

THE 'AQABA PLEDGE: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE 'ANṢĀR'S SUBSCRIPTION TO
THE PLEDGE

by

MATTHEW LEE VANAUKE

(Under the Direction of Kenneth Honerkamp)

ABSTRACT

The 'Aqaba pledge was a pivotal moment for early Islamic history. Often, however, it is read and understood in the context of Muhammad's life. Consequently, much remains unanswered concerning the other party to the pledge, viz. the 'Anṣār. Traditionally, it has been understood that the 'Anṣār subscribed to the pledge in the context of their ongoing intertribal wars and that out of a desire to bring an end to those wars, seeing Muhammad as the means for that, they accepted the terms of the pledge. This paper expands on this traditional understanding. It begins by expanding on the traditionally understood sociopolitical context that surrounded the 'Anṣār on the eve of the pledge, looking closely at the Perso-Byzantine war in the early seventh century. It then points to a hitherto unidentified cause that forced the 'Anṣār to desire reconciliation and to accept the terms of the pledge.

INDEX WORDS: 'Aqaba pledge, Jewish Messianism, The Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614, Byzantine, Late Antiquity, Early Islam, 'Anṣār

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MATTHEW LEE VANAUKER

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by

MATTHEW LEE VANAUKER

Major Professor: Kenneth Honerkamp

Committee: Alan Godlas
Carolyn Jones Medine

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2016

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife, my daughter, and my parents.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The ‘Aqaba pledge constitutes a pivotal moment in early Islamic history. It is the moment that heralded in a transformation for the early Islamic community in Mecca, transforming them from a beleaguered and fragile community to a powerful and formidable one. Hitherto, the community in Mecca was beset with troubles, fears, and turmoil. They had been a detested, rejected, and oppressed minority in the eyes of the ruling elite—the Quraysh. However, with the ‘Aqaba pledge, the Muslims gained respite. The pledge afforded them the opportunity to extricate themselves from their dismal and pernicious conditions in Mecca. Whereby, soon after, they migrated from Mecca to Yathrib, that is, present-day Medina. There, they became invigorated with strength, honor, and prestige. Almost in a blink of an eye, they became the ruling majority in Yathrib, and ten years later, that once beleaguered and fragile community grew in strength and numbers, allowing them to conquer all of the Arabian Peninsula, and thereafter, they sprang forth from the Peninsula in all directions, conquering and laying claim to the lands considered today to be the Muslim world. All of this perhaps could never have transpired had it not been for that brief moment in Islamic history that made it all possible, namely, the ‘Aqaba pledge.

With that said, it is important to understand the context and the causes of this pivotal moment. However, any account of it is often read and understood in the context of the Meccan period of Muhammad’s twenty three years as a God’s messenger and prophet. Whereby, only briefly are we made aware of the pledge’s other participants, namely, the ‘Anṣār, making the

context and causes for their participation in the pledge least understood. It is here then that this paper turns, looking at that context and those causes that gave impetus for the ‘Anṣār to pledge to support and to defend Muhammad at all costs and to allow him and his community of followers to take residence in Yathrib without any regard for the social, economic, or political consequences. For their participation in the pledge and their fidelity to its terms, we find in numerous places in the Islamic sources the ‘Anṣār occupying a prominent and esteemed position. For instance, the Qur’ān honors them, referring to their generosity, selflessness, and sacrifice, stating:

And [also for] those who were settled in al-Madinah and [adopted] the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul - it is those who will be the successful.¹

Furthermore, we find in al-Bukhārī, the Prophet according them a lofty status and a high position, stating, “Love for the ‘Anṣār is a sign of faith and hatred for the ‘Anṣār is a sign of hypocrisy.”²

With such high praise and noted esteem, it is imperative to understand with clarity and precision the ‘Anṣār’s participation in the pledge. This paper then is a humble attempt to try to formulate a better understanding of (a) the sociopolitical context for the ‘Anṣār on the eve of the pledge and of (b) the causes that spurred them to undertake such a pledge. In doing so, this paper argues that a complete account of the ‘Anṣār’s role in the ‘Aqaba pledge must take into account not only the sociopolitical context of seventh century Yathrib and Arabian Peninsula but more

¹ Qur’ān, 59:9

² Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 17

importantly the sociopolitical context of the seventh century Near East, looking specifically at the Perso-Byzantine war of the early seventh century. Furthermore, it argues that in addition to the conventionally understood cause of the ‘Anṣār’s subscription to the pledge, which will be identified below, a more pertinent cause existed that prompted the ‘Anṣār to subscribe to the pledge’s terms, namely, the Jewish Messianic expectations that, as a result of the Perso-Byzantine war, intensified. These intense expectations for political and spiritual redemption were perceived by the ‘Anṣār as not only a threat to their rule in Yathrib but a threat to their very existence, which led to their desire for reconciliation and their subsequent subscription to the ‘Aqaba pledge.

To do so, this paper begins by first looking at the conventional understanding of the ‘Aqaba pledge, paying attention to its context and causes for each of its participants. Then, it shifts to the Perso-Byzantine war in the early seventh century, describing its context, causes, and results. Afterwards, it documents the Jewish Messianic expectations that intensified as a result of this war. Finally, and in the last section, this paper looks specifically at Yathrib, demonstrating that news of the war reached the Peninsula and Jewish Messianic expectations arose and intensified for the Jews in Yathrib, which, as a result, spurred the ‘Anṣār to subscribe to a pledge that in short required drastic political concessions on their part by allowing an entire community to not only take residence in Yathrib but also to occupy its seats of power.

CHAPTER 2

PLEDGE OF AL-‘AQABA PROPER

The pledge made at al-‘Aqaba took place between two parties: Muhammad and by extension his early community of followers in Mecca known as the Muhājirūn³ and the Anṣār. The Anṣār is a title that refers to two Arab tribes, the ‘Aws and the Khazraj⁴. They resided in Yathrib located about 400 kilometers north of Mecca, existing in present-day Saudi Arabia as Medina.⁵ In Yathrib, the ‘Aws and the Khazraj lived amongst other Jewish Arab tribes, mainly Banū Naḍīr⁶, Banū Qaynuqa⁷, and Banū Qurayza⁸. Control there resided with the Aws and the Khazraj. As for Muhammad and the Muhājirūn, they lived in Mecca, and unlike the Anṣār, they were not in a position of power. Rather, they were a rejected and detested minority by the dominant tribal confederation—the Quraysh—who controlled life in Mecca, politically, socially, and economically.

According to traditional accounts, the pledge itself consisted of two separate installments. It is believed that the first took place in 621CE, and the second a year later in 622CE. Both of them occurred in a place known as al-‘Aqaba, roughly eight kilometers north of Mecca, that is, half-way between Mecca and Mina. In the first installment, twelve men from the Anṣār, ten from the Khazraj and two from the ‘Aws, came to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage and met with Muhammad at al-‘Aqaba where they swore an oath to:

³ See “al-Muhājirūn.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*.

⁴ See “al-Anṣār,” *ibid.*

⁵ See “al-Madīna.” *ibid.*

⁶ See “Naḍīr.” *ibid.*

⁷ See “Qaynuqa’.” *ibid.*

⁸ See “Qurayza.” *ibid.*

1. Not associate anything with God.
2. Not steal.
3. Not commit fornication or adultery.
4. Not kill their children.
5. Not slander.
6. Not disobey God or His apostle in the good.⁹

This installment is known as the pledge of the women (*bay'at al-nisā'*), and the contents of it are preserved in several traditions traced back to 'Ubāda b. as-Sāmit.¹⁰ After this first pledge, the 'Anṣār returned to Yathrib, and immediately, the new faith began to spread and the size of the Islamic community there grew rapidly. After a year had passed, the Muslims of Yathrib made way to Mecca again for the annual pilgrimage and again met with Muhammad at al-'Aqaba. Yet now, the number of those present had increased from the twelve present at the first 'Aqaba to seventy or more.¹¹

The second installment at 'Aqaba is referred to as the pledge of war (*bay'at al-ḥarb*). The reason behind this appears to be for one of two reasons, or both. First, the main distinction between the first and second installments is that the first contained no protocols for war and peace. The second pledge, however, did, yet it did not abrogate any of the previous clauses. Those clauses remained intact and applied to those who, although present now, had not taken

⁹ See ibn Hishām, *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 2, pg. 81; Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3892; cf. Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3893 and Saḥīḥ al-Muslim 1709.

¹⁰ From Banū Qawāqila of the Khazraj, he was a prominent companion of Muhammad who was also present at 'Aqaba. See Ibn Ṣ'ad, *at-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, vol. 3, pg. 573.

¹¹ The primary sources do not agree on the exact number of attendees, varying from 70 to 75 in number. See ibn Hishām's *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah* vol. 2, pg. 88; cf. ibn Kathīr, *Bidāyah wal-nihāyah*, vol. 3, pg. 417.

part in the first installment. Now, in the second installment, unlike the first, the Anṣār swore to protect Muhammad in the manner in which they would protect themselves, their wives, and their children. This clause, however, was mutual as Muhammad, too, pledged to defend the Anṣār against its enemies and to make peace with whom they make peace.¹² The other reason behind the second installment being referred to as the pledge of war, in addition to the war clause found within it, pertains to a new divine development. Prior to this, God commanded Muhammad only to proclaim the new revelation by first proclaiming it to his nearest of kin, then to the inhabitants of Mecca, and finally to the tribes who arrived in Mecca for the annual pilgrimage. As for the hostility and harm that he and the Muhājirūn faced, God commanded them to remain patience and to overlook it.¹³ However, either shortly before or shortly after the second installment at ‘Aqaba, the first verses of the Qur’an¹⁴ regarding the permissibility to fight were revealed.¹⁵ Thus, either for one of these two reasons or both, this installment is referred to as the pledge of war. In addition to the war clause, there were other clauses added, and these clauses, along with the war clause, completed the pact made at ‘Aqaba. In sum, they required the Anṣār to provide unwavering loyalty to not only the Islamic community, but to what was about to emerge, namely, the first Islamic polity.

Muhammad and the Muhājirūn

The account of what occurred at al-‘Aqaba is primarily understood in the context of Muhammad’s life, or more precisely in the sources that accounts for his twenty three years as God’s prophet. These are collectively and properly referred to as the *sīra*, meaning biography.

¹² Ka’b bin Mālik stated that Muhammad said to the ‘Anṣār: أبايكم على أن تمنعوني مما تمنعون منه نساءكم وأبناءكم; see ibn Hishām, *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 2, pg. 89.

¹³ See ibn Hishām, *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 2, pg. 108.

¹⁴ See the Qur’ān 22:39-41

¹⁵ See ibn Hishām’s *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 2, pg. 108; cf. at-Tirmīdhī 3470, at-Tirmīdhī 3471 and an-Nasā’ī 3085.

This body of literature (i.e. the *sīra* literature) serves as our primary source for understanding the ‘Aqaba pact. It becomes clear throughout the literature that the ‘Aqaba pact was a significant development for Islam in general and for the early Islamic community in particular. To be sure, it served as the catalyst for extricating the fledgling Islamic community in Mecca from the existential threat that it faced. The threat arose early during the Meccan period¹⁶ and remained throughout it. As a result, sustainability of the early Islamic community in Mecca and by extension the message of Islamic monotheism lingered in a perilous and precarious state. It is in this context that the antecedents of ‘Aqaba pact vis-à-vis Muhammad and the Muhājirūn is understood. In doing so, the causes for their subscription to the pact present themselves.

The existential threat that Muhammad and the Muhājirūn faced characterizes much of the sociopolitical context of the Meccan period. It manifested in the second stage of the Meccan period and continued until the *hijra*, which effectively ended this period.¹⁷ This stage commenced with Muhammad’s open and public invitation to Islam. Previously, he called people to Islam in a private manner and on an individual basis. Then, as tradition maintains, God ordered him to proclaim the message publicly and collectively. At this point, he began to receive scorn and ridicule at first from those closest to him such as his uncle Abū Lahab and then from those who were in leading circles of the Quraysh. Overtime, opposition increased and intensified, and as the number of Muhammad’s followers grew in Mecca, the Quraysh began to openly oppose them as well. At first, the opposition was harmless. However, with the increase in

¹⁶Historically, Muhammad’s prophecy divides into two periods: the Meccan period and the Medinan period. The former lasted for thirteen years and the latter for ten years.

¹⁷ The Meccan period can be divided into three distinct stages. The first stage lasted for approximately three years. It is characterized by God commissioning Muhammad as a prophet and then Muhammad secretly and individually calling people to Islam. The second stage commences with God’s order to Muhammad to proclaim Islam openly and publicly. This stage began during the fourth year of Muhammad’s prophecy and continued until the migration to Yathrib (i.e. the *hijrah*). Beginning in the tenth year of Muhammad’s prophecy, the final stage of the Meccan period began with Muhammad calling people to Islam from outside of Mecca.

number of adherents, it became apparent that the Quraysh needed to stymie its growth by adopting tougher measures lest it face any future threat to its authority. Consequently, what had hitherto been harmless opposition became harmful persecution, which in some cases meant death for some of Muhammad's followers. At first, these persecutions were haphazard and ad hoc, seeking only to enervate Muhammad's message and to dissuade any new converts. Later, they intensified and became more systematic, forcing some of Muhammad's early followers to depart from Mecca and to take refuge in Abyssinia lest they perish. Unfortunately, not everyone had the means to flee and were forced to remain behind. Then, after the conversions of some powerful figures in Mecca, the intrigues of the Quraysh reached a new level. The Quraysh realized that a permanent and lasting solution was needed. Thus, they adopted a measure that sought to eradicate not only Muhammad and his early followers but also his non-Muslim supporters such as his uncle, Abu Talib, instituting a boycott on those who remained in Mecca. The boycott relegated Muhammad, his followers, and his non-Muslim supporters to a narrow valley outside of Mecca, and it stipulated that they were to be denied any social interaction whether economically, physically, or socially, for the Quraysh aimed to eliminate all further conversions and to force those who had converted to abandon their new faith and return to the faith of their predecessors. The boycott lasted for approximately three years until voices back in Mecca surfaced in opposition and in pity for those suffering under the boycotts draconian measures. Eventually, they were able to bring the boycott to an end, allowing Muhammad, his followers, and his non-Muslim supporters to return to Mecca. As for those who had departed to Abyssinia, they would remain at the least until the close of the Meccan period.

The end of the boycott, however, did not extinguish the threat entirely. Shortly after the boycott, Muhammad's uncle—Abu Tālib—passed away. And this is the immediate cause for the

‘Aqaba pact, for it entailed severe implications not only for the early Islamic community in Mecca but also for Muhammad himself. Because, although the short and long-term prospects for sustainability had always been precarious and perilous for the early Islamic community in Mecca, the death of Muhammad’s uncle not only intensified this state of affairs for them, but also now made Muhammad subject to their more sinister intrigues. Previously, the persecutions were limited to Muhammad’s followers with a few exceptions. Hitherto, Muhammad’s uncle served as his protection, guarding him against the treacherous and nefarious machinations of the Quraysh, but after his death, Muhammad became an open and legitimate target. In a way then, his uncle had been the bulwark that not only preserved Muhammad but also that preserved Islamic monotheism in its infancy. Now, the Quraysh proceeded unabated in their efforts eradicate Muhammad and by extension the Islamic message of monotheism. Cognizant of this, Muhammad set out to find a new guarantee of protection and a new place of refuge. It became clear that Mecca could no longer serve as the beacon for Muhammad’s message. Therefore, in an attempt to extricate himself and his followers, he ventured off to a place to the east of Mecca known as Ṭā’if. To his surprise however, the leading men there rejected him and had their inhabitants violently expulse him. Humiliated and rejected, he returned to Mecca and began to beseech the tribes who came annually to Mecca to extend to him and his community their protection and a new place of refuge. He entreated, for example, Banū ‘Abd Allāh of Banū Kinda, Banū Bakr b. Wā’il, Banū Ka’b b. Rabīah of Banū ‘Amr b. Sa’sa’ah, and Banū Hanīfa, yet all of them rejected him. Then, Muhammad made contact with the Khazraj and the Aws in Mecca, and they pledged to protect him and to grant him and his followers a new place to call

home, viz. Yathrib. Thereafter, Muhammad and his followers undertook the *hijra*, migrating from Mecca to Yathrib.¹⁸

The Anṣār

Despite the arguments for or against the historicity of that account, which is a synopsis of a much larger account found in the *sīra* literature, it cannot be denied that it is coherent and detailed, providing the reader with the pact's context and causes vis-à-vis Muhammad and the Muhājirūn. As for the Anṣār, the same literature provides no such account. Only suddenly and briefly do the 'Ansar appear prior to the commencement of the Medinan period. Then quickly they accept Islam, ascribe to the terms of the pact, and return to Yathrib before the literature shifts back to Muḥammad and his community in Mecca. To compensate for this apparent dearth of information, scholarship has utilized other Islamic sources besides the *sīra* literature, such as the Qur'an, the ḥadīth literature, pre-Islamic poetry, and the historical works that document the pre-Islamic tribal wars, known as '*Ayām al-ʿArab*, or more specifically for the 'Ansar '*Ayām al-ʿAnṣār*, in order to foster a coherent and detailed account of the 'Ansar's subscription to the pact. The conventional understanding then has been that the 'Ansar partook in the pledge as a result of (1) their destructive intertribal wars that appear to have had occurred repeatedly and with increasing frequency and (2) their wishful thinking that through Muhammad they could reconcile and end those reoccurring and destructive hostilities. Scholars both in and outside of the Islamic tradition have ascribed to this.

Again, regardless of the historicity of this, even if it could be determined that this was the case, such an understanding on one hand confuses context with cause and on the other hand provides only a sufficient cause. Simply to depict the hostile polarization between the two tribes

¹⁸ For the more detailed account of this period see ibn Hishām's *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 1, pg. 296-431; vol. 2, pg. 5-75

(i.e. the ‘Aws and the Khazraj) and the violence that they were mired in does nothing more than to describe Yathrib’s sociopolitical context on the eve of the ‘Aqaba pact. Sure, perhaps Yathrib was divided and predisposed to moments of violence, yet it is not a cause in and of itself that necessitates the concessions that were made by the ‘Ansar on the night of the ‘Aqaba pledge. Furthermore, to conclude that the ‘Ansar perceived Muhammad as a mediating figure through which they could cement their ruptured ties does not demonstrate itself as a necessary cause. It is merely a sufficient one. To be sure, it would not be necessary for Muhammad and his entire community of followers to migrate to Yathrib in order to repair the ‘Anṣār’s relationship. Rather, only another cause could warrant such a significant political decision. In fact, such a cause is hinted at in the *sira* literature and serves as the point of departure for understanding (1) the sociopolitical context of Yathrib on the eve of the ‘Aqaba pledge and (2) the ‘Anṣār’s motivations.

In that literature, we are presented with a series of interactions that occurred between Muhammad and the Anṣār prior to the first installment of the pact at al-‘Aqaba. The literature attests to four separate interactions, appearing in chronological order in which they occurred. Although the details of each interaction are minimal, they do provide valuable clues that elucidate on the sociopolitical context of Yathrib and the cause for the ‘Ansar’s participation at ‘Aqaba. The accounts do attest to a degree of intertribal conflict existing between the Khazraj and the ‘Aws and perhaps to a perception amongst them of the possibility of Muhammad serving as a means for ending their internecine violence. However, and most importantly, but ignored entirely, is the details found in the last interaction. This encounter furnishes us with perhaps the most significant details vis-à-vis the sociopolitical context of Yathrib and the motives of the Anṣār’s participation in the pledge.

The fourth and final interaction occurred between Muhammad and a group of men representing the Khazraj tribe.¹⁹ Like the other encounters, Muhammad recited some verses of the Qur'an and invited them to accept Islam. As in the other three encounters between Muhammad and members of the 'Anṣār prior to the first installment, this encounter acknowledges the enmity that existed between the 'Anṣār; it acknowledges their desire to reconcile, and their belief that Muhammad could serve as the means for achieving that. For instance, after accepting Islam, they stated, "We have left our community for no tribe is so divided by hate and enmity as they are. God may cement our ties through you. So, let us go and invite them to this religion of yours; and if God unites them in it, no man will be dearer than you." Nevertheless, and most important, this encounter also testifies to tensions existing between the 'Anṣār and the Jews in Yathrib. Whereby, the Jews had been consistently threatening the 'Anṣār, reminding them, "The time of a Prophet who is to be sent is now at hand, with him we shall slay you even as 'Ad and 'Iram were slain." Recalling this explicit threat, those present at this encounter exclaimed, "Know surely, this is the Prophet with whom the Jews are ever threatening us; so, let us make haste and be the first to join him."²⁰

Thus, it appears here that in addition to the belief that through Muhammad the 'Anṣār could cement their ties there is a belief that a Jewish threat could only be dealt with by Muhammad's presence. Surely, this then is a necessary cause, for it required his physical presence and by extension the presence of his community in order to counter it. Yet, before understanding why and to better understand that threat made by Jews in Yathrib, we must (1) step outside of the Arabian Peninsula and into the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean where in

¹⁹ The sources differ over the exact number of this group. Some sources state that their number was six. See ibn al-Kathīr, *Bidāyah wal-nihāyah*, vol. 3, pg. 400-2 for the different narrations.

²⁰For an account of all four interactions prior to the first 'Aqaba see ibn Hishām's *as-Sīra an-Nabawīyah*, vol. 2, pg. 71-78.

the early seventh century a war between the Byzantines and the Persians waged for nearly a quarter of a century and (2) into Jewish Messianic expectations that arose in the context of this war.

CHAPTER 3

The LAST GREAT WAR OF ANTIQUITY: ITS CONTEXT, CAUSES, AND RESULTS

Between the years of 602 and 630, the Persians (i.e. the Sassanids) and the Byzantines, the last remaining vestige of *Orbius Romanus* (i.e. the Roman World), waged a long and devastating war.²¹ It is often referred to as the last Great War of antiquity. To be sure, it was the last of the Perso-Roman wars that began with Pompey's entry into the Eastern Mediterranean in 63BCE. In terms of length, it was the longest war fought between the two empires—waging on for over a quarter of a century. In addition, this war was the most destructive—exactng on both empires heavy costs. The war arose in the context of the Byzantine emperor Maurice's (582-602) murder, and on the surface, the cause of the war appears to be an attempt to avenge Maurice's murder and install the rightful heir to the throne. However, Maurice's murder served only as a pretext for a Persian invasion into Byzantine territories.

The results of the war were far-reaching. It witnessed the growth of the Persian Empire to heights not seen since the Achaemenid period (ca. 550-331) as the Persians captured large swaths of Byzantine territory, capturing all of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Byzantine Armenia by 613, Palestine by 616, and Egypt by 620. The Persians then controlled Mesopotamia, Syria, and Byzantine Armenia for twenty or more years, Palestine for fifteen years, and Egypt for ten years. Adding to that, the Byzantine's were pushed out of the Near East and Armenia, thus

²¹ For the most comprehensive and authoritative account of this war, and which this section is indebted to for its information and primary sources see Stratos, Andreas N. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. 602-634*. Translated by Marc Ogilvie-Grant. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968.

leaving it without a Roman presence for the first time in over five centuries. Consequently, the balance of power in the region shifted. However, least mentioned and of the utmost importance for our discussion is the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614, which resulted in Jews regaining control of their holy city for the first time since the Roman Emperor Titus had destroyed the Jewish Temple and expelled the Jews from the city in 70CE.

As just mentioned, the war itself arose out of the tumult that ensued from the murder of the Byzantine emperor Maurice in 602CE. Prior to ascending to the Byzantine throne, Maurice had earned a reputation as a proven and successful Byzantine general. He ascended to the Byzantine throne following the Emperor Tiberius' death in 582CE, and his reputation continued to earn acclaim. His notable achievement was ending the Perso-Roman war of 578-590 on auspicious terms. Yet, on the eve of his murder, Maurice's political fortunes had suddenly dried up. He had incurred the ire of several different institutions within Byzantium. For instance, his lenient policy towards the Monophysites²² warranted him the displeasure of the ecclesiastical authority. In addition, in 600CE, the slaughter of 12,000 Byzantine soldiers held captive by the Avars due to Maurice's obstinate refusal to ransom them earned him the resentment of the army and the people. Then, the hostility amongst his subjects increased further when the populace of Constantinople suffered a harsh winter in 601-2CE combined with a grain shortage in the city. However, the die was cast when Maurice in 602CE ordered his troops in the Balkans to winter in enemy territory. They had just returned to Byzantine territory from a long but successful campaign against the Avars. When Maurice's order reached them, they complained of fatigue and of dismal prospects for sustaining the winter to the north,

²² Non-Chalcedon Christians, meaning those broke away from "normative" Christianity following the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

especially since the onset of winter was signaling that it would be harsh. The troops requested Maurice to rescind his order, but it was ignored. The troops then mutinied and rose up against him, selecting Phocas as their new leader. The troops made haste to Constantinople, seizing Maurice and his sons and executing them.²³ Afterwards, Phocas (602-610) ascended to the Byzantine throne in 602CE, and shortly after that, the Persians launched a two-prong invasion into Byzantine territory in 604CE, invading Mesopotamia and Byzantine Armenia.

As previously stated, the cause of the Persian invasion appears on the surface to be an effort to avenge Maurice's murder and to install the "rightful" heir to the throne—Maurice's son, Theodosios²⁴. The Persian ruler at the time, Chosroes II, owed his throne to Maurice.²⁵ In 590CE, the Sasanian throne was usurped by a Bahram Chobin, yet shortly before Chobin took the throne Chosroes fled the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon, and took refuge in Byzantine territory where he sought Maurice's assistance. Ongoing at the time was the Perso-Byzantine war of 578-591. It had entered its twelfth year, and through the course of it, the Persians had wrested control of a substantial amount of Byzantine territory. Chosroes implored Maurice for his assistance in exchange for peace, offering in exchange to forfeit all Byzantine territory that the Persians had conquered during the war. In addition, he purposed to suspend the prescribed tribute that the Sasanians exacted yearly from Byzantium in order to prevent Sasanian incursions into Byzantine territory. The yearly tribute that the Byzantines paid to Ctesiphon

²³ See "Revolution and Murder of Maurice" in Stratos, Andreas N. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. 602-634*. Translated by Marc Ogilvie-Grant. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968.

²⁴ Although it is said that Maurice and his sons were executed, it is found in the works of Eastern Chroniclers that at least one son may have survived, i.e. Theodosios. See Ibid. pg. 52 for different the works of these Eastern Chroniclers and their account.

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 16. Also, Michael the Syrian in his *Chronicle* states that upon hearing of Maurice's murder Chosroes asked, "It was he [Maurice] who established me on my throne, which had been usurped. Now tell me, who among you will exact vengeance for his blood, so that my heart will be eased?" See the edition translated by Robert Bedrosian.

burdened the Byzantines fiscally. According to these terms, Maurice understood that he could preserve Byzantine resources, regain lost territory, and reduce the fiscal burden on the empire. Accordingly, Maurice sent his son-in-law, Phillippicus, to the secure Chosroes' oath and then dispatched a royal force to assist him in regaining his throne, which proved successful. Chosroes regained his throne, and Bahram was defeated. Shortly after, the terms of the agreement between Chosroes and Maurice were concluded and ratified in a peace agreement in 591CE. Owing his throne to Maurice, Chosroes never shrank from displaying his gratitude towards him. For example, he publicly proclaimed Maurice as his father and himself as Maurice's adopted son. Furthermore, in blatant protest to Phocas' seizure of Maurice's throne, Chosroes imprisoned Phocas' ambassador, Lilius²⁶, who had come to announce Phocas' ascent to the Byzantine throne per the established custom of the age. Then, in 603CE, Narses, the Byzantine governor of Mesopotamia in Edessa, who was indignant over the murder of Maurice, rose up against Phocas, claiming that Maurice's eldest son—Theodosios—had survived and thus was the rightful heir to the throne. Phocas sent a force under the Byzantine general Germanos to suppress the rebellion (and perhaps to kill Theodosios?). Narses, as a result, had Theodosios write a letter to Chosroes informing him of the events and beseeching him for his assistance in protecting the rightful heir to the Byzantine throne. Chosroes did not hesitate. As soon as word reached him, he assembled his troops and invaded Mesopotamia in 604CE, besieging Dara first and then marching on Edessa where his forces defeated Phocas' general, Germanos, and placed Theodosios under his protection. At the same time, Chosroes ordered the invasion of Armenia in 604CE, led by the Persian general Djuhan Veh. The inhabitants there, too, had been favorably

²⁶ Lilius had been responsible for Maurice's execution

disposed towards Maurice, and naturally, they resented the events that had transpired back in Constantinople.²⁷

It appeared that Chosroes' righteous indignation over the slaying of his benefactor, Maurice, granted him a *casus belli*, leaving Stratos to observe that on eve of Persian invasion, "He [Chosroes II] would not fight against the Byzantines but against the tyrant who had slain his benefactor, his adopted father, and in order to support the rightful emperor of Byzantine."²⁸ Perhaps Chosroes did intend to avenge his old benefactor and wage war for his heir, but if such intention existed it appears to have dissipated early. Rather it appears that noble intentions gave way to imperial ambition. After the Persians defeated the Byzantines at Edessa and placed Theodosios under their protection, they retreated back to Ctesiphon. In the meantime, the siege of Dara continued and later fell into Persian hands in 606CE. Almost immediately after its fall, the Persians renewed their campaigns into Mesopotamia under the Persian general Sahrbaraz and into Armenia under Astar Yestayar in 607CE. For the next two years, Sahrbaraz gradually conquered all of Mesopotamia. The final victory came in 609CE when Edessa surrendered to the Persians. In Armenia, Yestayar initiated the invasion; however, he was succeeded by another Persian general, Sahin, who between 608 and 609CE successfully captured the capital of Byzantine Armenia, Theodosiopolis. Sahin then continued westward, invading Asia Minor and capturing Cappadocia and Caesarea and eventually reaching Chalcedon in 608CE, directly opposite of Constantinople. However, in 610CE, the Persians left Chalcedon and retreated from Asia Minor completely, not offering one attempt to besiege Constantinople

²⁷ See "Phocas: External Situation" in Stratos, Andreas N. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. 602-634*. Translated by Marc Ogilvie-Grant. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968.

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 58.

and to install Theodosios on the Byzantine throne.²⁹ At this point, the Persians had captured all of Mesopotamia to include a small portion of Syria and all of Byzantine Armenia. It was not until the summer of 610CE that the Persians still led by Sahrbaraz marched across the Euphrates and began to conquer the Eastern Mediterranean. By 611CE, Sahrbaraz conquered Antioch, the capital of the Byzantine diocese of the Oriens, Apamia, and Emesa (i.e. present-day Homs). Consequently, these gains forced the Byzantines to be cut-off from Syria, Palestine, and Egypt via land-based routes. The Byzantines tried to check the Persian advance under the Byzantine emperor Heraclius who had overthrown Phocas in a coup d'état just a year prior, in 610CE. The two powers met in Antioch in 613CE and fought a bloody battle at its gates. The Byzantines suffered a terrible defeat that forced them to withdraw from the war and allowed the Persians to continue unhindered in their advance. Thus, in 613CE Chosroes ordered Sahrbaraz to continue westward. In 613CE, he captured Damascus, and shortly after began to head towards Palestine. The invasion of Palestine culminated with the Persian capture of Jerusalem, thus marking the end of five hundred years plus of Roman and roughly three hundred years of Christian rule in the holy city. Not yet satisfied, Sahrbaraz began to head towards Egypt in 616CE, which fell into Persian hands by 620CE, therefore marking the biggest expansion of the Persian Empire since the Achaemenid period.³⁰

During their westward invasion, the Persians encountered hardly any resistance from its inhabitants. According to the Eastern Chroniclers, as the Persians invaded the provincial capitals and town, the inhabitants willingly surrendered and submitted to the Persians without a fight.

²⁹ Adding to this is the fact that one of the Eastern Chroniclers—Sebeos—mentions that during the initial invasion of Armenia in 607 under Astar Yestayar Theodosios was present. Thus, he would also have been present in Sahin's westward march, which consisted of the same contingent as the one who accompanied Yestayar.

³⁰ See "War Against the Persians." in Stratos, Andreas N. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. 602-634*. Translated by Marc Ogilvie-Grant. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968.

For instance, the Chronicler Michael the Syrian writes, “[Shahrbaraz, the Persian general leading the invasion into the Roman Near East] came to Mesopotamia and captured Dara and Ras al-‘Ayn and Merdin and then wintered in Mesopotamia. After that he took Harran, Aleppo, and Antioch. The cities were willingly given over to him since he hurt none but the Greeks and Romans.”³¹ The majority of the inhabitants of Byzantine Diocese of the East were Monophysite Christians. They had become marginalized throughout the Byzantine Commonwealth and victims of repressive policies by successive Byzantine emperors. Maurice, however, had been more tolerant and accommodating to the religious minorities throughout the empire, which as mentioned above, earned him the ire of the ecclesiastical authority of the Orthodox (i.e. Chalcedon) Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople, therefore, required Phocas to “make a confession of the orthodox faith and of his defense of the Church” before ascending to the Byzantine throne, making him the first Byzantine emperor to be crowned by the Church. This hitherto unknown religious coloring of the coronation of a Byzantine emperor thereby became customary. That is to say, any future Byzantine emperor after Phocas’s reign could not be crowned unless he had sworn in writing to uphold and adhere to the tenets of the Orthodox (i.e. Chalcedon) faith. Naturally, Phocas did not want to earn the ire of the Chalcedon ecclesiastical authority as Maurice had done. Thus, he instituted a series of repressive policies towards the Monophysites, for instance, outlawing any and all Monophysite congregations. It is no surprise then six years into Phocas’ reign the Monophysites in Antioch rose up against him, forcing Phocas to violently crush the uprising. In short, the Monophysites felt no desire to defend against the Persian advance. In fact, as they advanced westward, the Monophysites

³¹ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pg. 116

passively assisted them by surrendering and submitting willingly to Persian rule. Such passiveness did not go unnoticed—the Persians rewarded them with churches and monasteries that they had confiscated from the Chalcedonian Christians.³²

Likewise, the Jews assisted the Persian advance into the Byzantine Near East, and they too were rewarded for their services rendered. However, unlike the Monophysites, the Jews took an active role in abetting the Persians. Stratos, paraphrasing Finlay, writes, “The Jews alliance with the Persians was open. They accepted them everywhere, gave them information, running before the Persian forces like trackers and directing them.”³³ For instance, in 611, when the Persians invaded Caesarea of Cappadocia, the Christians fled, but the Jews there waited and greeted the Persians upon their arrival with open arms.³⁴ Furthermore, when the Persians arrived and took control of Antioch in 611, the Jews submitted, offering no resistance. In fact, prior to the Persian advance on Antioch, the Jews there revolted against the Byzantines and killed the Patriarch of Antioch, preparing the way for the Persian advance. Then, when the Persians entered Palestine ca 614, the Jews in Palestine made haste to enlist in the Persian army and to assist in the capture of Jerusalem, coming from Tiberias, Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Caesarea, and Nablus. The sources conflict over the exact number of Jews that collaborated with Persian advance into Palestine. One source raises the number as high as 150,000-200,000 while other sources provide a more modest figure, ranging from 26,000 to 36,000.³⁵ For their help, and like the Monophysite Christians, the Jews were rewarded for their assistance with Sahrbaraz placing control of Jerusalem into Jewish hands.

³² See “Phocas,” in op. cit. Stratos., 69-79

³³ Ibid., 75.

³⁴ See Sebēos, Robert W. Thomson, James Howard-Johnston, and Tim Greenwood. *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*. Vol. 1. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999, 64.

³⁵ Op. cit., Stratos, 108.

CHAPTER 4

JEWISH MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS IN THE LAST GREAT WAR OF ANTIQUITY

Jewish control of Jerusalem proved to be a short lived experience. After nearly three years of control, in 617CE, the Persians placed control of Jerusalem back into Christian hands and banished the Jews from the city. Nevertheless, it represents an important moment in Jewish history. Centuries have passed, and it is still a source of lament. Michael Avi-Yonah, a late prominent Jewish historian, mourns what he terms as the Persian betrayal of the Jews, writing:

This change in Persian policy was an event of very great importance in Jewish history. By betraying their Jewish allies the Persians put an end to the national hopes of the Jews for many centuries [...]. The deception, which the Jews suffered in their alliance with the Persians, marks therefore the real end of the political history of Judaism in Palestine. Having to give up their hope of liberty and independence, they ceased to be a political power. All that remained to them was a noble vision without substance. The Jews in Palestine lost their political aim. They became thus adapted in their profile to the Judaism of the Diaspora. This was one of the most tragic moments in the history of our nation.³⁶

³⁶ Avi-Yonah, Michael. *The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule: A Political History of Palestine from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest*. New York: Schocken Books, 1984, 270.

Echoed here is the sentiment that was felt at the time—namely, that national salvation and political redemption for the Jews was at hand. Such redemption was supposed to be heralded in by the overthrow of Rome at the hands of the Persians, which then would signal the advent of the Jewish redeemer, viz. the Messiah. Thus, the outcome of the war itself, namely, the expulsion of the Byzantines from the Near East by the Persians, appeared to fulfill that prerequisite. Consequently, it is no surprise that Jewish Messianic expectations in this context reached a fever pitch.

In general, momentous events throughout history in which the Jews were intimately associated with appear to have generated such anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. To be sure, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver states:

The critical events in the history of the world which affected Jewish life invariably stimulated interest in such speculation. Great political changes, boding weal, or woe for Israel, accelerated the tempo of expectancy. Wars, invasions, migrations of peoples, the rise and fall of dynasties were fraught with significance for the scattered Jewish communities, and the rich fancy of the people, stirred by the impact of these great events, sought to find in them intimations of the Great Fulfilment. The Maccabean wars, the struggle with Rome, the fall of the Temple, the Bar Kochba uprising, the Perso-Roman wars, the rise of Islam, the Crusades, the coming of the Tartars, the expulsions, the Ottoman conquests, the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Cossack rebellion of 1648, and many other momentous occurrences intensified, each in its time, the

Messianic hope among the people and precipitated adventist speculations and movements in Israel.”³⁷

Included here are the Perso-Roman wars, and it is understood by historians and scholars alike that the Perso-Byzantine war of the early seventh century, the last Great War of Antiquity, produced such feelings within the Jewish community. It is even documented that shortly before the Persian invasion and during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, a belief circulated in Palestine that the Messiah’s advent would occur within the next eight years.³⁸ Therefore, the Persian invasion followed by the expulsion of the Byzantines from the Near East and the Jewish return to power in Jerusalem lent support to that sentiment.

To be sure, the actions of the Jews in the context of this war demonstrate that such adventist speculations for political redemption pervaded the collective Jewish conscious. As just mentioned in the preceding chapter, the Jews took an active role in abetting the Persians during their conquest. When the Persians arrived at Caesarea of Cappadocia, the Jews opened the gates of the city to them. Not only did the Jews do the same when the Persians reached Antioch, but prior to that, the Jews rose up and killed the Patriarch of Antioch. Hardly imaginable a few years prior when the Jews there watched the Monophysite Christians rise up only to be violently suppressed by the Byzantine Emperor Phocas. Moreover, when the Persians reached Palestine a great number of them mobilized and went straightaway to join the ranks of the Persian army in order to assist in the taking of Jerusalem. Hitherto, leading figures in the Jewish community of Palestine had argued for a passive policy of resistance towards Roman

³⁷ Silver, Abba Hillel. *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel: From the First through the Seventeenth Centuries*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959, 4.

³⁸ Baron, Salo W. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*. Vol. III. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, 21.

rule, but with the swift and successful Persian invasion the Jews began to recall their first return to Zion under the Achaemenes. What's more, once the Jews regained control of Jerusalem after more than half a millennium, they adopted measures that accorded with the Jewish ideal of political redemption. Forthwith they renewed Temple services (i.e. sacrificial worship). At the same time, they began to contemplate a restoration of the Temple. After the Persians departed, the Jews then proceeded to remove any profane places of worship such as Christian churches in order to reinstate a purely Jewish character in the city. Lastly, they attempted to vanquish the remainder of their enemies and purify the city of its non-Jewish inhabitants in order to prepare for the arrival of the exiles (i.e. the Jews of the Diaspora). Therefore, the Jews ransomed from the Persians the remaining Christians in the city who had not been exiled to Persia, offering them the opportunity to convert to Judaism or to die as a Christian.³⁹

Such actions could only be inspired by a collective perception that the prerequisites for the advent of the Messiah were fulfilled. Before the rise of Islam, the coming of the Messiah had always presupposed the overthrow of the Roman Empire. This is evidenced in Jewish literature. For instance, located in the Pseudepigrapha are two Jewish apocalypses of the late second century—4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. Both of them depict the demise of Rome as the precursor to the advent of the Messiah followed by the immediate restoration of Israel.⁴⁰ In addition, the Talmud

³⁹ See Conybeare, Frederick C. "Antiochus Strategos' Account of the Sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 614." *Eng Hist Rev The English Historical Review* XXV, no. XCIX (1910): 502-17. For archaeological reports that verify mass killings of Christians by Jews in the wake of the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614 see Magness, Jodi. 2011. "Archaeological evidence for the Sasanian Persian invasion of Jerusalem." In *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an age of transition 400-800 C.E.* Ed. Kenneth G.Holum and Hayim Lapin, 85-98. Bethesda (MD): University Press of Maryland, 2011.

⁴⁰ Stone, Michael E., and Matthias Henze. *4 Ezra and 2 Baruch Translations, Introductions, and Notes*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013; Silver, 16-7.

echoes this belief that Rome's overthrow would be an indication of the Messiah's imminent arrival. For instance, in a passage attributed to the famous Tanna Jose Ben Kisma, the Talmudic sage alludes to a series of wars between Rome and Persia (i.e. the Parthians). He states that although the Persians would emerge victorious every time, the Romans would quickly recover and another war between the two would ensue. However, the Persians would finally deliver a lasting defeat to the Romans, after which would signal the advent of the Messiah.⁴¹ Likewise, the Midrash also alludes to this prerequisite of Rome's fall. One such passage read in the context of the fall of the western part of the Roman Empire in the fifth century mentions that a Roman general approached a Jewish man in Palestine and asked, 'Who will rule the kingdom [i.e. Rome] after us?' Then, "the man brought a blank paper and took a pen and wrote upon it, 'and after that came forth his brother, and his hand (Jacob's—Israel) had hold of Esau's (Edom-Rome) heel.'"⁴² Here it is implied that Esau's, or Rome's, destruction will be followed by Israel's restoration. Although these examples are few, they are numerous within Jewish literature. Whereby, they attest to the belief that Rome's fall was the final and utmost indicator of the advent of the Jewish Messiah. This abiding and universal belief in Jewish Messianic thought is summed up by the late professor emeritus of Hebrew literature and Jewish history—Joseph Klausner—in Hebrew University in Jerusalem, writing, "From the fall of Jerusalem to the fall of Rome the people of Israel watched and prayed for the defeat of Rome. The people hung with fervent anticipation upon the outcome of every war waged against Rome."⁴³

Like Rome, Persia, too, figures prominently in the list of prerequisites for the advent of the Messiah. Throughout the literature, it is the Persians who will hand Rome its final defeat.

⁴¹ Klausner, Joseph. *The Messianic Idea in Israel, from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*. Translated by W.F. Stinespring. III ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, 433; Silver, 20

⁴² Silver, 28; For more on the prerequisites of the Messiah's arrival see the chapter "The prerequisites of the Messiah's Coming" in Klausner, 427-439.

⁴³ Silver, 28.

This belief appears to have begun in the second century when Trajan and Marcus Aurelius were warring against the Parthians and continued after the Sassanians ascended to power. In general, the Jews had always regarded Persia favorably for a few reasons. First, since Pompey's entrance into the region in 63BCE, the Persians had remained a constant thorn in Rome's side, becoming Rome's chief adversary to the east. In addition, Persia had accommodated and tolerated the Jews possessing far less examples of state-sanctioned persecution against the Jews in comparison to the Roman Empire (e.g. the destruction of the temple, the Hadrianic persecutions, the discriminatory laws that banned Jewish customs and rituals, et cetera). And most important, there existed a significant historical link between the Jews and the Persians. Nearly a millennium ago, the Achaemenes under the rule of Cyrus the Great invaded the Near East and toppled the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus then ended the Babylonian captivity and decreed that the Jews may be permitted to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple, which Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, had destroyed.

In the context of the Perso-Byzantine war of the early seventh century, it would have been impossible for the Jews not to recall that historical moment. First, the canonized Hebrew Bible immortalizes Cyrus as a God-sent liberator, stating:

“Thus say the Lord of Cyrus: 'He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my purpose'; even saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built'; and of the Temple, 'My foundation shall be laid.' Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped.”⁴⁴

Second, the Hebrew Bible also preserves Cyrus' declaration, which permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple:

⁴⁴ Isaiah 44.28-45.1

Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered, and burnt offerings are brought [...] let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the Temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the Temple which is in Jerusalem [...] let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this of God on its site.⁴⁵

Finally, the Hebrew Bible concludes with mention of Cyrus and his intention to have the Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, [saying]: “Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever there is among you of all His people--the LORD his God be with him--let him go up [to Jerusalem].”⁴⁶

These references of Cyrus in the canonized Hebrew Bible do well to consecrate the Persians as God’s instrument that facilitated Jewish redemption in the sixth century BCE. They likewise serve well to sanction a belief that Persia could fulfill a similar function in the future. To be sure, Simeon ben Yohai, one of the Tannaitic sages of the second century, states, “If you see the horse of a Persian tied to a post in the land of Israel, expect the footsteps of the Messiah.”⁴⁷ Moreover,

⁴⁵ Ezra 6:3-7

⁴⁶ 2 Chronicles 36:22-23

⁴⁷ Silver, 28.

in the third century, we find Abba Bar Kahana remarking, “If you see the benches filled with Babylonians [i.e. Persians] in the land of Israel, expect the footsteps of the Messiah.”⁴⁸

Therefore, with the Persian invasion pushing the Byzantine’s out of Near East and out of Jerusalem for the first time in nearly five centuries, the Jewish mind must have perceived in this the fulfilment of the prerequisites for the footsteps of the Messiah as articulated in Jewish texts of the Pseudepigrapha, the Talmud, and in the Midrashim commentaries.

Thankfully, however, we are not left to conjecture. The Jewish Messianic expectations that arose in the context of this war were given written expression in Jewish prose and poetry, and these writings are contemporary to the time period. They provide a clear testimony to the Messianic fervor that arose in the context of this war. For instance, M. Avi-Yonah in his book *The Jews under Roman and Byzantine Rule* writes:

The excitement, which arose among the Jews at the approach of the Persian army, is evidenced by the revival of Messianic hopes which had always accompanied periods of spiritual ferment [...]. This time the Messianic hopes were given a literary form. We are confronted now for the first time with the so-called ‘Salvation Midrashim’ as historical sources [...]. The first of these Midrashim which we can use here is called the *Midrash of Elijah*.⁴⁹

Midrash of Elijah, or *Sefer Elijah*⁵⁰, is believed to have originated in the context of Sasanian conquest. It first came to the attention of Western scholarship in an eighteenth century anthology of Midrashim texts. The established terminus for its composition is prior to the ascension of the

⁴⁸ Ibid. 29

⁴⁹ Avi-Yonah, 260-1.

⁵⁰ For a good critical translated edition of this work see Reeves, John C. *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005, 29-40.

Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 610 with a specific date of 607 being proposed.⁵¹ Accordingly, this means that Jewish Messianic hopes in the context of this war surfaced prior to the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614. Commenting on the contents of the text, Robert L. Wilken writes:

There is little in the Book of Elijah that is new. Indeed much of the book is a pastiche of biblical texts strung together in a simple plot: humiliation, hope, conflict, victory and restoration. Its themes are familiar and traditional and are well documented in Jewish and Christian sources in early centuries, but they indicate that at the time of the Sassanid conquest the ageless hope of deliverance came rushing to the surface with irrepressible force and energy. No event since the destruction of the Second Temple, except Julian's effort to rebuild the Temple, had unleashed such fervor and enthusiasm among the Jews of Palestine.⁵²

With regards to little in the text being new, Wilken is referring here to the fact that the name of the text and its content perhaps would have been familiar to a seventh century Jew. The title of the Midrash is largely symbolic. It is named after its central character, Elijah, who is none other than Elijah the prophet of the Hebrew Bible. The Talmud ascribes to Elijah a prominent role in the Jewish Messianic drama. Elijah's role in the Messianic moment is premised on Michai 3:23-24, which states, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the land with utter destruction." He is tasked with returning just prior to the advent of the Jewish Messiah where he possesses numerous functions as the forerunner to the Jewish redeemer. First, he resolves all Halakhic and non-

⁵¹ Ibid., 261.

⁵² Wilken, Robert Louis. *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 208.

Halakhic controversies within the Jewish community. The Mishnah provides numerous examples of Elijah functioning in this capacity. He then gathers the Jews of the diaspora and expels those deemed unfit. In addition to those functions, he also restores to the Jewish community the flask of manna, the flask of water for purification, and the flask of oil for anointing. The last one being of particular importance because he is depicted as ascending to the top of Mount Caramel and announcing the advent of the Messiah [ben David] who he anoints with the oil from the flask of oil for anointing.⁵³

The other ‘Salvation Midrashim’ to emerge in the context of this war is *Sefer Zerubbabel*, or the *Book of Zerubbabel*⁵⁴. Extant in a number of manuscripts and print recensions, the text was first published in a sixteenth century anthology of ‘salvation’ Midrashim entitled *Liqqutim Shonim* and has been republished numerous times since. The date of composition has been the subject of debate. Some scholars date its composition to the eleventh century, thereby placing it in context of the crusades. However, the scholarly consensus presently is that it was composed in first quarter of the seventh century, thereby placing it within the context of the Perso-Byzantine war specifically after the Persians returned control of Jerusalem to the Christians.⁵⁵ The crux of this argument is based on the text’s list of ten kings. The tenth king, Armilus, is a legendary figure who is said to be the son of Satan. However, the ninth king is said to be Shiroi of Persia who was in fact a king of Persia. He ascended to Persian throne in 628, taking the name Kavad II.⁵⁶ Thus, the established terminus of the text’s composition is during the reign of this Persian

⁵³ For a detailed account of Elijah’s role see “Elijah, the Forerunner of the Messiah” in Klausner, 451-8; Also another detailed account can be found in “Forerunners of the Messiah” see Drummond, James. *The Jewish Messiah: A Critical History of the Messianic Idea among the Jews from the Rise of the Maccabees to the Closing of the Talmud*. London: Longmans, Green, 187, 222-6.

⁵⁴ For a critical translated edition see Reeves, 40-67.

⁵⁵ Reeves, 47.

⁵⁶ Stemberger, Günter. *Judaica Minora II*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010, 167.

king. Additionally, the provenance of the text's composition is said to be in Edessa⁵⁷, therefore outside of Palestine, which is important for demonstrating that the Jewish Messianic expectations that arose in the context of this war was not confined solely to Palestine.

Furthermore, like *Sefer Elijah*, the title of the apocalypse is largely symbolic. The Hebrew Bible testifies in several places that Zerubbabel was a prominent postexilic biblical leader who was closely associated with the vanguard of returnees from the Babylonian exile⁵⁸, the restoration of the Jewish Temple⁵⁹, and the reinstatement and regulation of sacrificial worship in the Persian period (539-331BCE),⁶⁰ which attests to what was mentioned above, namely, that the Jews did not forget their historical link with the Persians. Furthermore, subsequent Jewish literature bestows upon Zerubbabel like Elijah a prominent role in the advent of the Jewish Messiah. For example, in one *piyyut* (liturgical poem), Zerubbabel is seen as the initiator of the Messianic age who signals to the angels Michael and Gabriel to descend and to vanquish Israel's enemies. In a Midrashim fragment preserved in a text from the Geonic period, Zerubbabel shares with the prophet Elijah the task of solving the halakhic quandaries of the Jewish community during the Messianic age. While in other places, it is contested whether Zerubbabel or Elijah will sound the shofar, which will signal the advent of the Davidic Messiah.⁶¹

In addition to the 'Salavation' Midrashim are the *piyyutim* attributed to Eleazar Kallir who is regarded as one of the earliest, most prolific, and most influential *paytanim* (Jewish liturgical poets) in the genre of Jewish liturgical poetry. Significant here are two of his *piyyutim*,

⁵⁷ Wheeler, Brannon M. "Imagining the Sasanian Capture of Jerusalem: The 'Prophecy and Dream of Zerubbabel' and Antiochus Strategos' 'Capture of Jerusalem'" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 57, no. 1 (1991), 73.

⁵⁸ Ezra 3:8

⁵⁹ Ezra 5:2

⁶⁰ Ezra 3:2

⁶¹ Reeves, 43-5.

which were discovered in the Cairo Genizah and later published. The first one, “Time to Rebuke” (*Ha’et li’geor*), was published and interpreted by Ezar Fleischer who dated its composition between the years of 629 and 634.⁶² In the poem, there is a striking allusion to the Persian conquest of Jerusalem, which has been regarded as the first historical attestation of, albeit a failed attempt, at a restoration of the Jewish Temple and a revival of sacrificial worship in the context of the Persian capture of Jerusalem in 614, stating, “And the holy people will have some repose because Assur [Persia] allows them to found the holy Temple; and they will build there a holy altar and offer sacrifices on it. But they will not be able to erect the sanctuary because the ‘staff from the holy stump’ has not yet come.”⁶³ Furthermore, the typological themes employed parallel those found in *Sefer Zerubbabel*. For instance, the poem makes allusions to the advance of Persia; the subsequent overthrow of Rome, and the defeat of Rome by Persia then signals the coming of the prophet Elijah and the arrival of the Messiah. This *piyyut* in the words of Hagith Sivan at the University of Kansas does well to conjure “up images of benevolent (Achaemenid) Persian rulers who authorized Jewish settlements in Jerusalem (Ezra-Nehemiah) and even Jewish revenge on their enemies (Esther), and hope to witness a repetition in their own time.”⁶⁴ The other *piyyut*, “On That Day” (*Oto ha-yom*), was published by J. Yahalom. He dated the text’s composition to the early years of the Arab invasion.⁶⁵ However, Sivan argues to the contrary, writing, “At first sight the *piyyut* would seem to provide a poetic account of the clash between “Edom” and “Ishmael,” Byzantium and the Arabs. But there are several problems with this [...]. Hence I would postulate that “On That Day” was originally composed to commemorate

⁶² Stemberger, 169.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁴ Hagith Sivan. "From Byzantine to Persian Jerusalem: Jewish Perspectives and Jewish/Christian Polemics." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 41, no. 3 (August 2000), 289.

⁶⁵ Stemberger, 171. It appears Bernard Lewis has accepted this terminus as well; see B. Lewis, “On That Day. A Jewish Apocalyptic Poem on the Arab Conquest,” in *Melanges d’Islamologie. Volume dedie a la memoire de A. Abel Salmon* (Leiden 1974) 197-200.

the Sassanian rather than the Arab conquest of Eretz-Israel/Palestine.”⁶⁶ This piyyut like “Time to Rebuke” is laced with the standard eschatological motifs of Jewish messianic thought in Late Antiquity, namely, the destruction of Rome, the restoration of the Temple and its services, and the arrival of the Messiah.

These apocalyptic works both in prose and in poetry do nothing more than to testify to the existence of and the intensification of Jewish Messianic expectations in the context of the Perso-Byzantine war in the early seventh century. As stated, the war and its results appeared to fulfill long believed prerequisites for the arrival of the Jewish redeemer. The questions that remain for now is (1) did news of the war reach the Arabian Peninsula; (2) if so, did Jewish Messianic expectations intensify for the Jews present there, and (3) if so, did they factor into the ‘Anṣār’s decision to participate in the pact made at ‘Aqaba.

⁶⁶ Sivan, 297.

CHAPTER 5

JEWS IN YATHRIB

News of the War Reaches the Peninsula

It appears that news of the war reached the Arabian Peninsula after the Persian defeat of the Byzantines at Antioch in 613. As it did for the Jews in and around Byzantium, this defeat for someone present in the Peninsula must have forced upon them the impression that the Byzantine defeat was a total and lasting one. Prior to it, the Byzantines had suffered other defeats in the course of the war, but they continued to war against the Persians. In fact, they had even reversed some of their losses. For example, after the Persians captured Caesarea in 611, the Byzantines recaptured it in 612. However, after this defeat, the Byzantines were forced to exit the war, retreating back to Constantinople. They would not reenter the war for another nine years. As a result, the Byzantine exit from the war concluded more than five centuries of uninterrupted Roman hegemony in the region. With the Byzantines out of the fight, the Persians were able to capture Syria, Palestine, and Egypt with minimal resistance. The Byzantines would not regain control of those territories for a decade or more. In meantime, for an onlooker, the defeat at Antioch was a game changer—the balance of power had suddenly shifted. Such a drastic shift in the political landscape, it is no surprise that we find this echoing throughout the Peninsula.

Surat ar-Rūm

The single most demonstrative proof that news of war reached the Arabian Peninsula is found in the Qur’ān. In the first six *’ayāt* (i.e. verses) of the thirtieth chapter—Surat ar-Rūm, we find what appears to be a direct reference to the Persian victory at Antioch in 613. It is as follows:

أَلَمْ ۙ غَلِبَتِ الرُّومُ ۚ ۞ فِي أَدْنَى الْأَرْضِ وَهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ غَلِبِهِمْ سَيَغْلِبُونَ ۚ ۞ فِي ضِعْفِ
 مِائَتٍ ۚ اللَّهُ الْأَمْرُ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمِنْ بَعْدُ وَيَوْمَئِذٍ يَفْرَحُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ۚ ۞ بِنَصْرِ اللَّهِ ۚ يَنْصُرُ اللَّهُ مَنِ
 يَشَاءُ ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ ۚ ۞ وَعَدَ اللَّهُ لَا يَخْلِفُ اللَّهُ وَعْدَهُ وَلَكِنْ أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ۚ ۞

- (1) Alif Lam Mim.
- (2) The Romans⁶⁷ have been defeated⁶⁸
- (3) In the nearer land, and they, after their defeat will be victorious
- (4) Within ten years—Allah's is the command in the former case and in the latter—and in that day believers will rejoice
- (5) In Allah's help to victory. He helpeth to victory whom He will. He is the Mighty, the Merciful:
- (6) It is a promise of Allah. Allah faileth not His promise, but most of mankind know not.⁶⁹

On these verses, the earliest Qur'ānic commentators⁷⁰ do not explicitly state that these verses were in reference to the Persian victory over the Byzantines at Antioch in 613. Nevertheless,

⁶⁷The Arabic word *ar-rūm* (الرُّوم) is translated here as the Romans. It is a correct translation, although perhaps the Roman Empire may be more accurate. Nevertheless, what is understood by the word is what we today refer to as, or today what we anachronistically refer to as, the Byzantine Empire, or the Byzantines. This should be no surprise, considering that the term the Byzantine Empire did not come into circulation until the sixteenth century with the publication of *Corpus Historiae Byzantinae* by Hieronymus Wolf. In order to make the meaning clear, some contemporary translations have chosen to render *ar-rūm* as the Byzantines or the Byzantine Empire. See Abud Majid Daryabadi translation of the Qur'an and the Sahīh International translation of the Qurān.

⁶⁸ Although no explicit mention of Persia is made here, Qur'ānic commentators all maintain that the above verses were revealed in the context of the Perso-Byzantine war. They all agree that the second verse is referring to the Persians defeat of the Byzantines. In this verse, the verb *ghalaba* (غَلَبَ), meaning to beat, to defeat, or to conquer, is rendered in its passive form. As a result, the doer of the action is not mentioned, only the object of the verb. This construction in Arabic is often referred to as *mabnī al-majhūl* by Arab morphologists or *mabnī al-maf'ūl* by Arab grammarians. Commonly, it is understood that such construction means that the doer of the action is unknown, hence it not being mentioned. However, scholars have put forth other reasons, and for the majority of them, the doer of the action is known but willfully omitted. Often times this occurs when the intended focus is the verb's object rather than its subject. In the verses above, the intended focus is not on the Persians rather it is on the Byzantines.

⁶⁹ For this translation see *The Glorious Qur'ān*, trans. M. M. Pickthall (New York, 1977), p. 423.

⁷⁰ For the earliest commentaries dealing with these six verses and which this paper utilizes see *Tafsīr al-Ṭabrī*, Vol. 6, 91-2; *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī*, Vol. 3, 3-4; *Tafsīr ibn 'Aṭīya*, Vol. 4, 327-9; *Tafsīr al-Tha'labī*, Vol. 7, 291-4; *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, Vol. 6, 259-62; *Tafsīr ibn al-Kathīr*, Vol. 6, 297-305; *Tafsīr al-Sayūṭī*, Vol. 11, 573-85.

they do appear to be in a tacit agreement that the Persian victory over the Byzantines had reached the Peninsula sometime during the Meccan phase of Muhammad's prophecy.⁷¹ They do so by describing how the Quraysh rejoiced in the Persian victory, considering it a victory for polytheism and a defeat for monotheism. They touted it in front of the Muslims in Mecca, knowing that the Muslims regarded the Byzantine loss as a loss for monotheism. As a result, the commentators inform us that these verses were revealed to temper the jovial spirit of the Quraysh and to lift the spirit of the Muslims by drawing their attention away from the Persian victory and towards the Byzantines' eventual victory in the near future.⁷² Furthermore, the majority of commentaries agree that the Byzantine defeat occurred after the two armies had met and fought in what the third verse calls the nearer land. In their attempts to interpret what is meant by the nearer land, the majority of Qur'ānic commentators and Islamic historians point to some location in and around ash-Shām, pointing to places either in present-day southern Syria, such as Bosra and Daraa, to present-day Jordan, or to Palestine. Although none of the commentators point to Antioch specifically, it is important to note that the historical record demonstrates that the only time the two armies met in and around ash-Shām where it resulted in a Byzantine defeat was at Antioch in 613. The Persians never defeated any Byzantine forces in locations where the commentators point to, i.e., southern Syria, Jordan, or Palestine. In fact, after the Byzantine defeat at Antioch, the Persians proceeded to capture Damascus in the same year and then Palestine in 614 without any Byzantine resistance. Furthermore, after the defeat at Antioch the

⁷¹ I only found one tradition attributed to 'Abū Sa'īd al-Khadrī that states that these verses were revealed in the Madīnan period, specifically after the battle of Badr (See ath-Tha'labī *op. cit.*, vol. 6 pg. 293; See also al-Wāḥidī in *'Asbab an-nuzūl*)

⁷² From early on, Muslims have regarded these verses as a clear proof of Muhammad's prophecy and of the Qur'ān's divine status as the word of God, for it predicted not only the eventual Byzantine victory over the Persians beforehand, but more importantly it predicted the eventual victory of monotheism over polytheism; See *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* 2798 c; See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 4820, 4825.

Byzantines were forced to withdraw from the war for nine years, and even when they did return to the fight, they did so much further to the east. Therefore, the only defeat that the verses above could be referencing is the Byzantine defeat at Antioch in 613.

Poetry of Ḥassān bin Thābit

This is strengthened further when we consider the poetry of Ḥassān bin Thābit. Ḥassān, a member of the Khazraj tribe in Yathrib, is remembered as one of the early poets associated with the early rise of Islam, often being referred to as the “poet laureate” of the Prophet Muhammad. However, before the rise of Islam, Ḥassān was known as one of the panegyrists for the Ghassān tribe⁷³ who descended from the al-‘Azd tribe, which is the same tribal group that the ‘Aws and Khazraj descended from, meaning Ḥassān, along with the ‘Aws and Khazraj, shared a common lineage with Ghassān.⁷⁴ It is believed that the ‘Azd tribe originated in South Arabia and immigrated into the Arabian Peninsula where they wandered about in the Peninsula before they split apart and settled in different locations.⁷⁵ The ‘Aws and Khazraj settled in Yathrib while Ghassān settled within the Roman *limes* around 490. The Ghassānids occupied a territory that became known as Ghassānland. It comprised the territories of Palaestina Secunda and Arabia, viz. part of present-day Palestine and Jordan. In 502, Ghassān entered into a treaty with the Byzantines. The treaty stipulated that the Ghassān must perform certain functions. First, they were to supply the Byzantine army with a contingent in the event of a war with Persia. Second, they were to war against Persia’s Arab allies, the Lakhmids. Finally, the Ghassānids were expected to repel nomadic incursions from the south; to perform routine military operations against the Jews in the Ḥijāz region, and to protect Byzantine interests along the coveted spice-route. In exchange, the Byzantines provided the Ghassānids with annual subsidies. The Ghassān

⁷³ See “Ghassān,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*

⁷⁴ See “Ḥassān b. Thābit,” *ibid.*

⁷⁵ For the most authoritative account on the wanderings of Ghassān see Wahb ibn Munabbih, *Kitāb al-Tijān*.

were loyal clients. For decades, they had fought alongside the Byzantines in several different Perso-Byzantine wars. Accordingly, in 613, when the Byzantines met the Persians at the gates of Antioch, the Ghassānids fought alongside them, and like the Byzantines, they, too, were defeated, and when the Byzantines retreated to Constantinople, Ghassān also fled into Anatolia, deserting Ghassānland.⁷⁶

Ḥassān's poetry is the only evidence of Ghassānid participation in the Perso-Byzantine war of 602-630.⁷⁷ While several of Ḥassān's poems are extant three of them evidence a role for Ghassān.⁷⁸ The three poems together demonstrate the presence of a Ghassān contingent alongside the Byzantines throughout the course of the war. The first poem written by Ḥassān provides important details pertaining to the Ghassān phylarchate in this period. For instance, we are told of Ghassānland's jurisdictions, of the Ghassān's leadership, of their ethos, of their battle tactics, of their weaponry, and of their importance as a Byzantine contingent. Most importantly, this particular poem is the only evidence of Ghassān's participation during Phocas' (602-10) reign, and in it we are informed how Ghassān took the battle to the Persians, penetrating their borders and reaching the Persian heartland.⁷⁹ In the other two poems, Ḥassān demonstrates Ghassān's participation at Antioch in 613 during the reign of Heraclius (610-41). The two poems

⁷⁶ For the most detailed account of Ghassān in the sixth and seventh century see Irfan Shahīd. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. Vol. I. Part I. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995.

⁷⁷ There are several works that deal with Ḥassān's poetry. For the Standard English edition see W.M. 'Arafat, *Dīwān of Ḥassān Ibn Thābit*, 2 vols. (London, 1971). Also, an Arabic version of this work exists. There are several books in Arabic that deals with Ḥassān's poetry see, for example, *Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān Ibn Thābit al-Anṣārī* (Cairo, 1929). For a detailed analysis of Ḥassān's poetry see Irfan Shahīd. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. Vol. 2. Part 2. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009, 232-46.

⁷⁸ For an account of Ghassān's participation in the context of this war see Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. Vol. I. Part I., 622-46.

⁷⁹ This poem is available in W.M. 'Arafat, *Dīwān of Ḥassān Ibn Thābit*, Vol. I, London, 1971, 307-9. Shahīd states that verses 8-15 and 9-17 are of particular importance for demonstrating Ghassān's participation in the war during Phocas' reign. See Shahīd, Vol. I. Part I, 624.

are elegies, lamenting the defeat of Ghassān and their subsequent retreat from Ghassānland.⁸⁰ In conclusion, these three poems together illustrate that (a) news of the war reached the Peninsula and (b) that similarly news of the Byzantine defeat at Antioch in 613 reached there as well.

Trade Activity

Now, even if the above testimonies did not exist or if one doubted them for one reason or another, then surely one could envision news of the Perso-Byzantine war reaching the Arabian Peninsula via trade routes. The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula could not have lived in complete isolation, cut off from the world around them and thus ignorant of momentous changes taking place beyond their borders.⁸¹ To be sure, common sense assures us that the inhabitants ventured outside of the Peninsula, thereby becoming aware of the context in which they lived. Simply, the climate alone would have propelled them to do so, for the Peninsula lacks sufficient resources to support life, thereby forcing them to import foodstuffs. With that said, the Arabs of the Peninsula engaged in trade in all directions, to the north in Bilād ash-Shām, to the South in Yemen, to the southeast in Oman, to the West in Abyssinia, and to the East in and around the Arabian Gulf. For the Arabs in the Ḥijāz, the most important trade routes were those that went to Bilād ash-Shām and the Yemen with Mecca and Yathrib serving as important crossroads for trade since the early part of the sixth century of the Common Era.⁸²

⁸⁰ For these two poems see ‘Arafat, 194-6; 230-1. Also, for an account of how these relate to Ghassān’s participation in the war see Shahīd, Vol. I. Part I, 637-8.

⁸¹ There is one work that does deny the existence of a vast trade network existing in and outside of the Peninsula; see Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987. A critical response to Crone’s work has been written; see Serjeant, R. B. "Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, no. 3 (Jul. – Sep. 1990), 472-86.

⁸² For a comprehensive account of trade in the Peninsula prior to Islam and a detailed list of primary sources on the subject see Sulayman, Salamah Salih, Aladie. *Meccan Trade Prior to the Rise of Islam*. PhD diss., The University of Durham, 1991.

Of interest for us here are their trade activities to the north in Bilād ash-Shām. There the primary place for trade activity was Damascus, but activity also occurred in other places such as Buṣra and Gaza, and trade caravans frequented these places in the summer months, heading south to Yemen in the winter. The Qur’ān alludes to this stating:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 لَا يَلْفُ قُرَيْشٌ ۝ (١) إِلَّا فِيهِمْ رِحْلَةُ الْشِّتَاءِ وَالصَّيْفِ ۝ (٢) فَلْيَعْبُدُوا رَبَّ هَذَا الْبَيْتِ ۝ (٣)
 الَّذِي أَطْعَمَهُمْ مِنْ جُوعٍ وَآمَنَهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ ۝ (٤)

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

- (1) For the taming of Quraysh.
- (2) For their taming (We cause) the caravans to set forth in winter and summer.
- (3) So let them worship the Lord of this House,
- (4) Who hath fed them against hunger and hath made them safe from fear.

Coincidentally, the Byzantine defeat at Antioch in 613 occurred in the summer. Moreover, the Persians captured Damascus in the autumn of 613, and it is believed that Jerusalem was captured near the onset of summer in 614. Thus, these momentous changes occurred during the time when the caravans from the Peninsula would have frequented the markets in the nearer land, i.e. Bilād ash-Shām, thereby noticing the conspicuous absence of Ghassān and the Byzantines.

Jewish Messianic Expectations in Yathrib

As news of the war between the Persians and the Byzantines reached the Peninsula, it, too, reached the Jews present in Yathrib. Accordingly, it reached them that the Byzantine Jews had regained control of Jerusalem in 614, reinstated Temple services and planned to rebuild the

Temple. The question, however, is did such news intensify Jewish Messianic expectations amongst the Jews in Yathrib as it did for those Jews residing to the north, just beyond the borders of the Peninsula. As mentioned previously, adventist speculations concerning the Messiah's arrival often followed from such momentous occasions. And surely the perception of a Roman overthrow by invading Persian forces coupled with the transfer of power of Jerusalem into Jewish hands after nearly five centuries along with the restoration of Temple services and plans to reconstruct the Temple, qualified as such an occasion.

Yet, any discussion on the Jews in Yathrib must bear in mind the long standing debate concerning the historicity of the Jewish presence there. The Islamic tradition itself maintains that the Jews of Yathrib were ethnic Jews, meaning direct descendants of one of the tribes of Israel, and not proselytes. The only thing debated within the Islamic tradition is their date of arrival to the Peninsula. While the sources agree that the Jews were the first to migrate to Yathrib, thus placing their arrival there prior to the arrival of the 'Aws and the Khazraj, the time period of their arrival is debated. On the one hand, there are those who date the Jewish arrival in Yathrib to the Biblical period, dating their arrival either to the time of Noah after the deluge, to the time of Moses, or to the time of David and Solomon. Then on the other hand, there are those who date their arrival after the Biblical period, either dating it to the Babylonian period following the destruction of the first temple or to the Roman period following the destruction of the second temple.⁸³

Scholars outside of the Islamic tradition, however, have approached the Islamic tradition with deep skepticism, concluding that any attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the Jews in Yathrib is futile since the Islamic sources remain the only primary sources for distilling

⁸³ For an account of these different traditions see Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā' bī 'akhbār dār al-muṣṭafā*, Vol. 1, 156-165.

such a picture. Nevertheless, instead of heeding their own advice, they have continued to utilize those same sources to draw conclusions about the Jewish presence in Yathrib. In doing so, the scholarly focus has differed drastically from that of the Islamic tradition. Whereby, instead of the focus revolving around the period of the Jewish arrival to Yathrib, it has revolved around the normative status of the Jews there, that is to say, their “Jewishness.” The majority has concluded that contrary to the Islamic tradition, which maintains that the Jews in Yathrib were ethnic Jews, the Jews of Yathrib were instead proselytes and thus not ethnic Jews.⁸⁴ Then, going a step further, scholars have attempted to further understand the “Jewishness” of these proselytes. Here, two conclusions have dominated: First, there are those who argue that although they were Jewish they were not of the Pharisaic tradition. In other words, they were not Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews. Rather, their “Jewishness” was either one of three things: a syncretism of Judaism and Christianity⁸⁵, a product of Samaritan influences⁸⁶, or a remnant of the Qumran sect.⁸⁷ Then, there are those who state that they were Jews in the fullest sense of the word, meaning Pharisaic Jews. For instance, in a work published in 2014 by Haggai Mazuz entitled *Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina*, Mazuz juxtaposes a variety of Islamic and Talmudic sources, concluding:

Our findings demonstrate that the Medinan Jews were Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews in almost every respect. Their sages believed in using homiletic interpretation (*derash*) of the Scriptures, as did the sages of the Talmud. On many halakhic

⁸⁴ For a list of sources see the introduction of Haggai Mazuz. *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews in Medina*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

⁸⁵ See Moshe Sharon, “People of the Book,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001).

⁸⁶ See Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁸⁷ See Chaim Rabin, “Islam and the Qumran Sect,” in Chaim Rabin (ed.), *Qumran Studies*, (Oxford University Press: London, 1957).

issues, their observations were identical to those of the Talmudic sages. In addition, they held Rabbinic beliefs, sayings, and motifs derived from the Midrashic literature.⁸⁸

Although Mazuz's work has received some harsh criticism⁸⁹, it is not the first to consider the Jews of Yathrib as Talmudic Jews. Rather it was Goitein who first said, "So far as we can learn about the Medinan Jews from the Qur'ān and from ḥadīth, they were regular Jews with clear local characteristics that were not so different from the typical Jew known to us from Talmudic literature."⁹⁰ Over the years many other scholars have also agreed with Goitein's conclusion, and Mazuz's work is then just the most recent example.

Despite this debate, it is important to note that irrespective of these various positions vis-à-vis the "Jewishness" of the Jews in Yathrib, none of them preclude the possibility of a Messianic belief and by extension the possibility of Messianic expectations intensifying in the context of the Perso-Byzantine war. To be sure, if they were in fact Talmudic-Rabbinic Jews, then the existence of a Messianic belief must be given serious consideration. This belief had been fully articulated by the Talmudic sages of the Tannaitic period⁹¹ and thus incorporated into the Talmud itself. Likewise, even if they were not "normative" Jews, rather perhaps being a product of Samaritan influences; or the leftovers from the Qumran sect, or perhaps even an admixture of some foreign elements such as Christianity or Arab culture, this also does not exclude the possibility of the existence of such a belief. In fact, some scholars, especially those in this latter

⁸⁸ Mazuz, 99.

⁸⁹ For a critical review of Mazuz's book see Hughes, AW. n.d. "The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 83, no. 2: 580-582.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁹¹ The Tannaim (or the singular Tanna) were a group of Jewish scholars living in the first and second centuries of the Common Era who expounded on the oral Torah and whose teachings are found recorded in the Mishnah (see "TANNAIM AND AMORAIM." *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Vol. 12, 49-54). For the most detailed account of Jewish Messianic belief in this period see *The Messianic Idea in Israel, from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*, op. cit.

camp, argue for the presence of a Messianic belief. For example, Moshe Sharon who suggested that the Judaism present in Yathrib was an admixture of Christianity states, “Based on the Qur’ānic material alone it is very possible that at least some of these Jews (if not all of them) represented a sect with a distinct messianic doctrine, who regarded the Messiah as the son of God and called him the “the savior,” “the helper” (‘Ozer, ‘uzayr).”⁹² Furthermore, Baron in his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* who believed that the Jewish existence in Arabia had syncretized Arab cultural elements into their Jewish beliefs and practices, writes, “Messianic currents spread with particular intensity to the Arabian Peninsula, where Jewish tribes, living in relative isolation, had assimilated many ingredients from the local Arabian folklore as well as all sorts of heterodox admixtures germinating in their own and in the neighboring Christian communities.” Lastly, H. Z. Hirschberg argued that the Jews of Yathrib were awaiting the “final redemption to be initiated by Elijah and fulfilled by a prophet-messiah.”⁹³

It should be no surprise that scholars reached such a conclusion. With the Islamic sources remaining the sole set of sources for deriving any conclusions on the religious and spiritual life of the Jews in Yathrib, they present ample examples that point to the presence of a Messianic belief. These examples illustrate that Messianic expectations existed at the time of Muhammad and more specifically on the eve of the ‘Aqaba pact. For instance, as just mentioned, Moshe Sharon provides one example through his linguistic analyses of the term ‘Uzayr found in the Qur’ān, which states:

The Jews call 'Uzair a son of Allah, and the Christians call Christ the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the

⁹² Sharon, “People of the Book.”

⁹³ Baron, Salo Wittmayer. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*. Vol. V. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957, 168.

unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded
away from the Truth!⁹⁴

Departing from the conventional understanding, which equates ‘Uzair with the biblical prophet Ezra, Sharon argues that ‘Uzair is cognate with the Hebrew word ‘Ozēr, meaning helper or savior. He claims that the Hebrew word often appears in biblical and post-biblical literature alongside the Hebrew words that are of the root word for salvation, hence his reasoning for believing that the Jews in Yathrib “represented a sect with a distinct messianic doctrine.” In addition, we find in the Qur’ān a verse that states:

And when there comes to them a Book from Allah, confirming what is with them.
—although from of old they had prayed for victory against those without faith
—when there comes to them that which they (should) have recognized, they
refuse to believe in it; but the curse of Allah is on those without Faith.⁹⁵

The Qur’ānic commentators on this verse have unanimously agreed that what is meant by “although from of old they had prayed for victory against those without faith” is that the Jews continuously prayed for the arrival of an expected prophet. They mention further that this was no ordinary prophet, but he was the one who will come at the end of time and deliver a lasting and final victory to Jews over their enemies.⁹⁶ Finally, in the *sīra* literature, we find that on the eve of the ‘Aqaba pact, when the ‘Anṣār met Muhammad in Mecca and heard his claims to prophethood, the ‘Anṣār exclaimed, “Know surely, this is the Prophet with whom the Jews are ever threatening us; so, let us make haste and be the first to join him.” According to them, the Jews in Yathrib had been threatening them continuously, stating, “The time of a Prophet who is

⁹⁴ Qur’ān, 9:30

⁹⁵ Qur’ān, 2:89

⁹⁶ See *Tafsīr al-Ṭabṛī*, Vol. 1, 290; see al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb an-Nuzūl*, 31.

to be sent is now at hand, with him we shall slay you even as ‘Ad and ‘Iram were slain.”⁹⁷ All of these examples contain within them messianic undertones that illustrate the presence of messianic expectations existing not only during the time of Muhammad but more importantly during the ‘Aqaba pact. All of them articulate a belief in a redeeming prophet for the Jews.

Of course, one may remain skeptical concerning the information contained in the Islamic sources for obvious reasons such as the lack of outside sources (i.e. Jewish sources) or the historicity, authenticity, and purpose of these sources.⁹⁸ However, it is important to note that Jewish Messianic belief in general does anticipate the coming of a prophet. This is evidenced in the Talmud where the prophet Elijah is ascribed the role to return shortly before the arrival of the prophet-messiah. This belief appears to have persisted over the centuries as evidenced by the Jewish apocalyptic literature previously mentioned and that is dated to the early seventh century as it contains references to Elijah and his role in the manifestation of the messianic age. Furthermore, the Messiah himself was considered a prophet-Messiah, possessing both the attributes of a king and a prophet inherited from Moses, the Judges, and David. The Jewish refusal then to accept Muhammad’s claims to prophecy is that he did not fit the Jewish profile for the prophet that they were anticipating. For instance, neither Elijah nor the prophet-Messiah

⁹⁷ Op. cit., vol. 2, 77.

⁹⁸ There are no Jewish sources available that can corroborate the material found in the Islamic sources or that can simply lend a Jewish voice to the discussion found within the Islamic sources, and often the Islamic sources are polemical towards the Jews in Yathrib and thus objectivity comes into question. Furthermore, although the latest research points to the Qur’ān’s compilation occurring in the seventh century, the *sīra* literature was written centuries later, putting into question its historicity, which also outside sources, if they existed, could help to verify. Secondly, it could be argued that references made regarding Jewish expectations for a prophet are to be understood didactically. For instance, such references are not meant to document Jewish beliefs for factual knowledge. Rather, they are used to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the Jewish refusal to recognize Muhammad as that prophet whom they had been anticipating. Therefore, the edifying lesson becomes: Do not be like those Jews who beforehand acknowledged the truth of Muhammad’s prophecy, yet they obstinately refused to accept it once it manifested. In other words, if one has recognized a truth prior to its manifestation, then one should not be so foolish as to deny it once it has actually manifested. As the above-mentioned Qur’ānic verse states, “when there comes to them that which they (should) have recognized, they refuse to believe in it.” Lastly, one may contend that these references to Jewish expectations for the coming of a prophet are to be understood as an attempt to provide a demonstrative proof of Muhammad’s prophecy.

was expected to descend from Mecca. Rather, they were expected to arrive suddenly in *Bilād ash-Shām*. Moreover, they were not expecting him to be a warner or a bearer of a new scripture such as the Qur’ān, but rather they were expecting him to destroy their enemies, free them from foreign domination, and reestablish the glory of the Davidic kingdom in the form of the messianic kingdom. Thus, it appears that while the ‘Anṣār understood Muhammad to be the proclaimed prophet of the Jews, the Jews understood this prophet to be none other than Elijah or the prophet-Messiah himself.

The Threat of Jewish Messianic Expectations

An intensification of Jewish Messianic expectations has the ability to mobilize and unify the Jewish community as a result of its political and to large extent imperial aspirations. In the former, it is a hope for political redemption. Whereby, the Jews are freed from foreign domination; its enemies are eradicated; the territory of Jerusalem is expanded to make room for the incoming of Jewish diaspora, and lastly it is a complete restoration of the Davidic kingdom in all its glory. In the latter, and after the realization of Israel’s political aspirations, Israel will force all other nations to succumb to Israel’s might, to seek its pleasure, and to hope for salvation by adhering to its example. This kingdom—the Messianic kingdom—will rule universally, serving as the final imperial empire on earth until the transition from this world to the world to come. As a result, it is in the mobilization and unification of the Jews in Yathrib for their hope of realizing these aspirations that would prove threatening for the ‘Anṣār.

The Islamic sources illustrate that the ‘Anṣār had become an enemy for the Jews in Yathrib. To begin, the sources mention how the ‘Anṣār usurped control of Yathrib and subjected the Jewish population there to its authority. As mentioned, the sources state that the Jews were the first to emigrate to Yathrib. Although it is debated within the sources when the Jews settled

in Yathrib and for what reasons, the traditions found within them all affirm that the Jewish existence in Yathrib preceded the ‘Anṣār’s. When the latter ventured out of Yemen and settled in Yathrib, they did so alongside the Jews who had by that time transformed the desolate oasis of Yathrib into a suitable dwelling, digging wells, building fortresses, erecting markets, and cultivating agriculture. For a time, the ‘Anṣār were content living under Jewish rule. However, they eventually seized control of Yathrib. Tradition states that a Jewish king rose to power and implanted the practice of *jus primae noctis*. Such practice states that it is the right of the king to have sexual relations with a bride on her wedding night before her husband. Incensed over this, one of the ‘Anṣār—Mālik b. ʿAjalān—killed the Jewish king when he attempted to claim his right of the first night with Mālik’s newly wedded sister. Afterwards, Mālik fled north to Bilād ash-Shām and enlisted the help of his relatives, the Roman clients—the Ghassānids. As zealous miaphysite Christians, they never shied away from an expedition against the Jews in Ḥijāz. Tradition states that the Ghassānids camped outside of Yathrib, and then they summoned all of the Jewish leaders in Yathrib to a meeting, which they accepted. As the Jewish leaders arrived and entered, the Ghassānids laid each one of them to the sword. With their leaders dead, the Ghassānids were able to wrest control of Yathrib from the Jews and transfer it to the ‘Anṣār. Thereafter, the Ghassānids returned to their territory, leaving the ‘Anṣār in control of Yathrib, and tradition mentions that the Jews never reconciled with that humiliating defeat.⁹⁹

Furthermore, the ‘Anṣār were regarded as the Jews’ enemies by virtue of their kinship and close relationship with the Ghassān tribe.¹⁰⁰ As mentioned previously, the Ghassān tribe was closely allied with the Romans who was considered enemy number one for the Jews. Thus, as

⁹⁹ For this account see ibn ‘Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, vol. 1, 516-18.

¹⁰⁰ In addition to the Islamic sources identifying a close relationship between Ghassān and the ‘Anṣār, there appears to be epigraphic evidence that adds further weight to that (see the Usays inscription, see Shahīd, *op. cit.*, Vol. I. Part I., 117-24.).

Roman clients, Ghassān is by extension enemy number one. It is important to keep in mind that part of the agreement between Ghassān tribe and the Byzantines required Ghassān to perform routine military operations against the Jews in the Ḥijāz region, and we are aware of several expeditions against the Jews there. For instance, we have just mentioned of one such example when Ghassān came to defend their relatives, the ‘Aws and the Khazraj, in Yathrib against the Jews there. Another example is mentioned by ibn Qutayba¹⁰¹ and believed to be confirmed by epigraphical evidence.¹⁰² It is argued that ca. 567, roughly half a century before the ‘Aqaba pact, the Ghassānids conducted an expedition against the Jews in Khaybar. Moreover, even outside of the Ḥijāz the Ghassānids performed military operations against Jews, or at least those considered by them to be Jews. For instance, in 529, Ghassān put down a Samaritan revolt in Palestine and then deported many of them to Ethiopia.¹⁰³

In the context of the Perso-Byzantine war in the early seventh century, the enemies of the Jews did not enjoy an auspicious fate. For instance, in 611, the Jews rose up in Antioch, killing the Patriarch of Antioch and paving the way for a Persian invasion. Likewise, when the Persians entered into Palestine, the Jews from in and around the area rushed to enlist in the Persian ranks to aid in the conquest of Palestine, and then when the Persians captured Jerusalem, the Jews made straightway to purify the city of its enemies. The ‘Anṣār surely caught wind of this and thus became weary that they, too, could suffer a similar fate, given the fact that they were considered enemies for the Jews. Thus, with their mainstay for defense against the them—the Ghassān—absent and with the sociopolitical context of Yathrib heavily polarized and wrought in bloody conflict, the threat posed by a mobilized Jewish front eager to realize its political

¹⁰¹ See Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ma’ārif*, 642

¹⁰² See the Ḥarrān inscription; for an anylsis on it and its identification with the Khaybar invasion see Shahīd, *op. cit.*, Vol. I. Part I., 322-331.

¹⁰³ See Shahīd, *op. cit.*, Vol. I. Part I., 79-82.

aspirations, which included vanquishing its enemies, could very well be of an existential concern for the ‘Anṣār. To be sure, it appears that on the eve of ‘Aqaba, according to the most detailed and coherent account available to us, the ‘Anṣār articulated that concern clearly. As stated previously, when the ‘Anṣār met with Muhammad and accepted Islam in their final encounter prior to the first installment of the ‘Aqaba pledge, they conversed amongst themselves, recalling that the Jews were prone to saying, “The time of a Prophet who is to be sent is now at hand, with him we shall slay you even as ‘Ad and ‘Iram were slain.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, the ‘Anṣār wasted no time, arguing, “Know surely, this is the Prophet with whom the Jews are ever threatening us; so, let us make haste and be the first to join him.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Op. cit., vol. 2, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Thus, it is in this context, namely, the Perso-Byzantine war of the early seventh century, that we are to understand the ‘Anṣār’s subscription to the pledge at ‘Aqaba. In it, Jewish Messianic expectations for political redemption erupted. As a result, Jews placed on their shoulder the burden of ushering in the Messianic age. They did so by immediately rushing to the aid of the advancing Persian forces. These intense feelings of redemption, then, trickled down to the Jewish community in Yathrib who had their own enemy—the ‘Anṣār. Undoubtedly, the developments to the north interjected into the Jews of Yathrib the confidence to threaten the ‘Anṣār, informing them of the imminent arrival of a prophet who they would join in eradicating the Jews’ enemies, which included the ‘Anṣār.

With news of the war and its developments reaching the Peninsula, it would appear that the ‘Anṣār recognized the legitimacy of the threat they faced. Quickly then, they understood that the sociopolitical climate in Yathrib was toxic, not conducive for countering such a threat. Furthermore, their chief ally that kept the Jewish presence in the Ḥijāz in check—the Ghassān—had fled north following their defeat at Antioch in 613. Therefore, the ‘Anṣār knew that they needed to solidify their ties and to bolster their numbers with a strong presence from outside that could replace the presently absent Ghassān tribe who use to provide such a service. With the north off limits due to the Persian invasion, the ‘Anṣār headed south to Mecca beseeching the Quraysh prior to their encounters with Muhammad for such an alliance. However, the Quraysh rejected. This led them to encounter Muhammad who at once presented the means for

reconciliation and the numbers needed in Yathrib to counter the threat posed by the Jews and their potential allies to the north. As already stated, the understanding of the ‘Anṣār’s participation in ‘Aqaba has been incomplete. Its study has been limited in scope to the sociopolitical context of Yathrib, which underscores the repetitive and destructive intertribal feuds between the two tribes of the ‘Anṣār. By doing so, the ‘Anṣār’s participation at ‘Aqaba has been reduced to one sole cause, albeit merely a sufficient cause, namely, the perception that Muhammad could solidify the ‘Anṣār’s ties, thus ending the hostilities between them. However, this explanation ignores an important clue found in the body of sources (i.e. the *sīra* literature), namely, the articulation of Jewish expectations for the arrival of a prophet who the Jews would then join and proceed to assist in eradicating those identified as enemies to the Jews, which included the ‘Anṣār. In order to understand this more precisely, we are forced to broaden the context of our study to include not only Yathrib or the Arabian Peninsula but also the Eastern Mediterranean where we find that the ‘Aqaba pledge occurred in the context of the Last Great War of Antiquity, viz. the Perso-Byzantine war of the early seventh century. By which we are able to identify the fact that in the context of this war Jewish Messianic expectations intensified and became the chief cause for the ‘Anṣār’s subscription to the pledge in ‘Aqaba as the political aspirations of the Jews for redemption threatened their very existence and only through reconciliation and sufficient numbers could they check such a threat. All of this then was found in Muhammad and his early community of followers, viz. the Muhājirun, in Mecca, hence the ‘Anṣār’s participation at ‘Aqaba.

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