



الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ



*Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of
the Worlds;*

Quran English Translation & Commentary

By

Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Appendix VIII

First Contact of Islam with World Movements

**The contemporary Roman and Persian
Empire**

(see 30:2-7 and Notes)

1. The conflict between the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius and the Persian King Khasrau Parwiz (Chosroes II) is referred to in Surah 30. (Al Rum). It will therefore be convenient

now to review very briefly the relations of those two great Empires and the way in which they gradually decayed before the rising sun of Islam. The story has not only a political significance, but a deep spiritual significance in world history.

2. If we take the Byzantine Empire as a continuation of the Empire that grew out of the Roman Republic, the first conflict took place in B.C. 53, when the Consul Crassus (famous for his riches) was defeated in his fight with the Parthians. If we go back further, to the time of the Greek City-States, we can refer back to the invasion of Greece by Xerxes in B.C. 480-479 and the effective repulse of that invasion by sea and land by the united cooperation of the Greek States. The Persian Empire in those days extended to the western (Mediterranean) coast of Asia Minor. But as it included the Greek cities of Asia Minor, there was constant intercourse in war and peace between Persia and Hellenic (Greek) world. The cities in Greece proper had their own rivalries and jealousies, and Greek cities or parties often invoked the aid of the Great King (Shahinshah of Persia) against their opponents. By the Peace of Antalcidas, B.C. 387, Persia became practically the suzerain power of Greece. This was under the Achaemenian Dynasty of Persia.
3. Then came the rise of Macedonia and Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire (B.C. 330). This spread the Hellenic influence as far east as Central Asia, and as far south as Syria (including Palestine), Egypt, and Northern Africa generally. Rome in its expansion westwards reached the Atlantic, and in its expansion eastwards absorbed the territories of Alexander's successors, and became the mistress of all countries with a Mediterranean seacoast. The nations of the Roman Empire "insensibly melted away into the Roman name and people "(Gibbon, chap ii).
4. Meanwhile there were native forces in Persia which asserted themselves and established (A.C. 10) the Dynasty of the Arsacids (Ashkanian). This was mainly the outcome of a revolt against Hellenism, and its spear point was in Parthia. The Arsacids won back Persia proper, and

established the western boundary of Persia in a line drawn roughly from the eastern end of the Black Sea southwards to the Euphrates at point northeast of Palmyra. This would include the region of the Caucasus (excluding the Black Sea coast) and Armenia and Lower Mesopotamia, in the Persian Empire. This was the normal boundary between Persia and the Roman Empire until the Islamic Empire wiped out the old Monarchy of Persia and a great part of the Byzantine Empire, and annexed Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and gradually Asia Minor, finally extinguishing the whole of the Byzantine Empire.

5. Another stage in Persian history was reached when the Arsacids were overthrown and the Sasanians came into power under Ardshir 1, A.C. 225. the Sasanian Empire was, in a sense, a continuation of the Achaemenian Empire, and was reaction against the corruptions of the Zoroastrian religion which had crept in under the Parthian Dynasty of the Arsacids. But the religious reforms were only partial. There were some interaction between Christianity and the Zoroastrian religion. For example, the great mystic Mani, who was painter as well as religious leader, founded the sect of Manichaeism. He flourished in the reign of Shapur 1 (A.C. 241-272) and seems to have preached a form of Gnostic faith, in which Alexandrian philosophy was mixed with Christian doctrine and the old Persian belief in the dual principle of Good and Evil. The Sasanians failed to purify religion and only adhered to fire-worship in arrogance, luxury, sensuality, and monopoly of power and privilege, which is the office of Religion to denounce and root out. That office was performed by Islam.
6. When the seat of the Roman Empire was transferred to Constantinople (Byzantium) in the time of Constantine (A.C. 350), the conflict between Rome and Persia became more and more frequent. The true Peninsula of Arabia was never conquered either by Rome or by Persia, although its outlying parts were absorbed in either the one or the other at various times. It is interesting to notice that the Roman Emperor Philip (A.C. 244-249) was a born Arab and that the architecture of the Nabataeans in the city of Petra and

in Hijr shows a mixture of Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and indigenous Arab cultures.

7. Arabia received the cultural influences of Persia and the Byzantine Empire, but was a silent spectator of their conflicts until Islam was brought into the main currents of world politics.
8. The Yemen coast of Arabia, which was easily accessible by sea to Persia, was the battle-ground between the Persian Empire and the Abyssinian Empire just across the Red Sea. Abyssinia and Arabia had had cultural and political relations for many centuries. Amharic, the ruling language of Abyssinia, is closely allied with Arabic, and the Amharic people went as colonists and conquerors from Arabia through Yemen. Shortly before the birth of the Holy Prophet, Abyssinia had been in occupation of Yemen for some time, having displaced a Jewish dynasty. The Abyssinians professed the Christian religion, and although their Church was doctrinally separate from the Byzantine Church, there was a great deal of sympathy between the Byzantines and the Abyssinians on account of their common Christian religion.

One of the Abyssinian viceroys in Yemen was Abrahah, who conceived the design of destroying the Temple at Makkah. He led an expedition, in which elephants formed a conspicuous feature, to invade Makkah and destroy the Ka'bah. He met a disastrous repulse, which is referred to in the Quran (Surah 105). This event was in the year of the Prophet's birth, and marks the beginning of the great conflict which enabled Arabia eventually to obtain a leading place among the nations of the world.

The year usually given for the Prophet's birth is 570 A.C., though the date must be taken as only approximate, being the middle figure between 569 and 571. the extreme possible limits.

The Abyssinians having been overthrown, the Persians were established in Yemen, and their power lasted there until about the 7th year of the Hijrah (approximately 628 |A.C.), when Yemen accepted Islam.

9. The outstanding event in Byzantine history in the 6th century was the reign of Justinian (527-565) and in Persian history the reign of Anawshirwan (531-579). Justinian is well-known for his great victories in Africa and for the great Digest he made of Roman Law and Jurisprudence. In spite of the scandalous life of his queen Theodora, he occupies an honourable place in the history of the Roman Empire.

Anawshirwan is known in Persian history as the "Just King". They were contemporary rulers for a period of 34 years. In their time the Roman and Persian Empires were in close contact during peace and war. Anawshirwan just missed being adopted by the Roman Empire. If the adoption had come off, he would have become one of the claimants to the Byzantine throne. He invaded Syria and destroyed the important Christian city of Antioch in 540-541. It was only the able defence of Belisarius, the Roman general, which saved the Roman Empire from further disasters in the east.

On the other hand the Turanian Avars, driven in front of the Turks, had begun the invasion of Constantinople from the western side. Justinian made an alliance with the Abyssinians as a Christian nation, and the Abyssinians and the Persians came to conflict in Yemen. Thus world conditions were hemming in Arabia on all sides. It was Islam that not only saved Arabia but enabled it to expand and to play a prominent part in world history after the annihilation of the Persian Empire and the partial destruction of the Byzantine Empire.

10. The sixth century of the Christian era and the first half of the seventh century were indeed a marvelous period in the world's history. Great events and transformations were taking place throughout the then known world. We have referred in the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire which dominated the civilized portions of Europe, Africa and Western Asia.

The only two other countries of note in history in those days were India and China.

In India there was the glorious period of Harsha Vardhana (606-647 A.C.), in which art, science, and literature flourished, political power was on a healthy basis, and religious enquiry was bringing India and China into closer relationship. The famous Chinese Buddhist traveler Yuang-Chwang (or Yuang Tsang or Hsuan-Tsang) performed his pious pilgrimage to India in 629-45.

In China, the glorious The'ang Dynasty was established in 618. the Chinese art of that Dynasty led the world. In political power, China extended from the Pacific in the east to Persian Gulf on the west. There was unity and peace, and China-hitherto more or less isolated-received ambassadors from Persia, Constantinople, Magadha, and Nepal, in 643. but all this pomp and glitter had in it the seeds of decay.

Persia and Byzantine collapsed in the next generation. India was in chaos after Harsha's death. The Chinese Empire could not long remain free from the "Barbarians": the Great Wall, begun in the third century B.C., was soon to be out of date. By about 683 the Khitans from the northwest and the Tibetans from the south were molesting China.

The Germans, the Goths and the Vandals were pressing further and further into Roman Empire. From Asia, the Avars and the Turks were pressing both on the Romans and the Persians, and sometimes playing off the one against the other. The simpler and less sophisticated nations, with their ruder but more genuine virtues, were gaining ground. Into all that welter came the Message of Islam, to show up, as by galvanic action, the false from the truth, the empty from the eternal, the decrepit and corrupt from the vigorous and pure. The ground of History was being prepared for the New Birth in Religion.

11. Anawshirwan was succeeded on the Persian throne by an unworthy son Hurmuz (579-590). Had it not been for the talents of his able General Bahram, his Empire would have been ruined by the invasions of the Turks on one side and the Romans on the other. Eventually Bahram rebelled, and Hurmuz was deposed and killed. His son Khusraw Parwiz

(Chosroes II) took refuge with the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, who practically adopted him as a son and restored him to the Persian throne with Roman arms.

Khusraw reigned over Persia from 590 to 628. It was to him that the Holy Prophet addressed one of his letters, inviting him to Islam towards the end of his life. It is not certain whether the letter was actually delivered to him or to his successor, as it is not easy to calculate precisely synchronous dates of the Christian era with those of the earliest years of the Hijrah era.

12. In Arabic and Persian records the term Kisra refers usually to Khusraw Parwiz (Chosroes II) and sometimes to Khusraw Anawshirwan (Chosroes I), while the term Khusraw is usually treated as generic - as the title of the Kings of Persia generally. But this is by no means always the case.

"Kisra" is an Arabic form of "Khusraw".

The name of Anawshirwan has been shortened from the time of Firdawsi onwards to Nushirwan. The Pehlevi form is Anoshek-ruwan, "of immortal soul".

13. The Roman Emperor Maurice (582-602) had a mutiny in his army, and his capital revolted against him. The army chose a simple centurion called Phocas as Emperor and executed Maurice himself. The usurper Phocas ruled from 602 to 610, but his tyranny soon disgusted the Empire, Heraclius, the governor (exarch) of a distant province in Africa, raised the standard of rebellion, and his young son, also called Heraclius, was sent to Constantinople to depose Phocas and assume the reins of power. It was the younger Heraclius, who ascended the throne of Constantinople in 610 and ruled till 642, who figures in Muslim history as Hiraql.
14. Khusraw Parwiz called himself the son of the Emperor Maurice. During his refuge at Constantinople he had married a Byzantine wife. In Nizami's Romance she is known as Maryam. According to some historians she was a

daughter of the Emperor Maurice, but Gibbon throws doubts on that relationship.

In any case, he used the resources of the Persian Empire to fight the usurper Phocas. He invaded the Byzantine Empire in 603. the war between the Persians and the Romans became a national war and continued after the fall of Phocas in 610. the Persians had sweeping victories, and conquered Aleppo, Antioch, and the chief Syrian cities, including Damascus in 611.

Jerusalem fell to their arms in 614-615, just 8 to years before the sacred Hijrah. The city was burnt and pillaged, the Christians were massacred, the churches were burnt, the burial place of Christ was itself insulted, and many relics, including the "true Cross" on which the Christians believed that Christ had been crucified, were carried away to Persia.

The priests of the Persian religion celebrated an exultant triumph over the priests of Christ. In this pillage and massacre the Persians were assisted by crowds of Jews, who were discontented with the Christian domination, and the Pagan Arabs to whom any opportunity of plunder and destruction was in itself welcome.

It is probably this striking event-this victory of the Persians over the Roman Empire-which is referred to in Surah 30 (Al Rum) of the Quran. The Pagan Arabs naturally sided with the Persians in their destructive zeal, and thought that the destruction of the Christian power of Rome would also mean a setback to the Message of the Prophet, the true successor of Jesus. For our Holy Prophet had already begun his mission and the promulgation of Allah's Revelation in A.C. 610. while the whole world believed that the Roman Empire was being killed by Persia, it was revealed to him that the Persian victory was short-lived and that within a period of a few years the Romans would conquer again and deal deadly blow to the Persians. The Pagan Arabs, who were then persecuting the Holy Prophet in Makkah, hoped that their persecution would destroy the Holy Prophet's new Revelation.

In fact both their persecution and the deadly blows aimed by the Persians and the Romans at each other were

instruments in Allah's hands for producing those conditions which made Islam thrive and increase until it became the predominant power in the world.

15. The Persian flood of conquest did not stop with the conquest of Jerusalem. It went on to Egypt, which was also conquered and annexed to the Persian Empire in 616. The Persian occupation reached as far as Tripoli in North Africa. At the same time another Persian Army ravaged Asia Minor and reached right up to the gates of Constantinople. Not only the Jews and Pagan Arabs, but the various Christian sects which had been persecuted as heretics by the Romans, joined in the fray and helped the Persians. The condition of Heraclius became indeed pitiable. With all these calamities, he had to deal with the Avars who were attacking from the other side of Constantinople, which was practically in state of siege. Famine and pestilence added to the horrors of the situation.

16. In these desperate circumstances Heraclius conceived a brilliant plan. He knew that the Persians were weak in sea power. He used his sea-power to attack them in the rear in 622 (the year of Hijrah). He transported his army by sea through the Aegean Sea to the bay just south of the Taurus Mountains.

He fought a decisive battle with the Persians at Issus, in the same plain in which Alexander the Great had defeated the Persians of his day in his famous march to Syria and Egypt. The Persians were taken by surprise and routed. But they had still a large forces in Asia Minor, which they could have brought into play against the Romans if Heraclius had not made another and equally unexpected dash by sea from the north.

He returned to Constantinople by sea, made a treaty with the Avars, and with their help kept the Persians at bay around the capital. Then he led three campaigns, in 623, 624, and 625, along the southern shore of the Black Sea and took the Persians again in the rear in the region round Trebizond and Kars. Through Armenia, he penetrated into Persia and got into Mesopotamia. He was now in a position to strike at the very heart of the Persian Empire. A decisive

battle was fought on the Tigris near the city of Mosul in December 627. before this battle, however, he had taken care to get the alliance of the Turks and with their help to relieve Constantinople in 626 against the Persians and the treacherous Avars who had then joined the Persians.

17. Heraclius celebrated the triumph in Constantinople in March 628. peace was then made between the two Empires on the basis of the status quo ante. Heraclius, in pursuance of a vow he had made, went south in the autumn to Emessa (Himis) and from there marched on foot to Jerusalem to celebrate his victories, and to restore to its place the Holy Cross which had been carried away by the Persians and was returned to the Emperor as a condition of peace.

Heraclius's route was strewn with costly carpets, and he thought that the final deliverance had come for his people and his empire.

Either on the way, or in Jerusalem, he met a messenger from the Holy Prophet carrying a letter inviting him to the True Faith as renewed in the living Messenger of the age. He apparently received the message with courtesy. But he did not realize the full import of the new World which was being shaped according to Allah's plans, and the future that was opening through the new Revelation. Perhaps in his heart he felt impressed by the story which he had heard from the Arabs about the Holy Prophet, but the apparent grandeur of his empire and the pride of his people prevented him from openly accepting the renewed Message of Allah. He caused a search to be made for any Arab who was sufficiently acquainted with the Prophet to tell him something about him. Abu Sufyan was then trading in a caravan in Syria. He was a cousin of the Prophet, and belonged to the Umayyah branch of the family. He was sent for to Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina).

18. When Abu Sufyan was called to presence of Heraclius, the Emperor questioned him closely about this new Prophet. Abu Sufyan himself was at that time outside Islam and really an enemy of the Prophet and his Message. Yet the story he told - of the truth and sincerity of the Holy

Prophet, of the way in which the poor and lowly flocked to him, of the wonderful increase of his power and spiritual influence, and the way in which people who had once received the Light never got disillusioned or went back to their life of ignorance, and above all the integrity with which he kept all his covenants - made a favourable impression on the mind of Heraclius. That story is told in dramatic detail by Bukhari and other Arabian writers.

19. The relations of the Persians Monarch with Islam were different. He -either Khusraw Parwiz or his successor- received the Holy Prophet's messenger with contumely and tore up his letter.

"So will his kingdom be torn up."

Said the Holy Prophet when the news reached him.

The Persian Monarch ordered the Governor in Yemen to go and arrest the man who had so far forgotten himself as to address the grandson of Anawshirwan on equal terms.

When the Persian Governor tried to carry out his Monarch's command, the result was quite different from what the great Persian King of Kings had expected. His agent accepted the truth of Islam, and Yemen was lost as a province to the Persian Empire and became a portion of the new Muslim State.

Khusraw Parwiz died in February 628. he had been deposed and imprisoned by his own cruel and undutiful son, who reigned only for a year and a half. There were nine candidates for the Persian throne in the remaining four years. Anarchy reigned supreme in the Sasanian Empire, until the dynasty was extinguished by the Muslim victory at the battle of Mada'in in 637. the great and glorious Persian monarchy, full of pride and ambition, came to an ignominious end, and a new chapter opened for Persia under the banner of Islam.

20. The Roman Empire itself began to shrink gradually, losing its territory, not to Persia, but to the new Muslim Power which absorbed both the ancient Empires. This Power arose in its vigour to proclaim a new and purified creed to

the whole world. Already in the last seven years of Heraclius's reign (635-642) several of the provinces nearest to Arabia had been annexed to the Muslim Empire. The Muslim Empire continued to spread on, in Asia Minor to the north and Egypt to the south. The Eastern Roman Empire became a mere shadow with a small bit of territory round its capital. Constantinople eventually surrendered to Muslims in 1453.

21. That was the real end of the Roman Empire. But in the wonderful century in which the Prophet lived, another momentous Revolution was taking place. The Roman Pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604) was creating a new Christianity as the old Christianity of the East was slowly dying out. The Patriarch of Constantinople had claimed to be the Universal Bishop, with jurisdiction over all the other bishops of Christendom. This had been silently but gradually questioned by the Popes of Rome. They had been building up a liturgy, a church organization and a body of discipline for the clergy, different from those of the Holy Orthodox Church. They had been extending their spiritual authority in the Barbarian provinces of Gaul and Spain. They had been amassing estates and endowments. They had been accumulating secular authority in their own hands.

Pope Gregory the Great converted the Anglo-Saxon invaders of Great Britain to his form of Christianity. He protected Italy from the ravages of the Franks and Lombards and raised the See of Rome to the position of a Power which exercised ample jurisdiction over the Western world. He was preparing the way for the time when one of his successors would crown under his authority the Frankish Charlemagne as Emperor of Rome and of the West (A.C. 800), and another of his successors would finally break away from the Orthodox Church of Constantinople in 1054 by the Pope's excommunication of the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Greeks. (See the last paragraph in [Appendix V.](#))

References:

Among Western writers, the chief authority is Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: mainly chapters 40-42, and 45-46; I have given references to other chapters in the body of this Appendix: his delineation of the characters of Heraclius and Chosroes II is brief but masterly.

L. Drapeyron's French monograph, *L'Empereur Heraclius* (Paris, 1869) throws further light on an interesting personality.

A.J. Butler's *Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902) gives a good account of Heraclius.

The famous French dramatist Corneille has left a play of Heraclius, but it turns more on an intricate and imaginary plot in the early life of Heraclius than on the character of Heraclius as Emperor.

Nizami, in his *Khusraw-o-Shirin* (571 H, 1175-66 A.D.) makes reference at the end of his Romance to the Holy Prophet's letter to the Persian King, and does attempt in the course of the Romance a picture of the King's character. He is a sort of wild Prince Hal before he comes to the throne. Shirin is an Armenian princess in love with Khusraw; she marries Khusraw after the death of his first wife Maryam, daughter of the Roman Emperor, and mother of an undutiful son who killed Khusraw and seized his throne.

Among the other Eastern writers, we find a detailed description of the interview of Abu Sufyan in Bukhari's *Sahih* (book on the beginning of Inspiration): the notes in the excellent English translation of Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss) are helpful.

Tabari's *History* is as usual valuable.

Mirkhond's (*Khawind-Shah*) *Rawdah al Safa* (translated by Rehatsek) will give English readers a summary (at second hand) of the various Arabic authorities.

Mawlana Shibli's otherwise excellent *Sirah al Nabi* is in this respect disappointing.

Mawlana Zafar Ali's *Ghalaba-i-Rum* (Urdu, Lahore, 1926) is interesting for its comments.

A note on the Persian capitals may be interesting. So long as Persia was under the influence of the Semitic Elamites, the chief residence of the rulers was at Susa, near the modern Dizful, about 50 miles northeast of Shustar. In the Median or Median period (say B.C. 700 to 550) the capital was, as we should expect, in the highlands of Media, in Ecbatana, the site of the modern city of Hamadan, 180 miles west of modern Tihiran. Ecbatana remained even in Sasanian times the summer capital of Persia. With the Achaemenians (B.C. 550-330) we come to a period of full national and imperial life. Susa was the chief Achaemenian capital from the time of Darius I onwards, through Persepolis (Istakhr) in the mountain region near modern Shiraz, and about 40 miles northeast of Shiraz, was used as the city of royal burial. Alexander himself, as ruler in Persia, died in Babylon, later when the centre of gravity moved north and northeast, other sites were selected.

The Arsacids (Ashkanian) or Parthians were a tribal power, fitly called in Arabic the *muluk al Tawaif*, and had probably no fixed or centralized capital. The Saqsonian took over a site where there were a number of cities, among which were Ctesiphon and Seleucia on opposite banks of the river Tigris. This site is about 45 miles north of the old site of Babylon and 25 miles below the later city of Baghdad. Ctesiphon

and Seleucia were Greek cities founded by one of Alexander's successors, Seleucia being named after Seleucus.

This complex of seven cities was afterwards called by the Arabic name of Madain (the Cities). The Takht-i-Kisra (or Arch of Ctesiphon) still stands in a ruinous condition on this site. This seems to have been the chief capital of the Sasanians at the Arab conquest, which may be dated either from the battle of Qadisiyah or the Mada'in (Both fought in 637 A.D.), after which Persia which then included 'Iraq came into Muslim Empire. The Abbasi Empire built Baghdad for its capital under Mansur in 762 A.D. when that Empire was broken up in 1258 A.D., there was some confusion for two centuries. Then a national Persian Empire, the Safawi (1499-1736) arose, and Shah Salim established his capital in the northwest corner in Tabriz. Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1628) had his capital at the more central city of Ispahan (or Isfahan). After the Safawi dynasty confusion reigned again for about four decades, when the Afghans were in the ascendant. When the Qajar (or Qajar) dynasty (1795-1925) was firmly established under Agha Muhammad Khan. Tihran (Tehran) near the Caspian, where his family originated, became the capital, and it still remains the capital under the modern Pehlvi Dynasty.



© Copy Rights:

Zahid Javed Rana, Abid Javed Rana

Lahore, Pakistan

www.quran4u.com