

ARAB VIEWS OF PERSIANS

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Another factor that deserves some attention when relating the Arab Conquest of Iran is the negative view of the Persians reflected in the Quran as not being People of the Book although they did compile the entire Avesta in a Book format and from what I have observed elsewhere, there are references to Alexander the Great burning all the Avestan texts and some more. Nadia maria El Cheikh analyses the exegetical texts pertaining to the opening verses of *Surat al-Rum* (30:1-5) concerning the Byzantine Persian wars of the early seventh century. (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118.3, 1998, pp. 356-364). The texts under scrutiny divulge a changing attitude toward the Byzantines.

At the time of the emperor Heraclius' accession, the Persians were menacing the Byzantine Empire from the east. In 611, the Persians undertook the conquest of Syria, capturing Antioch, the main city of the eastern Byzantine provinces, and, later on, Damascus. In 614, Jerusalem was captured and pillaged. The Byzantines' shock was increased when the Holy Cross was transported to Ctesiphon. The Persians continued their advance, occupying Egypt between 617 and 619. The emperor Heraclius eventually took the offensive, conducting campaigns against the Persians between the years 622 and 628. In 627, he finally defeated the Persians near Nineveh and the Persian king Chosroes was dethroned and killed (by his son). The provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were returned to the Byzantine Empire and the relic of the Holy Cross was reinstalled in Jerusalem.

The Arabs of the peninsula were caught up in the tensions of the superpowers; and the wars, as reflected in the exegetical literature seem to have led to a division within Quraysh between those who thought that the Persians would win and others who counted on a Byzantine victory.

Several Qur'an scholars have alluded to the difficulty in reading and interpreting these verses. These verses have the potential of changing the meaning and the resulting historical explanation. Richard Bell has stated that "it is also difficult to explain Muhammed's favourable interests in the political fortunes of the Byzantine Empire in this early period.

The only correct reading for us is *ghulibat al-Ram*. The Persians defeated the *Rum* from the land of al-Sham to that of Persia, and (after their vanquishing) the *Rum* (shall be victors) over the Persians subsequent to their earlier defeat which is the victory of the believers over the polytheists at Badr.

The *Rum* were defeated. The news, reaching the Prophet and the Companions in Mecca, troubled them, for the Prophet hated the victory of the ignorant (*ummiyyun*) Mazdeans (*Majus*) over the Byzantine People of the Book. The *kuffar* of Mecca rejoiced and meeting the Companions of the Prophet, said: You are People of a Book and so are the Christians, while we are *ummiyyun*. Our brothers the Persians defeated your brothers, and if you are to battle us, we will defeat you...And so God sent down these verses...Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq went to the *kuffar* and said: Are you rejoicing for the victory of your brothers over our brothers? Do not...for, by God, the *Rum* will defeat the Persians, so have we been told by our Prophet.

...As for those who read *ghalabat al-Rum*...on the authority of Abu Sa'id: O the day of the victory of the *Rum* over the Persians, the believers were pleased, so the verse was sent down...On the day of Badr, the *Rum* were victorious over the Persians, so the Muslims rejoiced and God sent these verses...As for the reading *sa-yughlabun*, the meaning is: Following their victory over Persia, they will be defeated by the Muslims, in order for the meaning to be correct...

The commentaries adhering to this traditional reading and interpretation explain the believers' "rejoicing" in religious terms, that is, the "believers shall rejoice" for the victory of the Byzantines, People of the Book, over the pagan Persians. The commentators, thus, stress the importance of the Byzantines' monotheism as a factor determining the Muslims' favorable standpoint.

As the Byzantines –People of the Book – defeated the Persian heathen, so the followers of the Prophet will defeat the *kuffar* of Mecca. Al-Tabari states that the Muslims and the *kuffar* met in battle on the same day the Byzantines and the Persians were confronting one another; God let the Muslims triumph over the polytheists and the People of the Book over the Persians. Al-Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 460/1067), one of the major Twelve Shi'ite exegetes, sees in the Byzantine victory a favorable sign for the ultimate victory of the believers. Al-Tusi states that following the Byzantine defeat, the polytheists of Mecca rejoiced and said: "The Persians do not have a Holy Book and they (the Byzantines) are people of the Book. Thus, we who have no Holy book will defeat Muhammad, who has one. So God sent three verses to comfort the Muslims. Al-Tusi mentions, on the authority of Abu Sa'id, that "victory on the day of Badr was for both groups, for the Prophet and for the Byzantines over the Persians. The believers rejoiced for both victories." The same comment is found in Ibn al'Arabi (d. 543/1148), al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273), and al-Zamakhshari (d. 528/1144). Al-Qurtubi, however, adds that the rejoicing was also for God's promise having been fulfilled.

Al-Tabari, however, gives his own judgement. He states his opinion

clearly and categorically: “The only correct reading for us is *ghulibat al-Rum* and no other reading is acceptable.” Although it is not clear when the two victories were to take place.

Furthermore, al-Qummi likens the Muslims' support for a Byzantine victory to the letters sent by the Prophet Muhammad to the emperors of Byzantium and Persia, inviting them to Islam. Echoing a tradition found in various Arabic texts, Al-Qummi states that “while the Byzantine emperor attached great importance to the Prophet's letter and honored his ambassador, the Persian emperor tore the letter apart and belittled the Prophet.” Al-Qummi is alone among all the commentators I have consulted in explaining these verses in terms of a later Persian defeat by the Muslims and with reference to the reception of the Prophet's letters by the great leaders of the Near East.

The main variant traced mainly to Ibn 'Uar and present in a large number of commentaries, promises an ultimate defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims.

The variant readings of these verses represent what, in A. Rippin's words, is “a conscious attempt to come to grips with an obscure passage by alternative grammatical constructions and lexical variations. Thus, variant readings would support differing interpretations. In the case of our verse the alternative reading seeks to explain the verse by denying a Byzantine triumph and emphasizing, instead, an eventual Muslim victory.

From the eleventh century on, a number of important commentaries communicated markedly negative interpretations of the opening verses of *Suat al-Rum*. The late tenth and early eleventh centuries had seen major Muslim defeats at the hands of the Byzantine emperors. Byzantine incursions into Muslim territory turned into large scale military campaigns leading to the annexation of Cilicia and a large part of northern Syria. The negative tradition that was not emphasized in the commentaries must be linked to the defensive position taken by the Muslims during these turbulent times when the Muslim community was divided and weak. The late eleventh century witnessed the arrival of the Crusaders with their fresh religious message. From then on, a clear consciousness would develop in response to this specific crusading mentality, one that rejected any identification with other monotheists and that placed Jerusalem at the top of its military and cultural agenda.

Starting with the eleventh century, a negative tradition emerged, one that depicted by Byzantines themselves as polytheists. The new direction can be linked to both the Byzantine revival and the advent of the Crusaders.

Unfortunately, the commentaries do not provide enough historical information concerning the events mentioned in the *sura*. The *tafsir*

tradition does not exhibit real historical knowledge of the Byzantine-Persian wars. More important, the commentaries do not supply any historical explanation of economic and political factors that might have enticed the early Muslims to wish for a Byzantine victory. In this regard the commentaries are disappointing.

These conclusive remarks by the author, however, indicates that the Byzantines too soon came to be regarded as pagans by the Muslims, thus making it difficult to contend that they had had preferences for the Byzantines over the Persians. It should also be noted that Arab tribes were almost equally divided in their alliances between Persians and Byzantines.