessions.<sup>14</sup>

These considerations led KROPP to formulate another (and more radical) reading of the passage. In his view, vv. 2–3 should be understood as an invective against

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 361 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>13</sup> SHOEMAKER 2011, 154.

<sup>14</sup> KROPP 2016, 289.

the Byzantines formulated by the Qur'ān's prophet. The passage should be understood as opening with a curse: *ḡulibat al-Rūm*, “the Romans be vanquished”, followed by a prognostication about its accomplishment in the future: *sa-yaḡlibūna*, “and they will be vanquished”. KROPP concludes that “certainly, a prophetic curse against enemies of God and the Muslim faith in general fits better into the context”.<sup>15</sup>

While SHOEMAKER's and KROPP's readings are thought-provoking and raise important questions, there are reasons to privilege the standard vocalization. The first element supporting the correctness of *qirā'a #1* relates to considerations about the transmission of the various *qirā'at* in the Islamic sources. As noted, ideological considerations seem to have supported the popularity of *qirā'a #2*. This reminds us of the important role of ideology in the development of Qur'ānic exegesis, for which the selection and transmission of traditional knowledge usually was determined, not by historical accuracy, but by exegetical value. On these bases, one may speculate that the commentators would have had much more interest in accepting and transmitting *qirā'a #2* because this reading puts vv. 2–3 in a framework in which the Qur'ān's prophet foretells events easily identifiable with the eventual victory of the Believers over the Byzantines. SHOEMAKER correctly observes that “the later commentary tradition certainly remembers the fulfillment of this prophecy as having convinced many of the truth of Muḥammad's message”.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the convenience of this reading for the construction of collective memory and shared sacred history, one is amazed that this reading emerged only at a later moment and that it remained secondary. For several reasons, one is thus tempted to speculate that if *qirā'a #1* prevailed over *qirā'a #2*, despite having less exegetical appeal, that is, because it was the original reading.<sup>17</sup>

There are additional arguments for the authenticity of *qirā'a #1* against *qirā'a #2*. A comparison between Q 30:2–3 and contemporary 7th c. sources provides other, more decisive evidence pointing in this direction. When read in accordance with *qirā'a #1*, the opening verses of sūrat al-Rūm bear a striking resemblance to

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15 Ibid.

16 SHOEMAKER 2011, 154.

17 Nicolai SINAI correctly observes that “the majority reading (“The Romans have been vanquished ... they shall vanquish”) is surely preferable: it is easier to imagine that some Muslims were tempted to turn a verse that had originally alluded to the Byzantine-Sassanid war ending in 628 into a miraculous prediction of the Islamic victory over the Byzantines than to see why a triumphant prediction of the Islamic conquests, which later Muslims clearly perceived as confirming Muḥammad's claim to prophethood, should have been transformed, by the majority of Quranic readers, into a reference to an obscure pre-Islamic war”. SINAI 2014, 515, n. 23.

prophecies circulating in the Middle East at the time when the Qur'ānic passage purportedly was formulated.

## Parallels in contemporary sources

In a passage of the *History of Maurice*, composed by Theophylact Simocatta during the reign of Heraclius (r. 610–641 CE), the author reports a prophecy attributed to the Sasanian sovereign Khosrow II. The scene takes place before the outbreak of the Byzantine-Sasanian conflict when, after being dethroned by the usurper Vahram, Khosrow fled to Byzantine territory. Theophylact's report reads as follows:

But I will not overlook what Chosroes, who was well versed in the burdensome folly of the Chaldaeans concerning the stars, is said to have prophesied at the height of the war. For when the renowned John, the general of the Armenian force, jeered at him on account of his lack of order, and said that it was wrong for a king to be perverse in his ways and outlandish in the impulses of his heart, they say that the barbarian said to the general: If we were not subject to the tyranny of the occasion, you would not have dared, general, to strike with insults the king who is great among mortals. But since you are proud in present circumstances, you shall hear what indeed the gods have provided for the future. Be assured that troubles will flow back in turn against you 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, when the forces of destruction will be handed over to dissolution and those of the better life hold sway.<sup>18</sup>

The events foretold by Khosrow in this passage refer to the conflict between the Byzantines and Persians that would take place immediately after the prophecy had been uttered. In fact, there are few doubts that the description of the initial fortune of the "Babylonian race", later overturned by the Roman power, refers to the evolution of the Byzantine-Sasanian war.<sup>19</sup>

Another prophecy about the conflict between the two empires occurs in a Syriac apocalypse attributed to Ephrem (d. 373) that was in fact composed around the middle of the 7th century.<sup>20</sup> Among the events predicted to take place in the future, Ps.-Ephrem alludes to the war between Romans and Persians:

<sup>18</sup> *History* 15.3–7, trans. in WHITBY and WHITBY 1983, 153.

<sup>19</sup> See REININK 2002, 87–89.

<sup>20</sup> See REININK 2003, 168–171.

***And the Assyrians will gain authority \* Over the region of the Romans [...] \* But just as the Nile, the river of Egypt \* Recedes again from what it flooded; \* So too will Assyria recede \* Back to their own country. \* For the Romans once again will be found \* In their ancestral land. \* Then evil will increase on the earth [...].***<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Christian authors, several 7th c. Jewish sources refer to the Byzantine-Sasanian conflict. In the Jewish apocalyptic work *Sefer Elijah*, we read, in connection with the events that the angel Michael reveals to Elijah at Mount Carmel:

***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.*** Three mighty warriors will come up to oppose him from the west, but they will be handed over into his control. Then the lowliest of the kings, the son of a slave woman and whose name is Gīgīt, will confront him from the west [...] At that time he will attack the faithful people, and he will provoke at that time three agitations [...] ***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” (Dan 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.<sup>22</sup>

Compared to previous texts, this passage in *Sefer Elijah* is cryptic and requires further clarification. The last king of Persia appears as the last member of the Sasanian dynasty, which is destined to collapse soon after the end of the conflict. The author of *Sefer Elijah* appears to confuse, or perhaps conflate, the Sasanian ruler Kavad II and Khosrow II (the former became king after the latter was murdered in a court conspiracy). It is noteworthy that the passage is preceded by a hermeneutical discussion in which Khosrow (*ḥsrw*) is identified as the king during whose reign “the time of the End Day” is appointed.<sup>23</sup> This identification appears to be consistent with the widespread idea – discussed below – that the conflict would immediately precede the beginning of the eschatological drama.

In addition to the identity of the last king of Persia, the prophecy contains references to the actual conflict. The precarious opposition to the Persians by the three (enigmatic) mighty warriors echoes the initial crisis of the Byzantines.

<sup>21</sup> Trans. REEVES. Available at: <https://clas-pages.uncc.edu/john-reeves/research-projects/trajectories-in-near-eastern-apocalyptic/pseudo-ephrem-syriac/>. My thanks to John Reeves for sharing with me a more updated translation of Ps.-Ephrem’s text.

<sup>22</sup> Trans. REEVES 2005, 33.

<sup>23</sup> The other opinions reported about the identity of this eschatological figure, that is, Artaxerxes and Cyrus, may reflect the debate about the correct interpretation of the Danielic prophecy on the four kingdoms (cf. *ibid.*).



Gigīt is probably the usurper Byzantine emperor Phokas (602–610).<sup>24</sup> The coming of the king from the West is best explained as a reference to the military ascent of Heraclius, who emerged as a new protagonist when, starting from the western province of Byzantine Africa, he led a revolt that resulted in the dethronement of Phokas. The attack on the "holy beautiful mountain" attributed to this king from the West is probably an allusion to Heraclius' conquest of Jerusalem and to his solemn restoration of the holy relic of the True Cross. The passage also refers to Heraclius' oppressive policy against the Jews of Palestine, which culminated in their compulsory baptism and forced conversion to Christianity. It is not surprising that *Sefer Elijah* pays much attention to the vicissitudes experienced by the "faithful people". The scenario here appears to be the same as the one described in the prophecies examined above. There is no room for doubt that the passage quoted from the *Sefer Elijah* refers unequivocally to the 7th c. conflict between Byzantines and Sasanians.

As the reader may have noticed, the prophecies mentioned bear a striking resemblance to the prophecy in Q 30:2–6. To fully appreciate these resemblances, we must first undertake an analysis of the cultural and historical context in which these Christian and Jewish texts were produced.

## Eschatological ideologies

In the texts examined above, the Byzantine-Sasanian war clearly was seen as a very important event in the development of God's plan for salvation. All these texts share the idea that the conflict between the Byzantines and Sasanians is the prelude to the beginning of the eschatological process. In Khosrow's prophecy the victory of the Romans over the Persians immediately precedes the Eschaton, when "the day without evening will dwell among mortals and the expected fate will achieve power, when the forces of destruction will be handed over to dissolution and those of the better life hold sway". Ps.-Ephrem advises his audience that "the final age has arrived". Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in both Ps.-Ephrem and *Sefer Elijah*, the conflict appears as the first of several events that will lead

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<sup>24</sup> See REEVES 2005, 33, n. 21. However, cf. *ibid.* n. 23, with reference to WILKEN's opinion about the possible identity of Gigīt with Heraclius. The charge of attacking the faithful people may indeed be referring to Heraclius' anti-Judaic policies (*vide infra*). It is also possible that as in the case of the last king of Persia, the author is here confusing or conflating together two different historical characters.

to the conclusion of the eschatological drama. This war is the first sign of the imminence of the End.

The attribution of an eschatological dimension to the conflict is symptomatic of the pessimistic sentiments that the war raised among those who lived in that historical period. Sources confirm that contemporaries increasingly felt that they were witnessing events known to precede the end of time. The Persian seizure of the Holy Land and of the True Cross may have generated chiliastic anxieties among the Christians of the Byzantine Empire. At the same time, for Jews, the temporary liberation of Jerusalem from “Roman” yoke spread Messianic hopes and apocalyptic expectations. The re-establishment of Byzantine authority over the holy city and the anti-Judaic policy adopted by Heraclius’ administration were similarly understood as components of the ongoing eschatological process. In sum, the conflict was seen by many, Jews and Christians, as an unequivocal sign of the imminence of the End and as the accomplishment of prophecies found in their sacred books.<sup>25</sup>

In the eyes of many, the conflict appeared to confirm the idea that the destiny of the Greco-Roman Empire was linked to the beginning of the Messianic era. This idea followed the hermeneutical reading of the prophecies of the four kingdoms in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 2, 7 and 8), which identify the Empire as the fourth and last world power. In accordance with this hermeneutic, Byzantium came to be understood as the last kingdom before the beginning of the eschatological process. For this reason, it is not surprising that chiliastic anxieties reemerged and relapsed each time the Empire faced difficult periods. At the same time, the widely accepted identification of the Roman Empire as the last world power provoked a wide range of speculations about the role that this last kingdom would play in God’s plan for sacred history. According to an idea widely spread among both Jews and Christians, the fall of Rome is among the *condiciones sine quibus non* for the fulfillment of the eschatological process. But another tendency in the Christian reading of Biblical prophecies on the End also emerged. From as early as the 4th century – namely, after Constantine’s adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion – several Christian writers appear to have been engaged in a “propagandistic” exercise designed to confer on the Byzantine Empire a more positive role in God’s plan for human salvation. According to this new interpretation of the Danielic schema of the four kingdoms, the Roman Empire, recently converted to Christianity, is the last world power destined to prepare the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>26</sup> Different expressions of this ideological reading of

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<sup>25</sup> See REININK 2002, 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> See STOYANOV 2011, 380–381.

world history occur in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 340), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) and, in a still more “militant” way, in the *Christian Topography* by Cosmas Indicopleustes (6th c. CE).<sup>27</sup> Of course, such idealizations of the Empire and the related readings of the Danielic prophecies were especially useful for imperial propaganda during the not-uncommon periods when the Empire was engaged in conflict with its Persian neighbor. This implication can be observed in the works of the Syriac author Aphrahat (d. 345), who wrote as a Christian living in Sasanian territory. As Craig MORRISON rightly observes about the passages in the *Demonstrations* that deal with the prophecies of the four kingdoms, “Aphrahat saw in the book of Daniel a view of history that confirmed his hope that God would grant success to the recently converted Roman emperor in a campaign against Shapur II. The succession of kingdoms in Daniel enjoyed divine sanction and the fourth kingdom, Rome, would endure until Christ’s second coming.”<sup>28</sup>

The ideological reading of scriptures by Aphrahat, Eusebius and other writers served as an important precedent for later Byzantine policies. Imperial authority now had a solid theoretical base upon which it could build new eschatological ideals. It was now possible to offer a rosier perspective about the role of the Empire in God’s plans for human salvation. As destabilizing as they might be, apocalyptic fears could be turned into a powerful political weapon when the sword of propaganda was properly brandished. There is evidence for propagandistic policies marked by intense eschatological inclinations throughout the 6th century.<sup>29</sup> This imperial eschatological ideology was refined in the 7th c., when the war against the Persians introduced new political issues. On the Byzantine side, the conflict came to be understood as a real holy war, a representation supported by imperial propaganda. In Heraclius’ speeches to his troops, as reported in the *Chronographia* by Theophanes the Confessor (d. ca. 818), the intent to inflame the religious fervor of the Emperor’s Christian subjects clearly emerges.<sup>30</sup> The new coinage minted in 615–616 was designed to remind its users of Byzantium’s cosmocratic vocation.<sup>31</sup> Also, after the end of the conflict, many of Her-

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<sup>27</sup> On which see SIVERTSEV 2011, 11–13).

<sup>28</sup> MORRISON 2004, 79. On Aphraat’s interpretation of the Danielic prophecy, see also UBIERNA 2012, 149–154.

<sup>29</sup> As MAGDALINO rightly observes, “sixth-century emperors did not dread, but actually looked forward to, the consummation of the world.” MAGDALINO 1993, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. NICOVICH 2014, 15–16, STOYANOV 2011, 61–62.

<sup>31</sup> As HOWARD-JOHNSON observes, in the symbolism engraved on the reverse of the new coins “the core ideology of the Christian empire was also signaled – that the Romans alone were authorized by God to rule the earth”. HOWARD-JOHNSON 1999, 37.

acilius' actions appear to have been dictated by the need to reaffirm the central role of the Empire within the divine project and to claim the lasting character of Byzantine power until the end of the world.<sup>32</sup>

Court writers charged the conflict with religious connotations and spread the ideology that underlined imperial policies. A well-known example is that of Heraclius' panegyrist George of Pisidia. In his poetic production, Heraclius' counter-offensive is presented as a cosmological struggle against the evil forces of Satan, personified in the person of Khusraw II, and his victory over the latter is portrayed as a renovation of the world.<sup>33</sup> The conflict was thus not only religious but also a turning point in the sacred history of human salvation.

The representation of the victorious imperial campaigns as eschatological events of cosmic grandeur satisfied multiple tasks. First, it should be noted that in the very same period, Sasanian policy was shaped by similar apocalyptic tendencies. PAYNE has drawn attention to the fact that beliefs about the fulfillment of an eschatological process were current at the Sasanian court. According to Zoroastrian cosmology, "the world was on the march towards the end of time, when the cosmos would be restored to its originally pure and peaceful state".<sup>34</sup> The awareness of this imminent cosmic event would have dictated the policy of the Sasanian sovereigns, upon whom "it was, therefore, now incumbent [...] to demonstrate their success at securing the submission of the known world to their all-encompassing majesty."<sup>35</sup> The Byzantine power had to be subdued and this was exactly the task that Khosraw II was about to accomplish. Heraclius' need to re-affirm Byzantium's cosmocratic predestination to prepare Christ's second advent should also be read in light of parallel pretensions advanced on the Sasanian side.

The eschatological dimension attributed to Heraclius' actions was not limited to considerations of foreign policy. It also fit with problems internal to the Byzantine state. As noted, fears about the imminent collapse of Roman power did not fail to emerge among the Christian citizens of the Empire. Despite glorious

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**32** Scholars agree on the strong apocalyptic tones of Heraclius' policies during and after the conflict and on his intention to represent his actions as the realization of an eschatological process. See STOYANOV 2011, 67 and related bibliography (n. 186).

**33** Commenting on George's *Heraclias*, STOYANOV rightly observes that "Heraclius' exploits were thus extolled with eschatological imagery: his reinstatement of imperial and Christian victory over Persia amounted to a renewal and recreation of the world, inaugurating a new era, which makes him a worthy bearer of the titles 'commander of the cosmic rebirth' and *kosmorystēs* ('saviour of the world')" (ibid., 66).

**34** PAYNE 2013, 6.

**35** Ibid., 5.

representations of Heraclius’ campaigns, many people persisted in believing that the eschatological process could not be stopped, and that Byzantine power was about to collapse.<sup>36</sup> The need to transmit a firm and reassuring signal about imperial stability was imperative. In much the same way, the propaganda responded to anti-imperial apocalyptic speculations and to messianic expectations that had arisen within the Jewish community. According to the predominant rabbinical perspective, the fall of Byzantium was a condition for the fulfillment of the eschatological process. However, as SIVERTSEV has pointed out, many 7th c. Jewish sources testify to the elaboration of a more complex and sophisticated view, in which Israel is depicted as the heir of Roman authority and as the power that will establish the ultimate and lasting Messianic world dominion. In the ideological struggle for the primacy of the eschatological cosmocracy, Israel became a competitor to Byzantine power.<sup>37</sup> Examples of these tendencies elaborated in Jewish circles are a *piyyut* attributed to Eliezer ha-Qallir (d. ca. 640)<sup>38</sup> and the influential Jewish apocalypse known as *Sefer Zerubabel*.<sup>39</sup>

## Prophecy and ideology

Not surprisingly, the different prophecies examined above reflect different ideological positions and the different sectarian *milieux* in which they were elaborated. *Sefer Elijah* features many concepts about history and related ideological views found in contemporary Jewish works. In the passage quoted above, the king rising from the West – ostensibly Heraclius – is identified with “the horn that Daniel foresaw”. This reference to the Danielic prophecy demonstrates the ideological representation of Heraclius’ reign as the last world power according to the four kingdoms schema. It is likely that the phrase in question refers to the small horn mentioned in Daniel 7:7, a tropic image for the last wicked kingdom in the Danielic prophecy. This king from the West, whose coming is described as “ravaging and horrifying the world”, reflects the hostility of the Jews to the ascent of Heraclius. This representation is consistent with the traits ascribed to the demoniac figure of the wicked king Armilos in contemporary Jewish texts.<sup>40</sup> The view expressed by the author of *Sefer Elijah* differs considerably from the

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<sup>36</sup> See REININK 2002, 83.

<sup>37</sup> See SIVERTSEV 2011, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>38</sup> On this *piyyut* see STEMBERGER 1999, 268–270; VAN BEKKUM 2002 and SIVERTSEV 2011.

<sup>39</sup> See SIVERTSEV 2011, 158.

<sup>40</sup> On the figure of Armilos see: REEVES 2005, 19–22, VAN BEKKUM 2002, 107 ff.

representation of the Emperor as a salvific actor by his official panegyrist George of Pisidia.

The rest of the prophecy in the Jewish apocalypse displays the same anti-imperial ideological reading of sacred history. Of course, no reference is made to the everlasting character of the reign of the wicked king from the West. Rather, the series of events foretold in the prophecy points to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. According to the author(s) of *Sefer Elijah*, the eschatological process that will lead to the final events has begun and nothing can now save the last world empire from its imminent fall. Significantly, the prognostication makes no mention of the victory of the Romans over the Persians; the rise of Heraclius was recorded only for the destruction of the Holy Land and of “the holy beautiful mountain”. Even more annoying for imperial eschatological ideology, *Sefer Elijah* reflects the tendency in Jewish circles to deprive the Roman Empire of its everlasting power and to transfer that power to the Messianic kingdom of Israel. The prophecy continues by predicting that the gentile nations will bow in front of the people of Israel after the advent of the Messiah.

Views diametrically opposed to those exposed in *Sefer Elijah* are found in the prophecy attributed to Khosraw II, as reported in Theophylact Simocatta’s *History of Maurice*. The prophecy is presented as an admonishment on the unpredictability of fate addressed by the overthrown shah to a Roman general who mocks him. However, the account undoubtedly bears a second, more important implication. Putting a prophecy about the final outcome of a war-to-come in the mouth of the one who will later figure as the opponent of the Byzantines in this conflict means making him foretell, and implicitly admit, his eventual defeat by the latter. Previous scholarship has not failed to notice the propagandistic agenda underlining Khosraw’s prophecy.<sup>41</sup> The ideological dimension of this prognostication has been compared to one observable in a Syriac apocalypse composed soon after the end of the Byzantine-Sasanian, conflict entitled *Neṣḥānā d-leh d-Aleksandrōs*. The main purpose of the author of the *Neṣḥānā* is to predict the glorious future of the Byzantine Empire. This task is achieved by two prophecies, attributed respectively to Alexander and to Tūbarlaq, king of the Persians – avatar of Darius III. This second prophecy is particularly relevant to our comparison with the prophecy reported by Theophylact Simocatta.

The prophecy is reported at the end of the *Neṣḥānā*, after the account of Alexander’s victory over the king of Persia. Here Tūbarlaq gives Alexander a written version of the divination articulated by his astrologers. According to this prog-

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<sup>41</sup> See Theophylact Simocatta 1986, 153, nn. 80, 81; REININK 1985, 274, n. 47, 279; id. 2002, 87–89; id. 2003, 159–160; STOYANOV 2011, 63–64.

nostication, “Persia should be laid waste by the hand of the Romans, and all the kingdoms be laid waste, but that power should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom to the Messiah who is to come.”<sup>42</sup> Noticeably, the propagandistic message elaborated by the author of the *Neṣḥānā* builds on the same literary device used in Khosrow’s prophecy. In both cases, a prognostication about the glorious future of the Greco-Roman Empire is fictitiously uttered by the Persian archenemy, eventually destined to succumb. The coincidence is meaningful. It is not improbable that the author of the *Neṣḥānā* had knowledge of pseudo-prophetic material of the kind reported by Theophylact Simocatta. We can imagine that he used a similar prophecy in which Darius III/Tūbarlaq anticipated his successor Khosrow II in foretelling the outcomes of the contention between his and Alexander’s dynasties.<sup>43</sup> Whether the relationship between Khosrow’s and Tūbarlaq’s prophecies is direct or indirect, their occurrence in two contemporary sources demonstrates how advocates of Byzantium’s triumph promoted propagandistic material of this kind.

Placing the above-mentioned prognostications within the vivid contemporary discussion about the eschatological role of the Roman Empire, STOYANOV rightly observes that “these apocalyptic prophecies forged in Byzantine wartime propaganda inevitably develop the scenario of a Roman victory setting the stage for the advent of the eternal kingdom of Christ”.<sup>44</sup> Such optimism, however, was soon to be dashed by the abrupt turn taken by history in the years immediately following. The sudden appearance of a new political actor on the scene of sacred history called into question the eschatological role of the Empire. The defeats inflicted by the Arabs on the Byzantines and their occupation of numerous Byzantine territories, including Jerusalem, re-ignited theological concerns and apocalyptic anxieties that had emerged earlier during the conflict with the Sasanians. Even more annoying for Byzantine ideologists was the revival of Jewish Messianic expectations by the difficulties the Empire was facing. Imperial propagandists and, more generally, people who wished to express loyalty toward the Byzantine emperor, had to engage once more with the idea that the inevitable fall of the Empire was now close at hand.

To answer these new challenges, imperial eschatological ideology was re-adapted to fit the new historical scenario. New texts containing new prophecies

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<sup>42</sup> Trans. in WALLIS-BUDGE 1889, 158.

<sup>43</sup> The Syriac author puts much emphasis on the fact that Tūbarlaq would have delivered to Alexander a handwritten version of the prophecy. This suggests that he was referring to prophecies attributed to Alexander’s Persian enemy and that were widely transmitted by Byzantine propagandists.

<sup>44</sup> STOYANOV 2011, 63–64.

were composed to reiterate the claim that the Greco-Roman Empire was the last, everlasting kingdom.<sup>45</sup> The first text in which these views about the development of sacred history are found is the homily of Ps.-Ephrem. After predicting the victory of “the Romans” over “the Assyrians”, Ps.-Ephrem addresses the sudden appearance of the Arabs, whom he designates as the progeny of Hagar. The Arab invasion is an event leading one step closer to the End. The prophecy continues by predicting the destruction of Arab rule by the impious nations of Gog and Magog, who at God’s command, will assemble and clash against the Ishmaelites. Only after the defeat of the Ishmaelites by Gog and Magog and after the destruction of the latter by God’s angels will the Roman Empire rise again and establish the final and lasting world-dominion.

Ps.-Ephrem uses and elaborates on some key concepts from previous propagandistic works to describe the various phases of the apocalyptic scenario.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the section dealing with the wall built by Alexander against Gog and Magog is directly derived from the *Neṣḥānā*. The opening prophecy on the conflict between the Romans and the “Assirians” closely resembles the prophecy attributed to Khosrow II in Theophylact Simocatta’s work. At the same time, Ps.-Ephrem’s reassigning of the Byzantine Empire to its traditional eschatological role as the ultimate world power does not appear to be a propagandistic device, as it is found in sources he might have known. As Reinink has convincingly argued, Ps.-Ephrem likely lived in a Monophysite environment.<sup>47</sup> As in later Jacobite writers, the author presents the defeats suffered by the Empire at the hands of, first, the Persians and, later, the Arabs as a consequence of persecutions of the faithful – i. e. the Monophysites by the Chalcedonian persecutors. In general, Ps.-Ephrem appears to be more interested in illustrating the temporary character of the Arab kingdom than in spreading the message of Byzantium’s glorious future.

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<sup>45</sup> *Vaticinia* that are exemplars of this process are that of Constans II and the one elaborated in the *Apocalypse of Ps. Methodius*, both formulated to vindicate the eschatological role of Byzantium as the last world power of sacred history despite the Arab challenge. For two recent studies providing different views on the origins of this tradition, see POTESTÀ 2011 and SHOEMAKER 2015.

<sup>46</sup> REININK 2003, 168–161.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 168–171.



## Making sense of Q 30:2–7

When the opening verses of Q 30 are read in accordance with *qirā'a* #1 (*ḡulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yaḡlibūna*) the following dynamic of defeat/victory of the Romans by and over their unnamed enemy closely parallels the dynamic described in other 7th c. prophecies. The parallelism is especially close to Khosrow's prophecy in the *History of Maurice*<sup>48</sup> and to the *Apocalypse* of Ps.-Ephrem, where the alternation of Roman defeat and victory is exposed as clearly as in the Qur'ānic passage. These parallels suggest that *qirā'a* #1 should be considered the original reading and that the prophecy on the Rūm addresses the conflict with the Sasanians.

Another question that can be asked concerns the purpose of the prophecy on the Romans' victory in Q 30:2–3. It should be noted that the prophecies studied here make use of the *vaticinium ex eventu*, as is typical in apocalyptic texts. This literary device accurately attributes recent events to an authoritative personality from the past – in the present cases, Elijah, Ephrem and Khosrow II. When the present is projected into the past, it becomes future, and whoever can predict the future becomes a seer, a visionary, a prophet and hence, a person whose words should be listened to. By using a *vaticinium ex eventu*, an author improves his own prophetic authority – or better, the authority under whose name he writes. Once he has gained the reader's confidence in his prophetic credentials, he formulates a “genuine” prediction about the “real” future, thereby expressing his own expectations. One reasonably may assume that, as in the other prophecies, the prophecy in the Qur'ān represents a *vaticinium ex eventu* and that vv. 2–3 of Q 30 were formulated to increase the prophetic authority of the author(s) in the eyes of the readers/listeners. From this perspective, vv. 4–7 become particularly interesting.

Like other contemporary prophecies, the Qur'ānic passage situates the conflict involving the Romans in an apocalyptic framework. In fact, the claims at v. 4, “God is in command, first and last”, and at v. 5, “God helps whoever He pleases”, suggest that the victory of the Rūm is in accordance with God's wish and is part of the divine project. That the Qur'ān here is addressing sacred history is confirmed by the temporal expression at v. 4: *wa-yawma'idīn* (“and on that day”), which, in the Qur'ān, refers to the Day of the Judgment. Similarly, v. 6: “this is the promise (*wa'd*) of God, He does not break His promise” has a strong apocalyptic connotation (*wa'd* signifies God's eschatological promise). In general, the prophecy in

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<sup>48</sup> The parallel is acknowledged by SHOEMAKER in SHOEMAKER 2014, 537–538. The acknowledgment of this parallel, however, jars with SHOEMAKER's previous reading of Q 30:2–3 in SHOEMAKER 2011, 154.

Q 30 predicts that sacred history will unfold in the same manner as expressed in other prophecies about the conflict. The defeat of the Romans will be followed by their victory, which immediately precedes the Eschaton. As in other contemporary texts, Q 30:2–7 represents the conflict in which the Romans were engaged as a crucial step in the eschatological process.

## Dating Q 30:2–7

Sūrat al-Rūm has traditionally been assigned to the so-called Meccan section of the Qur'ān, that is, the part of the text that putatively reflects Muḥammad's prophetic career in Mecca before moving to Yathrib. According to NÖLDEKE's chronology, which is accepted by many Western scholars, the sura is assigned to the third Meccan period, that is to say Muḥammad's last years in Mecca.<sup>49</sup> Both traditional and Nöldekian chronologies place Q 30 in the period preceding Muḥammad's move to Yathrib in 622 CE.<sup>50</sup> Now, this dating means that the author of the prophecy correctly guessed – by either divine inspiration or chance – the future outcome of the conflict. Alternatively, one may posit that the Romans' defeat and victory mentioned in Q 30 do not refer to the conflict with the Persians in general, but to individual events or specific battles. However, the very precise correspondences between the Qur'ānic verses and the contemporary prophecies examined above makes this second possibility very unlikely. In fact, like other contemporary sources, the prognostication on the Rūm treats the war as a general event that occupies a very specific place in the development of sacred history. As observed in the previous section, given the very accurate description of the final outcome of the war, the prophecy on the Rūm should be taken as a *vaticinium ex eventu*. Put in different terms, like other prophecies about the outcome of the conflict, the prophecy in Q 30 should be understood as a description *a posteriori* of events that already had taken place. Thus, a *terminus post quem* for its compo-

<sup>49</sup> NÖLDEKE 2013, 58, 122–123.

<sup>50</sup> As recent scholarship is increasingly acknowledging, the chronological systems of the Qur'ān elaborated by both classical commentators and modern scholars are not reliable. The reliability is theoretically undermined by their heavy reliance on sources of questionable historical value. Some recent attempts to establish a chronology on the basis of stylometric data have failed to achieve more satisfying results (in particular I refer to the works by SADEGHI and SINAI in SADEGHI 2011; SINAI 2010; id. forthcoming. The present author is writing a criticism of these studies). The case of Q 30:2–7, as well as that of Q 18:83–102 addressed in the final pages of this article, point to the fragility of the established Qur'ānic chronologies. On chronology see REYNOLDS 2011; DYE 2011: 256–60; TESEI 2011.

sition should be fixed in the year 628, when Heraclius signed the peace treaty that put an end to the conflict. It was only after this event that the various prophecies on the Byzantine-Sasanian war – including the prophecy in the Qur’ān – could have been formulated. Now, I would like to argue that positing such a late date for the composition of the prophecy in Q 30:2–7 also facilitates the reconstruction of the possible circumstances for the transmission of prophecies on the war to the environment in which the Qur’ānic pericope emerged.

## Contextualizing Q 30:2–7

As is known, both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires had traditionally relied on the alliance of Arab vassals. The two tribal confederations of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids had been prominently involved in the clashes between the two superpowers until the end of the 6th century. At the turn of the century, however, the empires repudiated the alliance with their respective vassals. On the Byzantine side, the repudiation followed a deterioration in the relationship with the Ghassanids. The arrest and the exile of the *phylarch*, al-Mundīr b. al-Ḥārīṭ, in 582, triggered an open revolt of Byzantium’s Arab *foederati*. On the Sasanian side, the event of note was the deposition in 602 of the Naṣrid ruler al-Nu‘mān by Khosrow II. Peter EDWELL rightly observes that these decisions had considerable consequences for the development and outcome of the 7th c. conflict.<sup>51</sup> Without the conspicuous involvement of local auxiliaries, the Arab limes became more exposed when the empires decided to concentrate their military activities on that front. This was the case when Khosrow’s troops advanced in the Byzantine provinces of Syria and Palestine. At the same time, although more limited than in previous military campaigns, the involvement of Arab allies on both sides of the battlefield is confirmed by the sources. In July 622 in Armenia, Heraclius defeated an army led by an Arab chief loyal to the Sasanians.<sup>52</sup> Arab confederates accompanied Byzantine forces that invaded Sasanian territory and defeated the Sasanians at a battle fought near Niniveh in 627. The *Chronicon Paschale* mentions the presence of “the Saracenes who are subject to our Christ-loving state”.<sup>53</sup>

In the years immediately following the end of the conflict in 628, with the territorial expansion of the proto-Muslim community in the Byzantine and Sasanian provinces, the relationship between the Arab vassals and the two world powers

<sup>51</sup> EDWELL 2015, 275. See also KAEGI 1992, 52–54.

<sup>52</sup> See GREATREX / LIEU 2002, 199.

<sup>53</sup> Trans. by WHITBY and WHITBY in *Chronicon Paschale* 1989, 181.

changed again, this time forever. As HOYLAND observes, “these Arab allies of the empires, though they continued to fight for their imperial masters for a while, soon began to switch to the west Arabian coalition of Muḥammad and his successors”.<sup>54</sup> The entrance of Byzantium’s former Arab allies in the community that recognized the Qur’ān as a religiously authoritative text may have been of importance for the question addressed here. It is easy to imagine that these individuals would have served as transmitters of prophecies of the kind outlined above. There are good reasons to think that Arab troops involved in the conflict were aware of similar prognostications. Inasmuch as the prophecy in Q 30 is especially close to those reported in Christian sources, we should focus on Arabs who fought in Heraclius’ army.

One assumes that imperial propagandists had a special interest in spreading the fruits of their literary activity among soldiers. In fact, the sources indicate that Heraclius deliberately encouraged the troops to believe that they were fighting for the sake of God.<sup>55</sup> The promotion of religious fervor among the fighters reached its climax with the idea of martyrdom on the battlefield.<sup>56</sup> In sum, the *basileus* appears to have made many efforts to instill in his soldiers the conviction of being involved in holy combat. For this reason, it would not be surprising if predictions about Byzantium’s positive role within the divine project were included in the “propagandistic packet”. Prophecies composed soon after the conclusion of the conflict might have been promoted among the soldiers with a threefold aim: first, to confirm that the fight they had been involved in was consistent with God’s wish; second, to present the peace-treaty that re-established the *status quo ante* as a temporary solution;<sup>57</sup> and, third, to reaffirm that Byzantium’s cosmocratic vocation would be realized in the immediate future.

There is no reason to doubt that the Arab detachments enrolled in Heraclius’ army were exposed to this kind of propaganda. After relations with the Ghassanid

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54 HOYLAND 2015, 94–95. HOYLAND also suggestively observes that “from this perspective the Arab conquests began as an Arab insurrection, that is, the early conquerors were not invaders coming from outside the empire but insiders trying to seize a share of the power and wealth of the Byzantine state” (ibid.).

55 As HOWARD-JOHNSON notes, “Heraclius portrayed the war as a religious one against a loathsome, pagan enemy and urged his troops to act as God’s *plasmata*, as the obedient agents of His will”. HOWARD-JOHNSON 1999, 39–40.

56 An eloquent example of this attitude is a passage of the speech that the *basileus* gave in 625 CE: “So let us sacrifice ourselves to God for the salvation of our brothers. May we win the crown of martyrdom that we may be praised in future and receive our recompense from God”. Trans. in ibid., 40

57 This seems to have been one of the specific goals of the author of the *Neṣḥānā* (cf. REININK 1986, 274, n. 47; POTESTÀ 2011, 282).

vassals deteriorated in the late 6th century, the need to strengthen the loyalty of the Arab auxiliary troops would have been especially urgent. The promotion of Christianity by the Ghassanid phylarchate since the 5th c. may have facilitated the task. Unlike Heraclius’ Turkish allies – whom contemporary Christians identified with the impious Gog and Magog – Arab Christians in the Byzantine ranks could be inspired by the trope of a holy war as much as Armenians who were fighting at their side. It is easy to imagine that these Arab fighters would have had a direct knowledge of ideological and propagandistic prophecies relating to the conflict. The wide diffusion of Monophysitism among Byzantium’s Arab allies makes this possibility even more likely.

Sources confirm that prophecies about the Byzantine-Sasanian conflict circulated widely in Monophysite circles. The need to secure the loyalty of the Jacobites in the re-conquered territories seems to have been an issue for some pro-imperial writers. At the same time, the dissemination of this propaganda triggered a re-writing of the prophecies, which were used to communicate different messages or to fit with more recent historical developments. A well-known example is the *Neṣḥānā d-leh d-Aleksandrōs*, which was conceived as a manifesto of pro-imperial propaganda addressed to the Christian Monophysites of North Mesopotamia.<sup>58</sup> The work must have circulated widely among the Monophysites for it generated a number of reactions and re-writings. In the span of few years, an anonymous author, Ps.-Jacob of Sarug, composed a metric homily in which he transformed the triumphalist tone of Alexander’s prophecy in the *Neṣḥānā* into a prediction of the Empire’s imminent fall.<sup>59</sup> A few years later, Ps.-Ephrem drew on the Syriac apocalypse on Alexander to formulate his own prediction.<sup>60</sup> As noted, Ps.-Ephrem’s homily confirms the circulation of propagandistic material among Monophysites. The prediction about the outcome of the conflict against the “Assyrians,” which closely resembles the prophecy attributed to Khosrow II, points in this direction.

The question is, “Did these pseudo-prophecies circulate among Arab-speaking Monophysites living under Byzantine rule or fighting in Heraclius’ army? Might this be the channel of transmission to the early Believers of the prophecy on the destiny of the Rūm in Q 30”? Strong support for this assumption is found elsewhere in the Qur’ān. There is evidence that the literary products of imperial propaganda circulated in the environment(s) in which the corpus originated. Specifically, the author(s) of the pericope on Dū-l-Qarnayn at vv. 83–102 of

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<sup>58</sup> According to REININK, the Monophysites “had to be made fully alive to the fact that the emperors’ military achievements in the war against the Persians should now be crowned by the ecclesiastical union of all Christians in one Church of the Empire”. REININK 2003, 164.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, 165–168.

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*, 168–171.

sūrat al-Kahf (Q 18) had direct knowledge of the Syriac *Neṣḥānā*, which he (/they) used as a source.<sup>61</sup> Note that in his adaptation of the narrative told in the Syriac apocalypse the author(s) of Q 18:83–102 did not reproduce any elements relating to imperial propaganda. By contrast to the *Neṣḥānā*, in the Qurʾān the prophecy uttered after the construction of the eschatological barrier against Gog and Magog does not predict any glorious future for the Empire, but only the advent of the Eschaton. The situation is very similar to that observed in the homily of Ps.-Jacob of Sarug, and one wonders whether the author(s) of the Qurʾānic pericope consciously omitted the political implications expressed in the *Neṣḥānā*. In this case, it may be argued that the Alexander story in the *Neṣḥānā* was transmitted to the early Believers after passing through a Monophysite “ideological filter”. From this perspective, it is significant that the same sūrat al-Kahf features other narratives widespread among contemporary Jacobites.<sup>62</sup> A stylistic analysis of the sūra demonstrates that Q 18 – at least in its final shape – is the product of a single author or of a single scribal committee.<sup>63</sup> The author(s) of the Qurʾānic pericope on *Dū-l-Qarnayn* was (/were) a former member(s) of the Monophysite community who joined the proto-Islamic movement.

Q 18:83–102 strongly suggests that Byzantine propagandistic materials circulated among Arab Monophysites who joined the proto-Islamic movement.<sup>64</sup> In support of this scenario it may be added that Byzantine propaganda seems to have had an impact on the authorities who led the primitive community of the Believers. The actions performed by Muʿāwiya (according to the sources) in Jerusalem at the moment of his election as caliph appear to have been inspired by Heraclius’ triumphal entry into the holy city in 630.<sup>65</sup> More generally, in its formative period, the community of the Believers seems to have shared the widespread apocalyptic anxieties that characterized that historical moment. It has been suggested that ideas similar to that of Byzantium’s divinely appointed imperialism

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**61** For a recent analysis of the common points between the two texts see VAN BLADEL 2007 and TESEI 2013–2014.

**62** In particular I refer to the story of the Companion of the Cave at vv. 9–26 (on which see GRIFFITH 2007) and to the story of Moses’ journey to the junction of the two seas at vv. 60–82 (see TESEI 2015).

**63** The present author is working on a study dealing with topics inherent to the critical analysis of Q 18.

**64** As VAN BLADEL observes about Q 18:83–102, since the *Neṣḥānā* “was aimed particularly at Monophysites, as REININK also proposed, then one would expect it to have been deliberately spread among the Monophysite Arabs of the Ghassanid phylarchate, some of Heraclius’ close allies” (VAN BLADEL 2007, 190).

**65** Cf. HEILO 2015, 40; MARSHAM 2013, 90, 102, 107.

help to explain the early territorial expansion of the proto-Muslim community.<sup>66</sup> Some people within the nascent community perceived the wars of expansion as part of an eschatological process.<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to determine the degree to which the political leaders of the new movement formulated or deliberately encouraged any chiliastic agenda.<sup>68</sup> However, whatever “official political line” was followed by the early leaders of the community, ideas closely related to the Byzantine eschatological militarism appear to have had a considerable impact on the new community. As observed above, internal Qur’ānic evidence suggests that prophecies related to the Byzantine apocalyptic ideology were circulating in the environment(s) from which the Qur’ān emerged.

In this context it is easy to imagine how the prophecy on the Rūm in Q 30 may have entered the Qur’ānic corpus. As the proto-Muslim community started its expansion in the imperial Middle Eastern territories, it was joined by Arabs who had been in direct contact with the Byzantine world. Of course, predictions on the Byzantine-Sasanian may have reached the Ḥiğāz. However, given that Q 30:2–7 could only have been formulated after 628, just a few years before the first reported Arab raids in the Palestinian province, it is easier to assume that the transmission took place when the proto-Islamic community reached the environment where the other prophecies on the conflict were produced.

## “And on that day the believers will rejoice”

Before concluding, we shall address a topic that has sparked much debate among both Muslim and Western scholars, that is, the reason why the believers in the Qur’ān are said to rejoice on the day of the Romans’ victory. The question may be reformulated as follows: Can one detect an ideological dimension behind the prophecy on the Rūm in Q 30? Compared to contemporary texts, the Qur’ānic verses bear a striking resemblance to pro-Byzantine prophecies, such as the one reported by Theophylact Simocatta. The expression of joy in the Qur’ān for the Byzantines’ victory points in this direction. It is likely that elements of pro-Byz-

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. SHOEMAKER 2014, 557.

<sup>67</sup> Many Islamic apocalyptic traditions refer to the Arab conquest of Byzantium as the event preceding the advent of the Antichrist, something that appears as a reiteration of the idea that the fall of the Roman Empire would precede the End.

<sup>68</sup> As HEILO rightly observes, “the caliphs might have set out with a very concrete terrestrial aim, but have been dragged along by apocalyptic beliefs that were inherent in the conquest that had brought them to power”. HEILO 2015, 69.



antine propaganda were transmitted to the proto-Islamic environment through the mediation of Arabs fighting in Heraclius' army. In these circumstances, the opening verses of Q 30 serve as a literary witness to an early stage in the formation of the new community during which its member had not yet elaborated a distinct political identity. There is, however, another possible reading of the verses in question.

The temporal expression *wa-yawma'idin* in v. 4 refers to the moment in which the Believers will rejoice in the future. This temporal expression is commonly understood to refer to the day of the Romans' victory and this understanding has generated many discussions about the Qur'ān's apparent expression of sympathy for the Byzantines. As noted, however, in the Qur'ānic corpus the idiom *yawma'idin* usually carries an eschatological connotation and is normally used to designate a specific temporal moment of sacred history, that is, the Eschaton. With this notion in mind, one wonders whether "that day" in Q 30:4 refers to the Romans' victory. In fact, the display of joy by the Believers may refer not to Roman success in the war, but to the Judgment whose appointment – as in other contemporary texts – is believed to follow the end of the conflict. If so, then the prophecy is making a claim about the unavoidable realization of God's plan for human salvation, and not about the Byzantine military triumph. In that case, the function of the opening *vaticinium* at vv. 2–3 is not to magnify the Roman success in the war, but rather to acquire prophetic authority by predicting an event "destined to happen" – a function that coincides with the parallel *vaticinia ex eventu* on the Byzantine-Sasanian conflict used in contemporary prophecies.

One might object that this alternative understanding of the ideology behind the Qur'ānic passage is too elaborate, or an over-interpretation of the text based on scholastic notions not shared by the author(s) of the Qur'ānic prophecy. After all, the pro-Byzantine reading of the passage would appear more immediate. I do not rule out this possibility which, as noted, is supported by the pro-imperial propaganda circulating among Arab Christians immediately before the rise of the new community of the Believers. There is, however, an important element that supports the a-propagandistic (if not anti-Roman) character of the prophecy in *sūrat al-Rūm*. This element emerges when one compares the *vaticinium* in Q 30 with the one found at the end of the pericope on *Ḍū-l-Qarnayn* in Q 18.

There are several reasons why these two prophecies should be compared to each other. First, the two passages have their most immediate parallels (if not their sources) in the same kind of literary material, that is, apocalyptic texts designed to situate the 7th c. conflict in the framework of sacred history. Second, as noted, it is likely that both prophecies were transmitted to the proto-Muslim community through the mediation of Arabs living under Byzantine jurisdiction and fighting in Heraclius' army. Finally, the two Qur'ānic passages likely were



composed in the same period. Q 30:2–7 must have been composed after the conclusion of the peace treaty in 628. Q 18:83–102 could only have been redacted after its source, i. e. the Syriac *Neṣḥānā*, was first created, ca. 629–630.<sup>69</sup> Thus, both prophecies may be understood as contemporaneous expressions of ideas from within the community that produced the literary materials that were later integrated in the Qur'ānic corpus.

When one reads Q 30:2–7 in the context of the a-propagandistic interpretation proposed above, it exactly replicates the case of Q 18:83–102. In both instances, pseudo-prophetic materials originally intended to celebrate the Byzantine Empire are deprived of their propagandistic connotations. In the Qur'ānic passages, the prediction of Byzantium's glorious eschatological mission has been removed and the prophecies simply predict the imminence of the Last Day. This symmetry between the two Qur'ānic prophecies is hardly coincidental. A global overview suggests that the two passages rely on coherent positions and similar attitudes toward the historical events to which they refer. Again, it is tempting to connect these circumstances to the intellectual and ideological debate among Christians living in the Byzantine Empire. In fact, the possible suppression of pro-imperial claims in the two Qur'ānic prophecies may be related to contemporary Monophysite reactions to the imperial propagandistic literature.

## Conclusion

By the time that the conflict with the Sasanians started, the Byzantine Empire had acquired a key role in the eschatological process, namely, that of the last world power before the Eschaton. This position of Byzantium within sacred history had both positive and negative aspects. Positively, as the last kingdom Byzantium could boast a prominent and honorable position in God's plan for human salvation; negatively, the Empire was destined to collapse. In times of turbulence and acute apocalyptic anxiety, each of these two positions could be used to reciprocally strengthen or undermine the confidence of Byzantine subjects. The complexity of these cultural and ideological dynamics may be observed in the three prophecies that have been analyzed on the previous pages. The *vaticinia* reported by Theophylact Simocatta, Ps.-Ephrem and in *Sefer Elijah* all attribute a special position to the conflict in the context of sacred history. The war between the Byzantines and Sasanians is a sign that the eschatological process leading to the

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<sup>69</sup> See REININK 2003, 155–165.

Eschaton has entered its final phase. The views expressed by each author about how this final phase will unfold reflects his personal beliefs, hopes and expectations which, in turn, are dictated by sectarian considerations.

The Qur'ānic prophecy on the Rūm in Q 30 participates in these cultural dynamics. By reading the prophecy against the background of contemporary and parallel texts, I have attempted to offer a new approach to unsolved problems about the correct understanding of the Qur'ānic passage. It has been demonstrated that the *qirā'a* #1 (*ḡulibat al-Rūm ... sa-yaḡlibūna*) should be considered the original reading and that the historical events it addresses are those related to the Byzantine-Sasanian war. A comparison with contemporary texts allows a better understanding of the message that the prophecy probably was meant to express. It appears that, as in the case of other prophecies on the conflict, the prophecy in Q 30 also addresses sacred, and not secular, history. My reading of the Qur'ānic verses suggests that its author(s) understood the events that he (/they) was (/were) witnessing as part of the eschatological process. In this way, the prophecy on the Rūm does not differ from other contemporary attempts to set the current circumstances in an apocalyptic framework. I have also attempted to establish the date on which, and the context in which, the Qur'ānic passage was formulated. The solution proposed for both issues is that the prophecy was transmitted to the proto-Islamic community by Arab Christians living under Byzantine jurisdiction. This happened – it has been argued – at the time of the first contacts between members of the new religious and political community and those Arab speakers who had been exposed to, and participated in, the intellectual dynamics of the Byzantine world. This solution provides a new possible understanding of the enigmatic expression of joy that, according to the Qur'ān, the believers will express after the Byzantine final victory. This obscure passage may be taken as the expression of an ideological reading of sacred history that contemplated the Eschaton as an approaching event.

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 Qur'ānic text. In my view, the Qur'ān should be considered as a literary document that reflects not only Muḡammad's prophetic career in Central Western Arabia, but also the development of the community(/ies) that recognized him as a leader during the first decades of its (/their) territorial expansion. Scholars in Qur'ānic and early Islamic studies should consider the Qur'ān as a text composed of different redactional strata that can be related to several different stages in the development of the early Muslim community.

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