In Defence of His Lord: An Examination of St John Damascene's Critique of Islam

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Introduction

This paper will examine St John Damascene's famous critique of Islam, *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (hereinafter *The Ishmaelites*), which is found in his most voluminous work, *The Fount of Knowledge*. John, who lived c. 675-750 CE, composed his treatise against Islam during the latter half of his life, while living as a monk in the Monastery of St Sabbas in Palestine.[1] Moreover, it is with this work that John became the first Christian theologian in history to explicitly discuss Islam.[2] So in this sense, *The Ishmaelites* is truly an unprecedented piece.

It is clear that John wrote *The Ishmaelites* with the intention of disproving the 'heresy' of Islam. However, even though *The Ishmaelites* is at times somewhat hampered by an overly polemical approach to the Muslim faith, its merits still outweigh its flaws. As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, despite his bias, John's critique of Islam displays a deep knowledge of the faith. In fact, his work at times offers a stunning view into what appears to be nascent Islamic beliefs and practices. Further, while my paper will not deal with each and every line of *The Ishmaelites*, it will take an in-depth look at the more prominent and controversial elements of John's work.

1. Islam as a Christian Heresy

John begins *The Ishmaelites* by referring to Islam as the 'superstition' of the Ishmaelites, and later on claims that it is a 'heresy' devised by Muhammad.[3] Not only is the Ishmaelite faith seen as a heresy, but one that is extremely insidious, since John

[1] It is worth noting that John lived his entire life within the Umayyad Caliphate. In fact, it seems that before becoming a monk in Palestine, John, who was born Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn, had followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, serving as a high-ranking Umayyad official in Damascus.
[2] Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, p. 77.
[3] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 153.

deems it a 'forerunner of the Antichrist.'[4] While the word 'antichrist' can at times be somewhat overused in patristic writings, John is perhaps using this term in a manner that reflects its dual meaning in Greek. The word '*αντίχριστος*' does not always have to simply mean someone or something 'against' Christ, but can also be understood as meaning 'in place of' Christ. While the early Muslims were not usually attempting to eradicate Christians or Christianity, the caliphate at times, depending on the ruler, must have appeared to John to be working towards replacing Christian beliefs and forms of worship with Islamic ones, all while claiming to accept the person of Jesus as God's prophet and messiah. In fact, this must have been the case since John's work was written after the Islamizing reign of 'Abd al-Malik. Moreover, since John does not portray Islam as a separate religion, but rather as a Christian heresy, by using the term 'antichrist' in this context, he is perhaps indicating early on in his work that Muslims are attempting to distort the nature of Jesus, and replace the saviour of the world with a counterfeit version of him.

In his work, John then gives an etymology of the term 'Ishmaelite,' as well as some of the other terms used to describe Muslims at the time. As the term implies, the Ishmaelites are said to have descended from Abraham's son Ishmael. The Damascene also points out that they are called 'Hagarenes'—a term which also connects the Muslims to a descent from Ishmael.[5] The terms 'Ishmaelites' and 'Hagarenes' are historically very early names used to describe Muslims. For instance, in the *Khuzistan Chronicle*, which was composed in Syriac in the mid-seventh century, Muslims are referred to as 'the sons of Ishmael,' which later authors would modify to such terms as 'Ishmaelites' or 'Sons of Hagar'.[6] So by referring to Muslims in a manner that indicates their legendary descent from Ishmael, John seems to be in agreement with the popular practice of the time. John also says that the Ishmaelites are called 'Saracens,' which comes from the Greek '*Σάρρας κενοι*,' meaning the 'destitute of Sarah.'[7] A term again

[4] Ibid., p. 153.
[5] Ibid., p. 153.
[6] Penn*, Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, p. 21.
[7] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 153.

connecting Muslims to Ishmael, since this name is supposedly in reference to the pregnant Hagar being left destitute after being exiled by Sarah. However, Louth deems John's etymology here as 'more fanciful,' and says that the name 'Saracen' may have just meant 'Eastern.'[8]

Despite mentioning three different names associated with the Muslims of his day, and even attempting an etymological explanation for each one, John never mentions the terms 'Muslim(s)' or 'Islam' anywhere in his writings. Instead, he uses terms that seem to indicate that the followers of the religion of Muhammad represent an ethnic oriented sect, and not a separate religion with universal claims. Moreover, that John does not use the terms 'Muslim(s)' or 'Islam' could stem from the fact that he would not have associated such terms with the Ishmaelites or their religion, since these terms may not have been in popular use yet, even by those who later came to be known as 'Muslims.' The terms John uses indicate that the Islam of his day had not yet undergone some of the changes that were associated with the religion of later centuries. This point, however, needs to be further developed in order to understand just why John seems to associate the beliefs of Muslims with only a particular ethnic group, and why he sees these beliefs as representing a specifically Christian heresy, and not a separate religion.

Firstly, it should be stated that for Muslims from Muhammad's time until the early eighth century, ethnicity and religion were intertwined. 'For a non-Arab to become Muslim, that individual first had to gain membership in an Arab tribe by becoming the *mawlā* (client) of an Arab sponsor.'[9] In fact, while the Muslim armies during this period could be rather forgiving to non-Arab peoples who attempted to ward off their military incursions, they often dealt harshly with Christian Arab tribes who defied them. So it seems quite reasonable that John should associate Islamic beliefs with a particular ethnic group.

Also, while the terms 'Muslims' (*muslimun*), meaning 'those who submit', and 'Islam', which itself means 'submission,' do appear in the Qur'ān as we have it today—often in reference to Muhammad and those who follow him—the term 'Believers' (*mu'minun*) is

[8] Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, p. 78.
[9] Penn*, Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, p. 59.

applied to the Prophet and his followers far more frequently in the sacred text. For instance, Muhammad and his followers are referred to in the Qur'ān as 'Believers' nearly one thousand times, as opposed to the less than seventy-five times 'Muslims' is used.[10] According to Donner, it was not until approximately a century after Muhammad's ministry that Islamic tradition began to emphasize the term 'Muslims' in reference to Muhammad and his followers, and to make it appear as if the terms 'Muslims' and 'Believers' were interchangeable.[11] Moreover, the evidence seems to indicate that Muhammad died somewhere between the years 632-635.[12] Thus, if one accepts that John composed *The Ishmaelites* during the first half of the eighth century, then it makes sense that he would not necessarily associate the terms 'Muslims' or 'Islam' with the religion of Muhammad.

While the above may answer why John does not use the terms 'Muslims' or 'Islam' in his writings, it does not completely explain why he does not see the teachings of Muhammad as representing a new religion. The reason for this may be that the term '*mu'minun*,' or 'Believers,' represents not just an issue of semantics, but of a potential difference in the Islam of John's day with that of the religion of later centuries. In truth, John not viewing Islam as a separate religion should not be seen as too abnormal, given his location and era. For instance, the first generation of Syriac writers to deal with the topic of Islam rarely ever indicate that they view the Arabs as possessing their own unique religion. While this begins to change after the Islamizing policies of 'Abd al-Malik, and John's work was written after such policies, his writings perhaps demonstrate that the caliph's reforms had not completely taken hold yet, even within his own caliphate.

It is also not just the fact that many Christian writers did not seem to view the beliefs of the Arabs as representing a separate religion that should lead one to question the common perception of early Islam as an independent faith. There are also some rather telling historical examples that seem to demonstrate that the early Muslims were rather 'ecumenical' in their relations with Christians, and perhaps Jews, and may in fact not

[10] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, p. 57.
[11] Ibid., p. 57.
[12] Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, pp. 104-05.

have seen themselves as belonging to an independent religion. One interesting example is that of shared churches. Within the Umayyad Caliphate, at least some of the early Muslims participated in the public prayer life of Christians. In fact, this is evident even after the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. For example, his son Hishām, who ruled the Umayyad Caliphate from 724-743, and thus was a contemporary of John Damascene, made some telling changes to a church called Basilica A in Rusafa, Syria, during the early eighth century.[13] The basilica was a famous site of pilgrimage, for it housed the relics of the Christian martyr St Sergius. Despite the poor geological situation at the north end of the basilica—the area had sinkholes which had damaged nearby structures—Hishām constructed a mosque there, a mere twelve metres from the relics of St Sergius. He also built a door in the *qibla* wall which opened into the courtyard that was shared with Christians. This allowed not only for fellowship between the two groups, but also for Muslims attending the mosque to be able to easily access the relics of the holy martyr.[14] Therefore, you had early Muslims presumably joining Christians, at least in some manner, in the veneration of a Christian saint.

There are also other examples of potential joint worship. A number of writings produced by Muslim authors speak of how Christians and Muslims worshipped together in the Church of St John the Baptist in Damascus during the seventh century.[15] While the recent excavation of the Church of the Kathisma revealed a *mihrāb* that was probably in use during the time the building was still serving as a church.[16] There are also instances of prominent Muslims visiting churches for seemingly religious reasons. For example, the pious ʿUmar II, who reigned as caliph from 717-720, is believed to have 'held Christian monks and holy men in high esteem.'[17] In fact, Umar II died on a visit to the monastery of St Simeon, near Aleppo, and was even buried there.[18]

[13] Penn*, Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, p. 144.
[14] Ibid., p. 144.
[15] Ibid., p. 144.
[16] Ibid., p. 145.
[17] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, pp 221-22.
[18] Ibid., p. 221-22.

John must have been aware of examples of shared sacred spaces among Christians and Muslims from during his time, and maybe even from the time of his father and grandfather. For instance, Hishām's reign took place during John's life, and if John himself had not seen Basilica A after the caliph's Islamic additions to it, given the prominence of the relics of St Sergius among Middle Eastern Christians, he would have likely heard about the changes. Moreover, the willingness on the part of at least some Muslims to worship in Christian churches, and to even perhaps venerate Christian relics, must have given a fair number of Christians the impression that Muslims did not view themselves as possessing a separate religion. Yet, Muslims at this time still held certain beliefs that contradicted fundamental dogmas of the Christian faith. So with this in mind, it makes sense that John should see the Ishmaelites as followers of a Christian heresy. As Donner puts it:

> [T]he sense that the Believers' movement that becomes Islam was not entirely at odds with Christianity, at least, seems to survive in some ways even into the mid-eighth century, for it is then that John of Damascus–who, as a high administrator for the Umayyads, surely knew whereof he spoke–wrote his famous treatise on "The Heresy of the Ishmaelites." In other words, he could still perceive nascent Islam as a form of Christian heresy, rather than as a fully independent religion.[19]

Another element that clearly connects Islam to Christianity for John is his belief that Muhammad based his 'heresy' on a misreading of the Old and New Testaments, which are said to have been 'chanced upon' by the Prophet.[20] John also indicates that Muhammad had been given a heretical interpretation of the Bible through his interaction with an 'Arian monk'.[21] John's thoughts here contain elements which are certainly reflected in some prominent Islamic texts. However, it should first be stated that the claim that Muhammad had come to learn at least something of the stories and teachings of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures seems an obvious position to take for anyone who accepts Muhammad's authorship of the Qur'ān, while also rejecting his

[19] Ibid., p. 223.
[20] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 153.
[21] Ibid., p. 153.

prophethood. Moreover, the fact that Muhammad is said to have had contact with a Christian monk, be it a heretical one, would only further prove the position that he had knowledge of Christian teachings outside of his claims of divine revelation.

Nevertheless, John's claim that Muhammad had been in contact with an Arian monk is an early reference to the Islamic story of the Prophet's meeting with a Christian monk by the name of 'Bahira.' John, however, does not provide a name for the monk, and according to Janosik, the first reference which calls the monk 'Bahira' is to be found in Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, which was likely composed after John's death.[22] While the precise date of the composition of Ibn Isḥāq's influential work is difficult to determine because of its fragmentary nature, it is at the very least extremely unlikely that John would have known of the work at the time he was writing his critique. Thus, it is clear that the story of Muhammad and the monk must have been spoken of by Muslims before it found its way into the sīra tradition, and John's work is a good testimony to this fact. It is also worth noting that according to Ibn Isḥāq, the meeting between Muhammad and Bahira took place in John's birthplace of Syria, while the young Muhammad was travelling with his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, in a merchant caravan. Ibn Isḥāq's version of the story also speaks of Bahira recognizing the young Muhammad, through a special mark on his body, as a holy figure predicted in his 'Christian books,' just before he proceeds to warn Abū Ṭālib to guard his nephew from the Jews, who would harm him if they came to the know of his divine purpose.[23]

The Islamic story does not, however, indicate what Christian sect the monk belonged to, nor does it specifically state that Bahira taught Muhammad the Christian Scripture. Yet, even in Ibn Isḥāq's work, Bahira is portrayed as recognizing Muhammad's future calling based on a 'book' in his cell, while later the plural 'books' is used to describe how the monk discerned the Prophet's mark.[24] It is possible that John had learned of an earlier version of this story than is perhaps contained in Ibn Isḥāq's *sīra*, and that this earlier version spoke in more detail of what these 'books' contained and what the monk's sect

[22] Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, p. 96.
[23] Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, pp. 79-81.
[24] Ibid., p. 80.

was, and this is why John connects this story to Muhammad's supposed knowledge of the Bible, as well as to his claim that the monk was an Arian. It may also be the case, however, that John's claim that the monk was Arian simply stemmed from his belief that the Islamic teachings about Jesus had found their source in Arian theology.

2. Idolatry and the Ka'ba

John says that Christians are charged by Muslims with the sin of idolatry.[25] This charge must have aroused some rather passionate feelings for John, since he had expended so much energy over the years defending the veneration of icons against many of his fellow Christians during the iconoclasm controversy—a controversy that had been fueled in no small part by the Byzantine emperor's fear that his people's veneration of images had contributed to Muslim success on the battlefield. Nevertheless, the specific Islamic charge against Christian veneration that John speaks of is not related to icons, but to that of the Cross, which he says the Ishmaelites 'abominate'.[26] There are examples from the Ḥadīth that portray Muhammad seemingly speaking of icons, such as when he classifies Christians who create images at the graves of their pious dead—presumably the saints—as 'the worst creatures'. [27] Yet, the Cross must have been seen as even more problematic than most other imagery by at least some Muslims at the time, since we find references to the falseness of Jesus's death on the Cross in the Qur'ān itself (e.g. 4:157-58), not to mention a ḥadīth where Muhammad lists 'worship of the Cross' as one of three reasons as to why Christians do not convert to Islam.[28] However, it is interesting to note that John does not reference writings attributed to Muhammad when speaking about the Ishmaelite rejection of the Cross, but instead says 'they,' in reference to the Muslims, 'abominate' the Cross.[29] He seems to be speaking here from first-hand experience with individuals who must have voiced their

[25] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 156.
[26] Ibid., p. 156.
[27] <http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/023-sbt.php#002.023.425>
[28] Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, p. 79.
[29] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 156.

disdain for the veneration shown by Christians to a symbol seen as deceitful by the Islamic faith.

Yet, before giving a positive defence of the Cross, John criticizes Muslims for what he views as hypocrisy, that being their veneration of the Ka'ba. By doing so, he is perhaps trying to get to the root of the issue. That is to say, before he attempts to explain why Christians venerate the Cross, he is first concerned with demonstrating to Muslims that the practice of idolatry cannot be the issue that they have with the veneration of the Cross, since they themselves are also given to the veneration of created things when they deem them worthy of such behaviour. Thus, in response to the Muslim accusation of idolatry, John asks, 'How is it, then, that you rub yourselves against a stone in your Ka'ba and kiss and embrace it?'[30] John's point, of course, is to show that both Christians and Muslims venerate earthly things, so any charge of idolatry against Christians for doing to the Cross what Muslims do to the Ka'ba is superfluous.

John then takes the argument a step further by questioning the rationale behind the Muslim veneration of the Ka'ba. He presents Muslims as making contradictory claims over the reasons behind the sacred status of the Ka'ba. According to John, some Muslims claim that Abraham had engaged in sexual relations with Hagar on the stone located in the Ka'ba, while others say that Abraham tied his camel to the site before sacrificing Isaac to the Lord.[31] The Ka'ba John is speaking of here is clearly that of the one located in Mecca, since he turns to topography in relation to the biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in order to disprove the latter claim. He speaks of how the Hebrew Scripture says that Isaac's sacrifice took place on a forested mountain, and that Abraham extracted wood from the surrounding trees and laid it on Isaac, as well as that the father and son had journeyed there on a pair of donkeys.[32]

John's point is that the topography of Mecca does not match the biblical account of the sacrifice of Isaac. He also seems to indicate that he has used this argument against Muslims who have reacted with embarrassment before essentially restating their initial

[30] Ibid., p. 156.
[31] Ibid., p. 156.
[32] Ibid., p. 156.

claims. In view of what John believes to be the reasons behind the veneration of the Ka'ba, he scoffs at the practice. For him, even if Muslims were correct in saying that Abraham had relations with Hagar on the stone or that he had tied his camel to it before a momentous event in sacred history, it is still unworthy of veneration when compared to the Cross that Christians believe destroyed the power of hell. He then concludes his section on the Ka'ba with the claim that the stone is actually the head of an idol of Aphrodite that the pre-Islamic Arabs had worshipped, and which they had referred to as 'Khabar,' which allegedly means 'great,' and that traces of the carving were visible, even in his own day, to 'careful observers.' [33]

John's polemics against the veneration of the Ka'ba raise a number of important questions, some of which can only be attempted to be answered in light of recent historical research. Firstly, John does not portray the Abrahamic pedigree assigned to the Ka'ba as finding its source in Muhammad's teachings. Instead, he seems to assign such beliefs to individual Ishmaelites. In fact, while most Muslim scholars would agree that Qur'ān 22:26, for example, clearly associates Abraham with the Ka'ba in Mecca, neither it, nor any other part of the Qur'ān, speaks of Abraham's relations with Hagar, or perhaps more specifically, the conception of the legendary father of the Arabs Ishmael, nor the sacrifice of Isaac, as having anything to do with the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque. However, it is not unreasonable to believe that some Muslims may have associated the Ka'ba with the birth of the Arab people, and perhaps believed that the conception of Ishmael took place on or near its location. The importance of Ishmael to the Arabs of the time was immense, and this can even be seen by the fact that John, as well as other early writers, refer to the Arab followers of Muhammad as 'Ishmaelites.'

It is also quite interesting that John speaks of Isaac, instead of Ishmael, as the son Abraham is said to have sacrificed. Despite the Qur'ān never naming the child Abraham sacrificed, most Muslim commentators tend to believe that Ishmael was the son in question. Yet even al-Ṭabarī, who was born nearly a century after the death of John, and who wrote a detailed account of the role Ishmael played in the history of the Ka'ba

[33] Ibid., pp. 156-57.

and the Hajj, taught that Isaac was the son sacrificed by Abraham, and not Ishmael. It seems that while it became the accepted tradition of later Muslim commentators to associate Ishmael with Abraham's sacrifice, a number of early Muslim commentators believed Isaac was the one offered to God.[34] Moreover, while it is possible that John may have chosen to speak of Isaac because of the biblical account of the sacrifice, coupled with the fact that his work was meant for a Christian audience, this is probably not the case. It appears that John is simply referring to the common belief held by Christians, Jews, and Muslims of his day, that Isaac was the son sacrificed by Abraham.

John also rejects the supposed Abrahamic pedigree of the Ka'ba, and instead claims an insidious source for the Ishmaelites' reverence for it. According to him, Muslims, seemingly unwittingly, are actually paying homage to the pagan goddess Aphrodite when they venerate the stone housed in the Ka'ba.[35] We can reasonably assume that the stone John is referring to here is the black stone still venerated by Muslims today inside of the Ka'ba, which is referred to in Arabic as '*al-Ḥajaru al-Aswad*.' The stone as we have it today does not bare any markings that would indicate that it was once the head of an idol, and one would also have to wonder about the reaction at least some Muslims would have had if there had been visible signs of presumably a face on the stone back in John's day. Nevertheless, although John may be mistaken here, the stone's origins, and even essence, are still open to debate.

While the black stone itself may not have been the head of Aphrodite, whom John says the Arabs referred to as 'Khabar,' there is reason to believe that the Greek goddess was worshipped by pre-Islamic Arabs, and perhaps even in Mecca itself, and that John's thoughts on this have at least some historical grounding. Prior to Arabia's conversion to Islam, there were three popular deities worshipped by the Arabs: the female goddesses al-Lāt, Manāt, and al-'Uzzá. The Qur'ān itself even makes mention of all three of them (53:19-20). Further, according to Ahmed, these goddesses were at times worshipped in Greek forms. Al-Lāt, whose name is probably the feminine form of 'Allāh,' was depicted

[34] Nasr et al, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, p. 1094.
[35] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 157.

in the form of Athena in Syria and Iraq. Whether she was worshipped in this form in the Ḥijāz region is still unclear. However, in the Ḥijāz a statue of al-Lāt carved out of white stone was believed to be destroyed after the town it was located in came under Muhammad's control, a year prior to his death. The shattered remains of the statue survived among the people, and the story of these remains' history were told to Western travellers during the nineteenth century, just before the Wahhabi vandalization of them.[36] Could the stones from the white statue of al-Lāt, or perhaps a stone or stones from a similar statue, have anything to do with John's association of the stone in the Ka'ba with the pagan goddess? It is difficult to know for sure, but it is certainly a possibility.

Moreover, even if John's claim that the stone in the Ka'ba was in his day visibly the head of Aphrodite is incorrect, he was not wrong to associate that particular deity with the region. In fact, the goddess al-'Uzzá was in a number of cases carved to resemble Aphrodite by the pre-Islamic Arabs in the Ḥijāz.[37] While al-'Uzzá was not to our knowledge referred to as 'Khabar,' which is perhaps a Hellenized version of the Arabic word *'akbar*,' John is right to claim that she was not known by the Greek name 'Aphrodite.' It is also worth noting that al-'Uzzá was the head female deity of Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, and her statue had even been carried, along with al-Lāt's, into battle by the tribe.[38] According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad himself is said to have made a sacrifice to al-'Uzzá prior to his prophetic calling.[39]

In a more general sense, it is far from controversial that John should associate the Ka'ba with paganism, since for a period it was surrounded by numerous idols, perhaps at one point 360 of them.[40] However, Islamic tradition rejects the concept that the Ka'ba was originally designed for pagan worship. If we are to accept the traditional view that the Ka'ba and the Sacred Mosque spoken of in the Qur'ān is that which is venerated by Muslims today in Mecca, then we can say according to the holy text its beginnings

[36] Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, pp. 56-7.
[37] Ibid., pp. 57-8.
[38] Ibid., p. 58.
[39] Ibid., pp. 57-8.
[40] Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, p. 11.

stemmed from God's commandment, since the Qur'ān states that the location of the future Ka'ba had been divinely revealed to Abraham in order for him to construct a shrine there where God alone may be worshipped (2:125-27; 22:26).

Although, according to the Qur'ān, the Ka'ba was established for monotheistic worship, Islamic tradition does not hide the fact that the site was eventually 'corrupted' by paganism. For instance, Ibn Isḥāq speaks frankly of idol worship being present in the pre-Islamic Ka'ba.[41] In fact, the Ka'ba was one of the centres of pagan pilgrimage of pre-Islamic Western Arabia. Moreover, although the Quraysh were the custodians of the Ka'ba, and Muhammad a member of the tribe, the Prophet and his followers eventually found themselves forbidden to perform the traditional pilgrimage there. The Islamic account, however, teaches that when Muhammad and his followers were able to take control of Mecca, the shrine of the Ka'ba was purified through the removal of the idols housed within it, and that the true worship of God practiced by Abraham was restored. [42] So while Islamic tradition would, of course, vehemently reject the idea that the stone in the Ka'ba is a pagan relic of any kind, it does admit to the presence of pagan idols prior to Muhammad's guardianship of the shrine. Thus, John's thoughts on the topic should not be considered unreasonably speculative or merely a polemical invention.

Before moving on from the topic of the Ka'ba, there is one last element of John's writings on the subject the needs to be examined in a little more detail: the multiplicity of reasons for the Ka'ba's importance to the Ishmaelites. As already mentioned, John states that Muslims claim that Abraham had relations with Hagar on the Ka'ba or that he had sacrificed Isaac on it. If we are to accept that these statements are not mere inventions on John's part, it is clear that the Muslims that he conversed with, or at least the sources he gathered his knowledge about the Ka'ba from, gave at least two different reasons for the sanctity of the shrine. While the reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they do present an imprecise rationale behind the Ka'ba's exalted position in Islam. Nevertheless, the reason why John may have learned of two different meanings

[41] See, e.g., Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, pp. 35-41.
[42] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, pp. 47-9.

for the Ka'ba's sanctity could be that Muslims at this point in time had not yet reached a consensus as to what exactly the sacred history behind the shrine was. Taking into account recent historical theories about the place of the Ka'ba in early Islam, such a scenario seems quite plausible. While a detailed examination of such theories is beyond the scope of this paper, an overview of them would perhaps help assist the reader in understanding why John ascribes multiple reasons for the Muslim veneration of the Ka'ba.

There is reason to believe that Mecca, and thus, of course, the Ka'ba, did not become the clear centre of Islam and the Hajj until the victory of 'Abd al-Malik during the Second Fitna, near the end of the seventh century. In fact, there is a prominent tradition among Muslims that claims that Muhammad directed his early followers to pray not towards Mecca, but towards Jerusalem. References to a change in the *qibla* can be found in the sīra and the Ḥadīth, as well as in the Qur'ān itself. For instance, Qur'ān 2:142-45 deals in part with the criticism faced by Muslims from their opponents for changing the *qibla*, although the holy text never says what the former *qibla* was.

There is also reason to believe that based on both archeological evidence in Iraq and the writings of a number of authors from the early Islamic period, such as Jacob of Edessa, who described the Muslim *qibla* in Egypt, that the early Muslims, even after Muhammad's death, may have been praying in the direction of a different shrine, and not towards the Meccan Ka'ba in north-west Arabia.[43] In fact, the sacred status of Jerusalem in primitive Islam, and the high regard held for the rock which is located in what is believed to have been the spot of the Holy of Holies of the Jewish Temple, and which was eventually enshrined in the Dome of the Rock by 'Abd al-Malik, cannot be denied. For instance, we see in the *Faḍā'il al-Quds* tradition, which speaks of God's selecting of Jerusalem from all the lands of the earth, the claim that God himself had used the sacred rock there as a throne for forty years after the creation of the world, before then ascending to Heaven.[44] Moreover, during the Umayyad period, there is

[43] Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, pp. 223-28.
[44] Ibid., p. 236.

evidence of elaborate rituals held for the Jerusalemite rock by Muslims in ceremonial garbs, and which included rubbing the rock with perfume and burning incense in front of it. This ceremonial veneration of the rock even involved the participation, be it in minor roles, of both Christians and Jews.[45] Thus, Jerusalem may then be rightly understood as the spiritual centre of the world for at least a portion of the early Muslims, even many years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

The point of this is not necessarily to call into question the historicity of the sacred position of Mecca for Muslims, but instead to present multiple possibilities for John's claims on the different reasons as to why Muslims held the Ka'ba in high regard. While I do believe that John himself was referring specifically to Mecca in his writings, if we entertain the possibility that Mecca's dominant sacred position may have been less than half a century old when he was composing his critique, it would then not seem too far-fetched to believe that the Ishmaelites he was in contact with assigned different historical pedigrees to it.

3. The She-Camel and the Qur'ān

Just as the terms 'Muslim(s)' or 'Islam' do not appear in John's writings, neither is the word 'Qur'ān' to be found anywhere in his work. However, the Damascene does at one point state that Muhammad had claimed to have been given a 'book' from Heaven.[46] Yet, John also says elsewhere that Muhammad wrote a number of 'books': 'On Woman,' 'The Table,' 'The Heifer,' and 'The Camel of God'.[47] Moreover, 'On Woman,' or *Women* (*al-Nisā'*), *The Table* (*al-Mā'ida*), and *The Heifer* (*al-Baqarah*) are all titles of different suras in the Qur'ān. However, there is no sura named 'The Camel of God' in the Qur'ān as we know it. But there are a number of references in the sacred text to a story clearly related to the one John says is contained in this book. Further, from all four

[45] Ibid., pp. 234-35.
[46] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 153.
[47] Ibid., pp. 157-59.

of the 'books' John mentions by name, he devotes the most attention to that of 'The Camel of God.'

John claims that in 'The Camel of God,' Muhammad speaks of a particular she-camel that had been divinely sent. This she-camel is said to have drunk an entire river dry, and was also unable to 'pass through two mountains because there was not room enough.'[48] The she-camel lived in an area inhabited by humans, who are said to have taken turns with the animal drinking water. Thus, one day the people would drink water, and the next day the camel would do so. Although, the she-camel would then supply the people with milk from the water she drank, evil men took it upon themselves to slaughter her. Yet, prior to her death, the she-camel had produced an offspring, who then called upon God after its mother's untimely demise and was subsequently taken up into Heaven. John then proceeds to ridicule the story by questioning how a she-camel without parents came into existence, who it mated with in order to give birth, and if the she-camel had entered paradise before Muslims in order to provide them with the river of milk they 'so foolishly talk about.' [49] He then follows this up by stating that Muslims claim that there are three rivers in Heaven: 'one of water, one of wine, and one of milk.'[50] While John omits the river of honey, he nevertheless correctly identifies three out of the four types of rivers in Paradise spoken of in the Qur'an (47:15).

While there is no sura entitled 'The Camel of God' in the Qur'ān, John's account of the she-camel still bears a number of important similarities with the she-camel of the Thamūd, which is spoken of in a number of suras throughout the Qur'ān.[51] The Qur'ānic text portrays this she-camel as a divine sign bestowed upon the Thamūd by the Prophet Ṣāliḥ. While the Qur'ān makes no mention of the she-camel drinking a river dry or its inability to pass between two mountains, it does position its consumption of water as a key element of the story. The Thamūd are said to have been divinely commanded to allow the she-camel to graze freely and unharmed (Q 7:73; 11:64), to give her water (Q

[48] Ibid., p. 158.
[49] Ibid., p. 158.
[50] Ibid., p. 158.
[51] The Thamūd were a pre-Islamic Arabian tribe.

91:13), to allow her to drink on a certain day and for them to drink on another one (Q 26:155), as well as to divide the water equitably among themselves and the beast (Q 54:28). Although the Prophet Ṣāliḥ makes it clear to the Thamūd that it is contrary to God's will to do any harm to the she-camel, the Qur'ān says that because of their sinfulness, they put her to death by hamstringing her (Q 7:77; 11:65; 26:157; 91:14). All of these elements are, of course, remarkably similar to the story John claims is contained in 'The Camel of God.'

Nevertheless, while the Qur'ānic version of the story provides details not referenced by John, such as the important role played by the Prophet Ṣāliḥ', there are also elements of John's story that are not present in the Qur'ān. As mentioned, the Qur'ān does not say anything about the she-camel drinking an entire river dry, or about the animal being unable to pass between a pair of mountains. It also does not state that the she-camel provided the people with milk, or anything about it having a calf. Yet, as will be shown, John's claims about these matters do not stem from ignorance, nor from his own imagination, but rather from early Muslim writers themselves.

However, before going into more detail about the historicity of John's version of the story, it should be stated that the fact the Qur'ān speaks of a sacred camel is not something unique among Arabian storytelling. The importance of camels is obvious in a desert setting. Camels provide transportation for people and goods, as well as food in the form of milk and meat. Just as cows became sacred to the Hindus, some camels became sacred to the Arabs. Thus, there were stories of different types of camels who possessed a religious importance. The Qur'ān itself rebukes the Arabs for the sacred status they afforded to four particular types of camels who, according to the text, lacked God's approval: the bahīrah, the sā'ibah, the waṣīlah, and the hām (5:103). These types of camels were considered sacred because of certain 'signs' produced by them, which were at times connected to the number of calves produced by a she-camel, as well as the gender and order in which these offspring were born. Therefore, it makes sense that three out of the four types of 'falsely' declared sacred camels mentioned by the Qur'ān

were probably female.[52] Moreover, due to the sacred status appointed to such camels, they were not to be treated as other camels were. Such animals were not to be ridden or to have their milk consumed by humans.[53] For instance, the bahīrah's milk was perhaps dedicated to idols.[54] These camels were, as in the case of the she-camel of the Thamūd, also to be allowed to graze freely without disturbance, and to die naturally. So the concept of the sacred camel is not something unique to Islam, but was a concept that had been present even in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Nevertheless, what is perhaps most intriguing is the fact that exegetical and poetic writings by prominent early Muslims on the she-camel of the Thamūd contain striking similarities with some of the non-Qur'ānic elements found in John's version of the legend. For instance, al-Ṭabarī says that on her assigned days, the she-camel would drink the well of the Thamūd dry, leaving the valley waterless.[55] This, of course, is reminiscent of John's reference to her drinking a river dry. The Damascene speaks of the importance of the milk produced by the she-camel, and so do a number of Muslim commentators. Al-Masʿūdī, for example, says that the she-camel produced great quantities of milk for the Thamūd.[56] While al-Thaʿlabī writes of how enormous the she-camel's belly would become after she would finish drinking all the Thamūd's water. He also teaches that the she-camel was enormous in general, and that the Thamūd were themselves giants.[57] This seems to give validity to John's statement about the she-camel being unable to fit between 'two mountains.' We also find a number of references to the she-camel's calf in Arab writings from the early Islamic period. The poet Hassān ibn Thābit, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad himself, writes of the wickedness of he who slew the she-camel in the presence of her calf.[58] While a poem ascribed to another Arab contemporary of Muhammad, Umayyah ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, refers to the she-

[52] Nasr et al, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, p. 329.
[53] Ibid., p. 329.
[54] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathir (Abridged), Volume 3*, p. 283.
[55] Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth*, p. 59.
[56] Ibid., p. 59.
[57] Ibid., p. 132.
[58] Ibid., p. 49.

camel as the 'mother of a camel-calf,' and speaks of how it was the calf's cry that brought divine destruction down upon the Thamūd.[59]

All of this demonstrates that there must have been more known about the legend of the she-camel than what is presented in the Qur'ān. Tales of the Thamūd and their destruction were spoken of by Arab poets long before the advent of Islam. So the Qur'ān itself was drawing on past sources for its account of the legend, while also perhaps adding its own perspective to the story as well. Therefore, a very simple answer as to why John's account of the she-camel has discrepancies with that of the Qur'ānic account could be that John had possibly conflated other Arab writings about the story of the she-camel with the Qur'ānic version of it. This also means that John must have had access to other writings about the Thamūd, or perhaps had heard about them from others, and connected them to the Qur'ānic story in a manner somewhat similar to some Muslim commentators. But even if this is the case, it still does not explain why John believes that the story is contained in its own book, or why he claims that Muhammad authored 'many' books, and even refers to a number of them by the same sura name that they are known by in the Qur'ān, while never once explicitly mentioning the Qur'ān itself. One possible answer is that John may not have come into contact with the version of the Qur'ān that we have today. This is not to say that such a Qur'ān did not exist by the time he was writing his critique, but that it may not have been as widespread as many people may believe.

According to the traditional Islamic account, the Qur'ān was revealed to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel sporadically over the span of his prophethood. While the traditional view on its codification does at times differ, it is generally accepted among Muslims, as well as many non-Muslims, that the Qur'ān was codified after the death of the Prophet by the caliph ʿUthmān, a former companion of Muhammad. ʿUthmān is said to have begun compiling the Qur'ān after receiving a complaint about the number of contrasting versions of revelation being recited by Muslims.[60] Along with codifying the holy book, the caliph is also said to have had destroyed any text believed to have been

[59] Ibid., pp. 49-50.
[60] Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 119-20.

revealed to Muhammad that was not in agreement with his Qur'ān. This order was allegedly accepted everywhere, with the lone exception of Kufa.[61] While this story may be true, or even partially true, there are a number of reasons to doubt this traditional account of the Qur'ān's codification, and this doubt may also shed some light on John's writings on 'The Camel of God,' as well as his portrayal of the Ishmaelites as believing in a number of books authored by Muhammad.

Shoemaker, for instance, finds it difficult to accept the tradition of the ʿUthmānic codification of the Muslim Scripture. Drawing in part from the research of a number of other scholars, he presents the possibility that it was actually the caliph 'Abd al-Malik who codified the Qur'ān. It seems that the Qur'ānic text may still have been 'in flux' when 'Abd al-Malik decided to work towards creating a standardized Qur'ān in order to counteract the divergent codices of alleged Scripture being used in his caliphate.[62] According to Shoemaker, 'The relative instability of the Qur'ānic text even at this late date is substantiated by the thousands of variant readings preserved by early Islamic authors or recorded on coinage.'[63] It seems that John Damascene, although himself a Christian, should be counted among these early authors who presented at times a variant reading. Further, it can be argued that even the Dome of the Rock, a building project initiated by 'Abd al-Malik, may itself present a variant version of the Qur'ānic text, since there are a number of 'citations' inscribed on the shrine that do not match any portion of the Qur'ān.[64] On the other hand, when speaking about the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock that criticize the Trinity, Donner, for instance, simply refers to inscriptions not found in the Qur'ān as 'paraphrases' of the holy text.[65] While it may be the case that the Dome of the Rock contains paraphrases of Qur'ānic verses, it seems rather odd that Muslims at this point in time would choose to paraphrase the word of God instead of inscribing the text verbatim on the great shrine, especially given the nearly immeasurable importance assigned to revealed Scripture in the Islamic faith.

[61] Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, p. 146.
[62] Ibid., pp. 147-48.
[63] Ibid., p. 148.
[64] Ibid., p. 148.
[65] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, p. 200.

Thus, this may also be seen as evidence of the Qur'ān not being codified even during 'Abd al-Malik's reign. In fact, some authors, such as John Wansbrough, go as far as to say that the Qur'ān was not fully formed until the ninth century.[66] Moreover, even in Medina, the Muslim jurist Malik, who was born in 711, six years after the death of 'Abd al-Malik, still felt it necessary to call upon the ruler to quash the sale and recitation of Ibn Masʿūd's version of revelation, which some Muslims attempted to revive as late as the tenth century.[67] This is important to note, since it testifies to the fact that even if 'Abd al-Malik had codified the Qur'ān during his reign, or even if it had been codified under ʿUthmān, it does not mean that all variants of the Scripture had been completely done away with, not to mention that what we understand to be the codified Qur'ān now may not have been what Muslims, perhaps including the two above mentioned caliphs, understood to be the codified Qur'ān.

With all this mind, it is feasible to believe that John Damascene was not in contact with the Qur'ān in the form that we have it today. It is possible that he, like perhaps a number of Muslims in his day, were dealing with a fragmentary version of the Qur'ān. It is, of course, also possible that John simply interpreted different suras in the Qur'ān as separate 'books,' since the Christian Bible is made up of numerous books, and he was thus applying his own scriptural framework to the holy book of Islam. Yet, this does not account for why he included a book, 'The Camel of God,' which is not found in the Qur'ān, as one of the books authored by Muhammad. Therefore, given the modern research on the subject of the Qur'ān's history, it is not unreasonable to entertain the possibility that John was in contact with a form of Islamic Scripture that differed in some ways from the Qur'ān that we have today.

4. Islamic Marriage, Divorce, and Zayd

In *The Ishmaelites*, John describes what he believes to be Islamic marital laws. He says that these laws are contained in the book 'On Woman,' which is a reference to the sura

[66] Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, pp. 245-46.
[67] Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 121.

Women (‘*al-Nisā’*). John says that it is lawful in Islam for a man to have four wives and ‘a thousand concubines—as many as one can maintain’.[68] He is correct that the Qur’ān teaches, specifically in *al-Nisā’*, that a man can marry up to four wives (4:3). However, it is in relation to marriage that the Qur’ān says that a man should only take more than one wife if he is capable of treating them all justly, which may be what John is referring to when he says, ‘as many as one can maintain.’ It is in the same verse that the Qur’ān also approves of concubinage, but without setting any limits. John’s mention of ‘a thousand concubines’ is perhaps meant to remind the Christian reader of the decadence of King Solomon, whose one thousand female lovers—consisting of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines—caused his estrangement from God (1 Kgs 11:3). It may also be a reference to Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr’s brother-in-law, al-Zubayr, who is said to have left behind one thousand concubines upon his death in 656.[69]

John also claims that Muhammad allows for divorcing any wife one wishes, and for gaining a new one through another man’s divorce, and he connects this claim with an example from the life of the Prophet. John says that Muhammad ‘fell in love’ with the ‘beautiful wife’ of his ‘friend’ Zayd.[70] In an attempt to show the ‘immorality’ of the Islamic prophet, the Damascene at first creates a sort of ‘caricature’ of the story of Muhammad and Zayd. The Prophet is said to have told Zayd one day, ‘Oh, by the way, God has commanded me to take your wife’.[71] Zayd readily agrees to this request because of Muhammad’s status as God’s apostle.[72] Yet, John then gives a fuller, and somewhat different, version of the story, where he says that Muhammad told Zayd that God had commanded him to divorce his wife. After a few days, Muhammad then claimed that it was God’s will that he himself should marry Zayd’s former wife. John says that Muhammad married her, and then committed ‘adultery’ with her, before making the law:

[68] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 157.
[69] Ahmed, *Woman and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, p. 80.
[70] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 157.
[71] Ibid., p. 157.
[72] Ibid., p. 157.

> Let him who will put away his wife. And if, after having put her away, he should return to her, let another marry her. For it is not lawful to take her unless she have been married by another. Furthermore, if a brother puts away his wife, let his brother marry her, should he so wish.[73]

While there are some clear discrepancies between John's version of the story and Islamic tradition, there can be no doubt that the Damascene is referring to Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh, the former wife of Zayd, who was the adopted son, and not mere 'friend,' of the Prophet. Moreover, John's telling of the story does reflect Islamic tradition in a number of important ways. For example, he says that Muhammad was taken by the beauty of Zayd's wife.[74] He is also in agreement with tradition when he depicts Zayd as immediately willing to divorce his wife and give her to Muhammad.

However, Islamic tradition portrays Muhammad as the one who was being tested by God throughout this ordeal, and even says that he initially refused to allow Zayd to put away his wife for him.[75] The Qur'ān says that Muhammad's unwillingness to take Zaynab as his wife was due to his fear of 'the people' (33:37). Adopted children were recognized as the offspring of their adoptive parents by the pre-Islamic Arabs, and Muhammad knew that marrying his daughter-in-law would be seen as incestuous by many of his people.[76] But God is said to have had other plans, and thus the Qur'ānic revelation came down to Muhammad which granted him permission to marry Zaynab (33:37) and to no longer view Zayd as his son (33:40).

Nevertheless, certainly the most glaring difference between John's presentation of the story and the Islamic tradition is that John views Zayd as Muhammad's 'friend', as opposed to his son. There can be little doubt that if John had known that Zayd was the adopted son of the Prophet he would have mentioned this, since it would have worked in favour of his case against Muhammad's moral integrity. But how is it that he missed this aspect of the story? It is possible that he did not have direct access to the Qur'ān's

[73] Ibid., p. 157.
[74] Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*, n.p. (Section: 'Muhammad's Relationships in Medina').
[75] Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, n.p. (Section: 'Peace and War').
[76] Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, p. 158.

account of the events, and that the Muslim sources John was in contact with simply did not portray Zayd as Muhammad's son. Yet, this issue requires more examination.

While it is the case that during Zayd's time as Muhammad's adopted son he was known as 'ibn Muhammad,' because of the divine teaching that children must be named after their biological father (Q 33:4-5), Zayd later became known as 'ibn Ḥāritha.'[77] In fact, in the *sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, Zayd is never portrayed clearly as Muhammad's adopted son. Instead, he is referred to as Muhammad's '*mawlā*,' which can, and in this case probably should, be interpreted as meaning 'adopted son,' but can also mean 'ally,' 'protégé,' and even 'friend.'[78] Moreover, because of the Qur'ānic naming tradition for adopted children, it was considered a sin to refer to Zayd as 'ibn Muhammad,' and this is why it is nearly unheard of in Islamic writings to have him called as such.[79] This may point to the possibility that some other popular Muslim sources, besides the sīra, also did not make it clear that Zayd was any more than a 'friend' of the Prophet. Thus, if John did not receive his information directly from the Qur'ān—which may be the case since he mentions details only found in the sīra and the Ḥadīth—he may have simply not come into contact with the belief that Zayd had at one time been considered Muhammad's son.

Without revisiting the question of the date of the Qur'ān's compilation more than is necessary here, it is also worth noting that according to Powers, it may be that the verses relating to Zayd were a later interpolation. He believes that verses 33:36-40, found in the Qur'ānic sura entitled *al-Aḥzāb*, are unlikely to have been produced in the Ḥijāz, but instead originated during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. Such verses include the Prophet's marriage to Zayd's former wife, as well as the teaching that Muhammad is both sonless and the seal of the prophets (33:40). Powers believes that these lines were added to the Qur'ān in order to combat any challenges to the Umayyad throne and religious orthodoxy based on claims of patrilineality or new revelations.[80] He also argues

[77] Powers, *Zayd*, n.p. (Section: 'The Reputation of Zayd and the Abolition of Adoption'); 'Ibn' simply means 'son of' in Arabic.
[78] Ibid., n.p. (Sections: 'Zayd in the Sīra of Ibn Isḥāq/Ibn Hishām' & 'Recovering Zayd').
[79] Ibid., n.p. (Section: 'The Reputation of Zayd and the Abolition of Adoption').
[80] Ibid., n.p. (Section: 'The Finality of Prophecy and the Redaction of the Qurʾān').

that *al-Aḥzāb* had a history of being edited: a fact which can be gleaned from information credited to one wife and two companions of the Prophet Muhammad. While *al-Aḥzāb* currently contains seventy-three verses, according to the Prophet's wife, ʿĀʾisha, it contains two hundred verses; on the other hand, Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī says it is as long as the sura *al-Barāʾa* (129 verses); while Ubayy ibn Kaʿb teaches that it had the same, if not more, verses than *al-Baqarah* (286 verses).[81] Powers uses these examples to help demonstrate that the sura has had a troubled history, and that it would not have been difficult for a caliph to have added four verses to the text, since much of the sura had been redacted over time.

Powers's theory may provide a potential answer as to why John is seemingly unaware that Zayd was Muhammad's son at one point in his life. Moreover, one need not even accept Powers's dating of these verses to 'Abd al-Malik's reign in order to give a degree of credence to his theory. In fact, it is possible that even a later caliph could have desired to insert such verses for the same reasons Powers believes that 'Abd al-Malik did. Yet, it must be said that this all remains but a theory, and is only presented here as a possible explanation for what seems to be a potential oversight on the Damascene's part.

John also takes a strong moral position on the subject when he claims that Muhammad committed 'adultery' after marrying Zayd's former wife. But how can it be said that the Prophet committed adultery with the woman he married? Is John perhaps comparing Muhammad's actions to those of David, who after being stricken by the beauty of Bathsheba, had sex with the married woman, and even sent her husband Uriah to his death in order to conceal his sin and marry her (2 Sam 11:2-27)? According to the Bible, God, through the Prophet Nathan, rebuked David severely for his sin (2 Sam 12:7-15). However, David had slept with Bathsheba while she was still married to another man, and nowhere is it indicated in the Scripture that David was continuing to commit adultery after he and Bathsheba were wedded. Perhaps then it is reasonable to assume that the bulk of John's criticism is based primarily on New Testament teachings which present

[81] Ibid., n.p. (Section: "Verse 37 of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* ('The Confederates')")

monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage (e.g., Mt 19:3-9; 1 Cor 7:2). John must have rightly assumed that Muhammad's new bride was but one wife among other wives and concubines, and this would have been seen by him as adulterous. Moreover, in light of biblical verses such as Matthew 5:32, John would not have recognized the validity of Muhammad and Zaynab's marriage, even without the practice of polygamy, since the marrying of a divorced woman is equated with adultery.

John's claim that Muhammad teaches that a man who divorces his wife cannot remarry her until she has been married to someone else reflects a pronouncement found in *al-Baqarah* (2:230). However, this Qur'ānic teaching should not be seen as frivolous, but instead as something meant to give the wife a degree of protection against the arbitrary or vindictive behaviour of an impious husband. The Qur'ān requires a man who wishes to divorce his wife to make a declaration of divorce (*talaq*) three times before it is finalized. While it is clear, according to the holy text, that a divorced woman must go through a waiting period of three menstrual cycles before she can remarry (Q 2:228), some argue that there is to be a waiting period after each declaration of divorce, and not only after the third one. Thus, if a man were able to remarry his ex-wife after the finalization of a divorce, this could cause the woman's life to be in a perpetual state of limbo, since a husband who continually repeated the process could force his wife to endure an endless streak of waiting periods.[82]

Further, John is correct in his claim that Islam permits a man to marry his brother's former wife. However, such permission is more implicit than explicit, since it stems from the fact that such a scenario is simply not listed among prohibited unions (Q 4:19-24). Nevertheless, since the Old Testament forbade such unions of affinity (Lev 18:16), although not before the Law of Moses (Gen 38:8-10), John undoubtably points to this teaching in an attempt to show the 'sinfulness' of Muhammad's message.

John also claims that in the same 'book' Muhammad says to 'Work the land which God hath given thee and beautify it. And do this, and do it in such a manner.' John then puts an end to the discussion of the topic because he does not want to tell of all the

[82] Nasr et al, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, p. 101.

'obscene' things Muhammad had done. The verse John appears to be referring to is not found in *al-Nisā'*, but in *al-Baqarah*, specifically 2:223. This verse presents one's wife as a field that can be tilled in any way one chooses. In fact, far from telling the believer how to have sex with one's wife, as John claims, the Qur'ān is allowing for the man to choose the manner in which he engages in coitus with her. This teaching is believed to have been revealed in response to those in the community who viewed certain sexual positions as deviant, and is usually seen as giving divine approval to all forms of vaginal intercourse between a husband and wife.[83]

But why does John use this verse to criticize Muhammad? While the verse is not exactly as John presents it, the argument can perhaps be made that he would have nonetheless found it offensive. One reason for this is that based on the story of Zayd, as well as on the multiplicity of wives and concubines allowed for in Islam, John would have seen such a verse as just one more example of Muhammad being libidinous. Further, as a Christian monastic, John had a low opinion of sexual intercourse in general. While he views the marriage bed as undefiled (Heb 13:4), virginity is seen as a superior calling, since it is better for the soul.[84] Thus, seeing Muhammad, whom he attributes the verse to, discuss sex in such a manner is scandalous to John, and only further proves the 'falsity' of Islam.

5. The Person of Jesus

It is early on in John's critique of Islam that he begins his apology for the Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. He does this at first by attempting to show that Muhammad's teachings about Jesus are self-contradictory. While John states such teachings without much personal input at first, it is clear that he expects the reader, likely a Christian, to view their content as illogical by the manner in which he presents it.

[83] Ibid., p. 98.
[84] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 153.

John says that Muhammad speaks of a single God, the creator all things, 'who has neither been begotten nor has begotten.'[85] He then states that Islam claims that Jesus is 'the Word of God and His Spirit,' but that he is at the same time a created being and servant of God, who had been conceived without seed by the Virgin Mary.[86] Moreover, he writes that Muhammad says that the Virgin Mary is 'the sister of Moses and Aaron.'[87] John also states that Muhammad teaches that the Jews lawlessly attempted to crucify Jesus, but ended up only crucifying his 'shadow,' while Jesus was taken up to Heaven.[88] In Heaven, Jesus is then asked by God if he had said that he was his son or God himself. Jesus responds to this by asking for mercy, and stating that he had never taught this, but that 'sinful' men who had fallen into error had falsely written such things about him.[89] While John expects these statements to be almost self-explanatory based on the manner in which he presents them, they perhaps require further comment here.

The oneness of God is an essential element of all Abrahamic religions. Nevertheless, Islam from its earliest days appears to have put a special emphasis on God's oneness (*tawḥīd*). While it may be the case that the so-called 'double *shahada*,' that is 'There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God', may have found its genesis during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik; the single *shahada*, 'There is no god but God,' seems to have been a sort of 'symbol of faith' for the early Muslims. The Qur'ān itself, in a number of passages, attempts to avoid any potential deviations from monotheism by stating that God is not begotten nor has begotten any other beings. For instance, the Quran says 'He, God, is One […] He begets not; nor was He begotten' (112:1-3).[90] While the Qur'ānic concept of God 'not begetting' is often meant as a critique of the pre-Islamic Arab belief that certain spirits, or *jinn*, were the literal children of God, the concept of God having no children is also used to attack the Christian teaching that Jesus is the Son of God, as well as a member of the Holy Trinity. For example, we read in the Qur'ān that the Christian concept of Jesus's divine sonship is reminiscent of the

[85] Ibid., p. 153.
[86] Ibid., p. 153.
[87] Ibid., p. 153.
[88] Ibid., p. 154.
[89] Ibid., p. 154.
[90] Nasr et al, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, p. 1579.

unbelievers of old (9:30), as well as that God not only produces no offspring, but has 'no partner in sovereignty' either (17:111).

So John presents both Islam's devotion to monotheism and its teaching that God is not begotten nor begets correctly. Further, he follows this up by mentioning the Qur'ānic teaching that Jesus is God's word (3:45; 4:171) and spirit (4:171). John is attempting to portray Islam's understanding of Jesus as inherently flawed. This is because, as a Christian, John understands the concepts of God's word and spirit in a trinitarian manner, and thus by calling Jesus the 'word' and the 'spirit' of God, the Qur'ān is seen as declaring Jesus's divinity, while also contradicting itself by teaching that he was created (Q 3:47; 3:59; 19:35), and but a servant of God (Q 43:59).

There is no denying that Jesus's status in the Qur'ān as God's word is unique. In fact, no other person, prophet or otherwise, is referred to as God's 'word' in the Qur'ān. Muslims, however, have never interpreted this term as an indication of Jesus's divinity. Yet some Muslim scholars, particularly Sufi and Shi'i, have been willing to take a radical look at what Jesus as word means. For instance, Muhammad Legenhausen accepts the idea that the Qur'ānic references to Jesus as word parallel John 1:1. He argues that while in the cases of Moses and Muhammad, God's word was manifested as text, i.e., the Torah and the Qur'ān, respectively, in the case of Jesus, the Gospel was revealed through his life, and thus he was the 'Word of God.'[91] However, such a view is not commonly held among Muslim theologians either today or in John's day. Instead, 'word' has often been understood as a reference to the Qur'ānic teaching that God created Jesus through the word 'Be' (3:59; 19:35). For instance, al-Ṭabarī says that Jesus is simply called God's 'word' because his creation took place through God speaking the word 'Be'.[92] However, the Qur'ān also states that Adam was created in a similar manner (Q 3:59), but he, of course, is never referred to in the holy text as God's 'word'.

Nevertheless, John revisits this issue later in his work when he claims that Muslims call Christians '*Hetaeriasts*, or *Associators*,' for believing Jesus to be 'the Son of God and

[91] Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures – An Extended Version*, n.p. (Section: 'Toward a Synthesis').
[92] Ayoub, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters, Volume II: The House of 'Imrān*, p. 131.

God.'[93] John's claim is reasonable, since in Islam the sin of *širk*—arguably the greatest sin—is that of associating anything or anybody with God. While there are Muslim theologians who argue that the sin of *širk* is not committed by Christians, since the Qur'ān itself deems them to be 'People of the Book,' there are certain Qur'ānic verses, such as 5:73, which seem to suggest that Christians are in fact guilty of *širk*, or something like *širk*, through their worship of Jesus; and John must have come into contact with at least some Muslims claiming as much.

John, however, attempts to retort the accusation of *širk* through a number of brief arguments. He begins by claiming that belief in Jesus's divine sonship is something that has been handed down to believers through the prophets and the Scripture; the same prophets Muslims claim to accept.[94] As a Christian, John would have believed that the Old Testament spoke of Jesus's divinity throughout its pages, so without any hesitation he would have considered disbelief in Jesus's divine nature as a rejection of the teachings of the Old Testament. This position is based on the New Testament itself. Throughout the four canonical Gospels, references are made by the writers to prophecies from the Hebrew Scripture which they believe were fulfilled by Jesus. Moreover, Jesus himself says in Luke that he is written about in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms (24:44). The Church Fathers also frequently found striking references to Jesus and his divinity in the pages of the Old Testament. For instance, in the theophany of the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6), St Gregory of Nyssa sees a prophecy of the virgin birth: 'The light of divinity which through birth shone from [Mary] into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.'[95] It is of little surprise then that John elsewhere takes exception to the fact that Muslims cannot marry or acquire property without witnesses, but yet

[93] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 155.
[94] Ibid., p. 155.
[95] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, p. 59.

Muhammad is accepted as a prophet without, in his opinion, being foretold of in the Scripture.[96]

However, it is also possible that John here is not speaking solely of the Old Testament. While it seems somewhat odd that he should refer to New Testament figures as 'prophets'—although there are exceptions, such as John the Baptist or Zacharias—it is certainly possible that he is using terminology which he may have also employed during his interactions with Muslims. Thus, when he says 'Scripture,' he may be referring to the New Testament as well. In fact, Islam teaches that the Gospel (*ʾInjīl*) (Q 5:46), which is generally seen as being a single book, was given by God to Jesus, a prophet, just as it says that Moses and David, both prophets according to the Qur'ān, were given the Torah (*Tawrat*) (6:91) and the Psalms (*Zabur*) (4:163), respectively. Yet, even though the Gospels of the New Testament are more than a single book—with each one of them bearing the name of a different evangelist—the Twelve Apostles, for which the evangelists Matthew and John are traditionally counted amongst, are seen as devoted followers of Jesus by the Qur'ān (3:52-3; 5:111-15; 61:14). Furthermore, it is also possible that when the Qur'ān uses the term '*ʾInjīl*' it is not only referring to the Gospel(s), but to the New Testament as a whole.[97] So John Damascene is perhaps also referencing the New Testament, which clearly states that Jesus is the Son of God, in his claim that Muslims are rejecting the prophets and the Scripture. Nevertheless, John says that arguing based on the authority of the Bible is countered by Muslims who claim that Christians misinterpret the Scripture, or that the Jews out of their hatred for Christians wrote falsehoods and attributed them to the prophets 'so that [Christians] might be lost.'[98] Both of these claims, especially the former, have been repeated for centuries in Islamic polemics.

[96] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 155; John seems to be referring to the Qur'ānic requirement for witnesses for certain financial transactions (e.g. 2:282), as well as the Sunni practice of requiring two males, or one male and two females, to witness a marriage in order for it to be deemed lawful.
[97] Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, p. 109.
[98] John of Damascus, Saint, *Writings, The Fount of Knowledge: The Philosophical Chapters, On Heresies, and On the Orthodox Faith*, p. 156.

John also argues that to call Jesus God's word and spirit, and to deny that he is God is to 'mutilate' God.[99] This is because 'the word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence.'[100] For John, this means that Muslims are saying that God is without word and spirit, since when these terms are used to describe Jesus in the Qur'ān, they are not believed to confer divinity upon him. John here is making an extremely important point, and one which will later, though likely unrelated to his critique, cause a major controversary in the Islamic world, namely how are Muslims to theologically understand God's attributes? Is God's word co-eternal with God himself? Does God even possess attributes? Or is the concept of diversity within the divine to be thought of as heresy?

These questions were taken up relatively early in Islam. The Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn, near the end of his reign in 833, declared that judges and scholars within his caliphate were to accept the position that the Qur'ān had been created by God. With this declaration, the caliph made it a crime to believe that the word of God, the Qur'ān, is co-eternal with God himself. His position had been influenced by Islam's 'first philosophers,' the Mu'tazilites.[101] These prominent Muslim thinkers denied that God could have any attributes that possessed a reality which were distinct from his. For instance, one may say that God is powerful, but one cannot say that God possesses a distinct 'power' without dividing him. So to claim that God's word, the Qur'ān, had existed in eternity with God was to commit the sin of *širk*, and to deny God's oneness (*tawḥīd*). Instead, the Mu'tazilites believed the Qur'ān to be the 'created word of God'.[102]

The Mu'tazilites' position presents a potentially tenable rebuttal to John Damascene's theological critique of the Qur'ān's use of 'word' and 'spirit' in reference to Jesus. For the Mu'tazilites, there is no issue with the idea of God creating his word, since the Qur'ān itself, which had been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, had been created. So to call Jesus God's word does not by any means bestow divinity upon him.

[99] Ibid., p. 156.
[100] Ibid., p. 156.
[101] Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, Volume 3*, pp. 11-2.
[102] Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, p. 71.

Moreover, God's spirit cannot be seen as an attribute of God because the very concept of attributes that possess their own reality is seen as heretical, since they create division within the divine. 'Spirit' cannot then refer to someone, or something, that is distinct from God and yet still divine, but instead the term must be viewed as simply allegorical.

However, the Mu'tazilite position did not succeed, at least not for long, among Muslims. In 847, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil reversed al-Maʾmūn's policy on the created nature of the Qur'ān, as well as on other Mu'tazilite positions.[103] What emerged instead, or rather re-emerged, was the popularly held belief among Muslims that the Qur'ān, as God's word, was co-eternal with God himself—a belief that is still an essential part of Sunni orthodoxy. This belief, however, does give John's earlier argument more weight. Based on this it can be asked: if the Qur'ān as God's word is co-eternal with God, then could not Jesus as God's word also be considered co-eternal with him? Just as the Qur'ān, which is written on paper or recited by human speech, is seen as co-eternal because it is God's word, so John, as a Christian, would have believed that Jesus, who had taken on flesh and blood, is also co-eternal with God because he is truly the word of God incarnate. In neither case is God's essence divided or multiplied, but his word is simply recognized as possessing its own unique reality. This unique reality would also hold true for John when it came to the spirit of God, which Christians see as a member of the Holy Trinity.

However, John, as an orthodox Christian, would not have believed that God's word and spirit were mere attributes, but instead he would have seen them as 'persons.' The Christian understanding of the Trinity is that of one God in three divine persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although all three persons of the Trinity share one divine will and are of one essence (*οὐσία*), and God himself is divine unity, the concept is more complicated than the common Muslim belief that the Qur'ān is the co-eternal word of God. So while most Muslims would agree that God's word and spirit are a part of him, they would likely have a difficult time accepting that these two elements were in fact 'persons,' and John's argument would have needed to delve somewhat deeper in

[103] Fakhry, 'Philosophy and Theology: From the Eighth Century C.E. to the Present', p. 280.

order to present a fuller understanding of the Christian concept of God to a potential Muslim reader.

Nevertheless, theological and philosophical arguments aside, perhaps the greatest issue John is taking with the Qur'ānic usage of the term 'word' to describe Jesus is a philological one. This may be the case since it is seemingly undeniable that the Qur'ān's use of 'word' in relation to Jesus is based on John 1:1: a verse which directly connects the concept of Jesus as God's word with his divinity. The Damascene may be essentially arguing that the Qur'ān is using a Christian theological term meant to demonstrate Jesus's divinity, while simultaneously ignoring its meaning by stating the very opposite view about Jesus's identity.

John tries to counter the Qur'ān's teachings against the divinity of Jesus further by attempting to call into question Islam's theological consistency by some subtle mentions of the virgin birth and Mary's supposed brother. Islam, as does Christianity, teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin; however, unlike Christianity, Jesus's virgin birth in Islam is not due to his divine sonship, but is instead seen as a 'sign' to humankind, as well as a 'mercy' from God (Q 19:21). By pointing out that the Qur'ān teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin but is not divine, John is perhaps calling into question how it is possible to accept that Jesus was conceived without seed and yet only a prophet.

John also seemingly looks to demonstrate a major philological error in the Qur'ān by writing that the Prophet Muhammad claims that the Virgin Mary is the sister of Moses and Aaron, while not offering any further comment. While the Qur'ān never explicitly says that the Virgin Mary is the sister of Moses, it does say that she is Aaron's sister (19:28), while elsewhere stating that Aaron is Moses's brother (19:51-3). It seems that the Qur'ānic text has conflated the biblical figures of the Virgin Mary and Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. This is an understandable mistake to make since the Hebrew version of the name 'Mary,' which is translated as '*Maryam*' in Arabic, is '*Miriam*,' which in Greek is '*Μαριάμ'* (*Mariam*). Moreover, elsewhere the Qur'ān states that the Virgin Mary's father is 'Imrān' (3:35-6), which is likely the Arabic version of the name 'Amram,' who according to the Bible was the father of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam

(Num 26:59).[104] Thus, John mentions this perceived error with the aim of discrediting Muhammad's religious authority by indicating that he was unaware that the Virgin Mary and Miriam were two different people.

John's statement that Islam teaches that the Jews failed in their attempt to crucify Jesus and instead crucified his 'shadow' reflects to a large degree the Qur'ānic description found in 4:157. However, it does not coincide with John's earlier claim that Muhammad had been taught by an Arian monk. In fact, the Qur'ānic teaching that God only made it appear to the Jews that they had crucified the Messiah is opposed to Arian teachings on the Crucifixion and is more reminiscent of certain Gnostic beliefs. This fact can be seen in a number of Gnostic writings that predate the Qur'ān, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter*, a work dated to at least the fourth century, and whose oldest known manuscript is written in Coptic.[105] We read in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, for instance, of how Jesus laughs above the Cross as the 'substitute' who resembles him is crucified below, unbeknownst to the people. Such a belief seems to be the result of Docetism, a Gnostic heresy which taught that Jesus's body was merely an phantasm.[106] The word 'Docetism' comes from the Greek '*δοκεῖν*,' which means 'to seem' or 'to appear'.[107] The concept of Jesus only 'seeming,' or 'appearing,' to experience something is precisely what the Qur'ān says about his Crucifixion: 'They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them' (4:157).[108] So John's claim that Muhammad learned about Christianity from an Arian fails to take into account a key teaching that is strikingly similar to Docetism, and not Arianism.

Conclusion

As can be seen throughout this paper, John's version of Islam contains certain discrepancies with the more traditional understanding of the Muslim faith. For instance,

[104] Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, pp. 478-79.
[105] Havelaar, ed., *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter: Nag-Hammadi-Codex VII, 3*, pp. 15-6.
[106] Ibid., p. 49.
[107] Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 139.
[108] *The Quran*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, p. 65.

John does not consider Islam to be a separate religion from that of Christianity, and does not even use the words 'Muslim(s),' 'Islam,' or 'Qur'ān' anywhere in his work. He also gives diverse reasons for the veneration of the Ka'ba, and writes of a book, 'The Camel of God,' which is not the title of any sura in the Qur'ān. While John does speak of suras and verses that are found in today's Qur'ān, some individuals may initially be tempted to wonder if he was perhaps somewhat ignorant of Islamic teachings. However, in light of recent research on early Islam, it seems that John, far from being uninformed, was a rather astute observer, who, having spent his life in contact with the Islamic faith, generally knew exactly what he was talking about. In this sense, *The Ishmaelites* is a fascinating historical document.

However, John's treatise was not intended as a historical piece, nor as a neutral introduction to the beliefs and practices of the Islamic faith, but instead as a critique meant to demonstrate to the reader the 'heretical' nature of Islam. In this respect, his work must have been rather persuasive to the average eighth-century Christian reader. In fact, *The Ishmaelites* inspired many Christian critiques of Islam, in both the Greek East and the Latin West, for centuries to come. For John was able to craft a relatively convincing case, at least for the time, against Islam. He did this by portraying Muhammad as a false prophet who had learned about the Bible through a heretical monk. Further, the Prophet's personal life is presented as deviant, especially in comparison to Christian marital ideals. While the Qur'ān is generally portrayed as a compilation of books based on the mere opinions of a man, consisting of fables, like the she-camel; approval of carnality, as in the practice of multiple wives and concubines; contradictions, such as declaring Jesus to be the word and spirit of God, but not divine; or just clear heresy, in the example of denying Jesus's Crucifixion. Moreover, the Damascene attempts to present a convincing defence of the Christian understanding of Jesus by appealing not so much to Christian writings, but to the Qur'ān itself. John also employs a similar tactic when defending the Christian veneration of the Cross, since he uses the Muslims' own veneration of the Ka'ba as a retort. All of this would have likely confirmed to an eighth-century Christian that Islam was simply a heresy.

However, there are a number of problematic arguments, at least from a more objective perspective, contained in *The Ishmaelites*. For instance, John clearly takes it for granted that the Christian tradition he inherited is correct, and this causes him to take a hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān that he would not, and in fact did not, take with the Bible. Thus, he fails to see parallels between some of the elements he criticizes about Islam with similar elements in Christianity. For example, he includes the Qur'ānic legend of the she-camel for no other reason then to demonstrate how 'ridiculous' Muhammad's writings are. But cannot peculiar stories about animals be found in the Old Testament as well? Should the talking of Balaam's donkey (Num 22:28) be considered any less odd than the Qur'ān's sacred she-camel? Moreover, the story of the she-camel could be given a simple, and obvious, exegetical understanding, such as the animal being sent as a test of faith for the people of the time; but John does not acknowledge this since his opinion is completely coloured by the fact that it is an Ishmaelite tale.

A similar problem can also be seen in John's criticism of Islamic marital laws, such as when he takes issue with the fact that the Qur'ān allows a man four wives and numerous concubines. As a Christian, John sees marriage in light of the New Testament, and thus the Muslim practice of polygamy and concubinage are used to supposedly demonstrate the error of Muhammad's thinking. But this position fails to fully take into account that a number of the holy men of the Hebrew Scripture also practiced polygamy, and some even had concubines. Abraham, whom John mentions a number of times, had Ishmael through laying with his concubine Hagar (Gen 16:1-16). Yet, John would see Abraham's behaviour as legitimate, since it took place before the Incarnation of Jesus, as well as because of Abraham's holy status within Christianity, whereas Muhammad's ideas on marriage and sexual activity are portrayed as stemming from his depravity.

However, it would be a mistake to criticize John too severely for the abrasive, and at times lopsided, approach he takes with Islam. For John felt he was defending truth itself in his critique of Islam, and he wrote in a rhetorical style that resonated with the Christians of his day, as well as with future generations of Christians. While his criticism of Islam is certainly harsh, is the criticism of polytheism, for instance, found in the Bible

or the Qur'ān any less harsh? The same can be said about the attacks on heresy contained in the writings of other Church Fathers and early Muslim scholars. The world John lived in was rather different than that of the twenty-first century. His world was one in which a point was made not through modern methods of ecumenical dialogue, but in a manner that defended the 'truth,' even if it meant at times being unkind, or even unfair, in one's arguments.

Nevertheless, *The Ishmaelites* demonstrates not only what a well-educated Christian response to Islam in the eighth-century Umayyad Caliphate looks like, but also what Islam during this period may have consisted of, and in which ways it may have differed from the Islam of the following centuries. In this respect, the work is perhaps more valuable today than it was in John's day. Lastly, despite the negative view of Islam that permeates *The Ishmaelites*, the treatise still challenges its readers to take a deeper look at both Islam and Christianity in order to better understand what divides these two great religions, as well as what they have in common.

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