

JOHN DAMASCENE IN CONTEXT

**An Examination of “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites” with special consideration given to the Religious, Political, and Social Contexts during the Seventh and Eighth Century Arab Conquests**

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**Abstract**

John Damascene’s work concerning “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites” confronts Islam—a heresy according to John—with respect to fundamental disagreements between Christians and Muslims concerning the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity and the authenticity of Muhammad’s prophethood and revelation. I argue that John’s work was prompted and influenced by his context in seventh-and eighth-century Byzantium. More specifically, my argument is that John’s firsthand understanding of Islam, the new rhetoric of a heavenward focus within what had been the Roman empire, the development of apologies and disputations concerning Islam, and the growing tensions in Christian-Arab relations in eighth-century Byzantium all influenced “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites”—very likely the first polemic against Islam from the orthodox Christian community.

The first chapter surveys the history of the Arab conquest, with a special focus on the Ummayyad Caliphate, under which John lived and served. I also detail the effects of the Arab Conquest on the Christian community, specifically that Arab rule signaled the end of the persecution of the Jacobite and Nestorian churches. In my second chapter I detail the Church’s attempt to deal with the fall of the

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Roman Empire in the East, and how the call to orthodoxy stimulated the growth of apologetic literature. My third chapter deals with Christian-Arab relations in Byzantium and the tensions that evolved as Islam began to make religious truth claims over and against Christianity. My fourth chapter builds on the previous three, analyzing John's polemic and revealing those elements of culture, politics, education and religion that can be seen in his work. I argue that these elements of context led him to consider Islam a heresy—an understandable conclusion—and respond to that heresy with an informed perspective, perfectly suited to provide the Byzantine Christian community with an answer to the theological challenges coming from their Arab rulers.

### **Introduction: the value of context defended**

History might be defined as the study of people affecting other people, and is aptly called “social studies”. Even those in history who strived to be isolated from the general public as aesthetes or monks are remembered for how their example and work affected society. Generally speaking, the history of a particular culture can often remain virtually static until the catalyst of cross-cultural interaction occurs. The introduction to a new culture is an exposure to the unfamiliar in the realms of language, values, learning and religion. Perhaps none of these areas of cultural expression causes more interest, discussion, anger, pain and controversy than religion. While some topics of culture can be isolated to a discussion that relies exclusively on logic and comparison, religion involves both the mind and the emotions, thus making it a more challenging subject to discuss. Be that as it may, religious beliefs are based upon truth claims substantiated by a blend of empirical fact and personal faith, and opposing truth claims naturally call for discussion. Discussion often leads to debate, and debate calls for evaluation and evaluation should lead to a conclusion. This conclusion may be the same for all parties involved in the debate or it may not. Hopefully the conclusion results in an enhanced perspective regarding the viewpoint contrary to one's own. Hopefully it means greater clarity and un-

understanding, fewer “straw men” and perhaps even a change in previously held convictions.

There are, however, two elements that are often the cause of an absence of proper evaluation and, therefore, an absence of helpful conclusions. The first is a refusal to consider the opposing position. Narrow-mindedness is an inhibitor to productive discussions and ensures that no helpful conclusion is reached. The second is a misunderstanding of the opposing position. Misunderstandings often prevent any conclusion from being reached. If a conclusion is reached in spite of misunderstanding, it is often a conclusion absent of greater clarity and fewer “straw men”. In debates, “straw men” are the result of a shallow or faulty definition of the opposing position, resulting in an argument based on stereotypes, extremes and even rumours. For this reason, “straw men” often present a hindrance to helpful conclusions. These caricatures of opposing positions are often based on misunderstandings, and they propagate further misunderstandings and vilification of the opposing position. The refusal to consider the opposing position is a decision of the will. A misunderstanding on the other hand is something that can be corrected through further dialogue. Misunderstandings can occur for any number of reasons, and one of those is an ignorance of context. A person’s context is an enormous factor in the shaping of worldview, and an appreciation of context is fundamental to the arrival at a helpful conclusion. This can be seen especially in studies of past events when context is not examined and as a result persons in history are misunderstood, dubbed ignorant, or sometimes even wrongly vilified.

Because a person’s context contributes so much to their own private conclusions, an examination and understanding of context is critical to gaining a grasp of a person or group of people in history with a view to acquiring an informed conclusion.

One such notable cross-cultural encounter is that which was brought on by the Arab conquests of the seventh-century Byzantine Empire that ultimately ended in the establishment of the Arab kingdom. These were certainly not the first Arabs to interact with Byzantium and its people, but it is significant that these Arabs had

recently been inspired by the teachings of a man named Muhammad. They had submitted to Muhammad's god and set out to establish a new theocracy.

As Arab rule continued to succeed and spread across the no longer Roman empire, one man born in the middle of the seventh century would later be a great writer and theologian in the Byzantine Christian community. He would help those around him arrive at having greater clarity and fewer "straw men" concerning this new faith of the Arabs and therefore further enable the Christian community to stand firm in their own convictions. His Arabic name was Mansur, but he was known to the Christian community and remembered in history as John Damascene, that is, "John of Damascus". (652-c.750).<sup>2</sup> He was an officer in the court of the Muslim caliph and John later became a monk and spent the rest of his life writing to ensure the solidarity of the orthodox community. His work concerning the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites" was, in its time, part of a new frontier of dialogue and debate. He challenged the religion of Muhammad, skilfully discerning the most critical topics that called for discussion and debate. John Damascene's work is valuable because it sheds light on the relationship between Christianity and early Islam. This is helpful in light of the modern stereotypes surrounding Islam; furthermore, it represents the first educated and qualified response to Islam from within orthodox Christianity. Additionally, John's work shows the modern reader how Islam was perceived by non-Muslims during his day. Interestingly enough, that perception was that Islam was a "heresy"—a corruption of orthodox Christianity. An examination of the religious, political, and social aspects of John's context will facilitate an understanding that John's work is both a reflection and product of his context. The changes taking place in seventh- and eighth-century Byzantium colour John's work and explain why he perceived Islam to be a heresy. Perhaps it might even lead the reader of this study to greater clarity, fewer "straw men" and a change in convictions.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1972), 8.

This work is divided into four chapters. The first focuses on the Arab conquest into Byzantium and the struggles for power within the Arab leadership (the caliphate). There is also a discussion of the effect of the transition of power on the theological disputes within the Byzantine Christian community. The first chapter ends with a more detailed examination of the life of John than that given above. The second chapter describes the fall of triumphalism, a post-Constantine ecclesiology that defended the claims of Christianity on the basis of the victory of the Roman Empire. During the latter parts of the Byzantine-Sassanid wars, triumphalism began to wane and would later be replaced by a rhetoric that focused on the Church's struggle for internal purity and against heresy. This led to the development of apologies to defend the faith and polemics to attack the heresies, a shift which can be exemplified in the work of John Damascene. The third chapter describes Arab-Christian relations under the caliphate focusing specifically on how the Christian community perceived their new rulers and the Islamic faith. There is also a discussion concerning how the caliphs exercised power over their Christian subjects and how it is that John Damascene, a Christian, was able to work in the court of the caliph. The fourth chapter specifically focuses on John's condemnation of the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites" which is the designation he gives to the Muslim faith. This tract against Islam is a small part of his work on heresies, *De Haeresibus*. The fourth chapter builds upon the foundation laid in the first, second and third chapters, using the reader's enhanced understanding of John Damascene's context to detail the different aspects of the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites." This work concludes by demonstrating that John's context is useful in discerning the meaning and value of his work, and that John's "Heresy of the Ishmaelites" is in fact a very intelligent and qualified response to this so-called "heresy".

## 1 The Conquest of Byzantium and John Damascene

### 1.1 The Muslim conquest

The Arab conquests of the Byzantine Empire radically changed not only the life and context of John Damascene, but also the entirety of Christendom and the Roman Empire. The shift of power that happened in the seventh century raised questions, destroyed paradigms and redefined the East in ways that can still be seen today. Of particular importance are the changes and modes of thinking in place during the Umayyad Caliphate, the dynasty in power during John's lifetime.

The conquests began during the "Rightly Guided" (*rashidun*) Caliphate in 633 and 634, shortly after Muhammad's death in 632.<sup>3</sup> The timing proved to be perfect. Byzantium was all but bankrupt after a long war with Persia and there was no quick recovery after the Persians left in 628.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Byzantine army quickly discovered that old paradigms and strategies that had been effective against the Persians were not yielding success in their conflicts with the Arabs.<sup>5</sup> The conquests were the result of the newly formed Arab-Muslim movement, united under the banner of Islam.<sup>6</sup> This is a testament to the magnitude of the work of Muhammad since prior to the rise of Islam, Arabs were a tribal people and essentially state-

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Sarris, "The Eastern Roman Empire (306-641)," in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. Cyril Mango (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58. Many Islamic historians utilize a uniquely Muslim calendar, which begins with Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 (the *Hijra* or *Hegira*). Thus, for instance, some Muslim historians record 623 A.D. as 2 A.H. (*anno Hegirae*). Though the author is aware of the Muslim calendar's use in historical studies, the Western calendar will be used exclusively in this work. Any citation that references a Muslim year will be accompanied by the Western equivalent. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York: Longman, 1999), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>6</sup> I.M. Lapidus, "The Arab Conquests and the Formation of Islamic Society," in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press 1982), 66.

less.<sup>7</sup> The invasion of Byzantium brought about a political and religious regime that was uniquely Arab. Most significant for John Damascene's context, and arguably for the context of the Ummayyad Caliphate is the conquest of Syria. The Battle of Yarmuk in 636 proved to be the end of Byzantine Syria.<sup>8</sup> The Byzantine rulers were driven out and Yazid, an Ummayyad, became the governor. His reign was short, and when he died in 639 his brother, Mu'awiya, replaced him.<sup>9</sup> What is more significant to this study is the fall of Damascus, which happened before the Battle of Yarmuk, in 635. Damascus fell to the Muslim General Khalid, who promised the inhabitants security in exchange for the payment of the poll tax.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, Mansur ibn Sargun, John Damascene's grandfather, played a significant role in the capitulation of Damascus to the Arabs. The historian Euty chius identifies Mansur as the one who negotiated the surrender and opened the Eastern Gate to the Muslim troops.<sup>11</sup>

The capitulation of Damascus is only a small part of the greater story of the Arab conquests. As stated above, Muhammad's religion unified the Arabs under a common cause and their victories in Byzantium meant that the Arabs were now united under a common empire. The Arab experience was fundamentally changing from tribal organization to a more centralized government.<sup>12</sup> During the conquest of Damascus, the "Rightly Guided" Caliphate was in power and was led by Caliph Umar (634-44). However, Umar was assassinated by a Persian slave in Medina, a murder apparently absent of any political motivation.<sup>13</sup> A committee of Meccan Muslims was

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Hoyland. "The Rise of Islam," in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. Cyril Mango, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121.

<sup>8</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Ummayyad Caliphate (661-750)* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 23-24. See also, Kennedy, 69.

<sup>10</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

then assembled to choose the new caliph. Their choice was Uthman, a leader of the clan of Ummaya, though Uthman is counted among the *Rashidun* caliphs because he did not attempt to establish an Umayyad successor.<sup>14</sup> Uthman is probably best remembered for making the bold move of producing a single definitive version of the Qur'an.<sup>15</sup> It was bold, most notably because it established the caliph as the political and religious leader, further solidifying the Arab theocracy.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, Uthman came under significant opposition due to accusations of "nepotism, favouritism and the encouragement of abuses... [and] certain reprehensible innovations which found no justification in the Qur'an or in the practice of Muhammad."<sup>17</sup> The caliph tended to concentrate power in the hands of his fellow Umayyads, and Hawting points out that Uthman set up Umayyads as governors in Egypt, Kufa and Basra.<sup>18</sup> Following his initial six years as caliph, Uthman began to experience significant problems around 650. Kennedy comments, "Uthman tried to deal with [the problems he faced] intelligently but he totally underestimated the strength of feeling and his attempts to cope with the discontent simply made the position worse".<sup>19</sup> These problems reached their climax when Uthman was assassinated in his home in 656.<sup>20</sup>

Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was chosen to replace Uthman. Almost immediately, Ali had to deal with opposition, political rivalry, and whispers of his participation in Uthman's murder, for which he was never officially charged.<sup>21</sup> Ali initially attempted to reverse the nepotism of Uthman and remove Umayyad governors, but he experienced significant difficulty when he attempted to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70. See also Hawting, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, 70.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Kennedy, 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Veccia Vaglieri, "The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates," in *The Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 1: The Central Islamic Lands*, eds. P.M. Holt, Ann K.S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 67.

<sup>18</sup> Hawting, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, 72-73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>21</sup> Hawting, 27.



remove Mu'awiya, governor of Syria. By the time of Uthman's death and Ali's rise to power, Mu'awiya had built his own military force in Syria and was prepared to go to war to defend his position as governor.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Mu'awiya had been appointed governor under Umar, and so he was not subject to the suspicions of Uthman's nepotism.<sup>23</sup> To add to the tension, Mu'awiya was Uthman's closest relative and "he had a moral claim against the murders of the caliph...he had a right, even a duty, to see vengeance for the wrong done to his clan."<sup>24</sup> The tension turned to war in 657 and would later be known as the first civil war of Islam or the Great *Fitna* (time of trial).<sup>25</sup> As already stated, Mu'awiya was motivated by vengeance for his murdered relative; it would be wrong to see this war as a struggle for the caliphate. Mu'awiya had made no claims to the caliphate, and historical record indicates that his intention was to remain in Syria as governor.<sup>26</sup> The battle happened at Siffin and though, as Hawting points out, the accounts of the war are somewhat obscure, it is generally accepted that the war was brought to an abrupt end when Mu'awiya's men put pages of the Qur'an on the end of their spears, causing the more pious men of Ali's army to end the fighting immediately.<sup>27</sup> Mu'awiya remained steadfast in his refusal to acknowledge Ali as caliph and demanded arbitration. Ali agreed, but insisted that he was not surrendering the caliphate; only that he would leave Mu'awiya to govern Syria.<sup>28</sup> The arbitration was seen as weakness on Ali's part and much of the support for the caliph quickly collapsed. Ali, however, still maintained a significant base of support, and this is the beginning of the

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<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, 77.

<sup>23</sup> Hawting, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Hawting, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Hawting (Hawting, 28) goes on to point out that although this may seem like a ruse to get the Syrians out of a difficult situation (the majority opinion, Hawting admits) it might also be that the action was taken to remind the other Muslims that this infighting was wrong, or perhaps that the dispute itself should be settled by the Word of God.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, 79.

sect that would come to be known as the Shi'a party (that is, Party of Ali) who maintained that Ali and his descendants possessed the true right to leadership of the Islamic Community (*umma*).<sup>29</sup> The war is of great significance to the context of John Damascene because Ali's defeat led to the eventual elevation of Mu'awiya to the caliphate in 661, thereby initiating the Ummayyad Caliphate.<sup>30</sup>

The Ummayyad Dynasty is an historical irony when one considers that the Ummayyads were a Meccan tribe who led opposition against Muhammad in 624.<sup>31</sup> Now, however, the caliph ruled the growing Islamic empire from Damascus in Syria, rather than Mecca.<sup>32</sup> Mu'awiya was from the Sufyanid family, and the subcategory of Sufyanid rule during the Ummayyad Dynasty thus begins with him.<sup>33</sup> Initially, Mu'awiya did well as the caliph, and Kennedy credits him for having "the shrewdness, moderation and self-control that the situation demanded".<sup>34</sup> Mu'awiya solidified a system of governors for each territory, and each province continued in the traditions of the previous rulers.<sup>35</sup> Mu'awiya's reign was generally one of peace and prosperity for Christians and Arabs alike.<sup>36</sup> His rule is known as one of tolerance, and historians and chroniclers portray him as a ruler who would rather use material inducements than force; he also refused to wear a crown, lest he be identified with the harsh tyrants of Byzantine history.<sup>37</sup> Some historians, however, insist that Mu'awiya failed in this effort and they accuse him of perverting the caliphate and turning it into a kingship. This suspicion

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<sup>29</sup> Hawting, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>32</sup> Vaglieri, "The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates," in Holt, Lambton, and Lewis, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>35</sup> Hawting, 35. Also Vaglieri, 87. For more on religious toleration under the Ummayyads see the second section of this chapter and the third chapter.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997), 263.

<sup>37</sup> Hawting, 42-43.

stems from his desire to appoint his progeny to take the caliphate after his death, something that many Arabs saw to be a failure, reminiscent of Uthman's nepotism and an attempt to establish a hereditary monarchy.<sup>38</sup> In spite of that opposition, Mu'awiya appointed his son Yazid to take his place, who did so after Mu'awiya's death in 680.<sup>39</sup> Yazid's reign did not last long, and after his death in 683, the Sufyanid's failed to select a strong candidate.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, tension swiftly developed over the matter and would ultimately prove to be the catalyst for a second *fitna*.<sup>41</sup> Following Mu'awiya's death, Ibn al-Zubayr—a leader in Mecca—began establishing himself and he became the rallying point for all Muslims who opposed Yazid's claim to the caliphate.<sup>42</sup> Yazid's army brought the war to Mecca, but later retreated upon hearing of Yazid's death in 683.<sup>43</sup> Yazid's son, known as Mu'awiya II, attempted to establish himself as caliph, but died only a few weeks after his rise to power. None of Yazid's other sons was old enough to assume control of the caliphate and this signalled the end of a caliphate dominated by the Sufyanids.<sup>44</sup> Marwan ibn Hakam was declared caliph in Damascus in 684,<sup>45</sup> yet Marwan's reign was also very brief, ending with his death in 685. During his time as caliph, Marwan was still entrenched in the difficulties of the second *fitna*, yet he showed great resolve to re-establish Ummayyad authority from Damascus which would influence Mecca and beyond. That task was continued by his son and successor Abd al-Malik, who became caliph in 685. Under his command, Mecca fell to the Arabs of Damascus in 692.<sup>46</sup> After Marwan, all future caliphs of the Ummayyad Dynasty would be his

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 43. See also Kennedy, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Hawting, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Hawting, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, 89-90.

<sup>43</sup> Hawting, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 41-42. See also Hawting, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Hawting, 49.

own progeny and the Marwanids replaced the Sufyanids as the ruling bloodline.<sup>47</sup>

Abd al-Malik is arguably the most significant caliph of the Umayyads by reason of the many changes that happened under his rule. One such change was the standardization of uniquely Arab coinage throughout the empire. The currency possessed “a standard weight and design...an inscription giving the date, the caliph’s name and a religious slogan”.<sup>48</sup> There were no faces on the coins, and this seems to be a significant move toward a dogmatic iconoclasm within Islam.<sup>49</sup> Along with a standardized coinage, Abd al-Malik began intentional Arabization of the empire, making Arabic the official language of the courts.<sup>50</sup> Finally, it was under Abd al-Malik’s leadership that the Dome of the Rock was constructed in Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup> Abd al-Malik died in Damascus in 705, leaving a generally successful reign behind him. Abd al-Malik had seen the completion of the Dome of the Rock and he had established a centralized bureaucratic empire and a strong Syrian army.<sup>52</sup> After Abd al-Malik’s death, his son, al-Walid, assumed leadership of the caliphate. Walid continued the policies of his father without many notable progressions or disruptions and, after his death in 715, leadership of the caliphate passed between four men in nine years. Walid’s son, Sulayman ruled, and after his death in 718, Umar II led the caliphate. In 720 it went to his son, Yazid II, and after Yazid’s death in 724, Hisham managed to hold power until 743.<sup>53</sup> Most notable for the focus of this work is Yazid II who strengthened the Islamic dogma of iconoclasm and Hisham, whose defeat by Charles Martel in 732 signaled the end of the Arab conquests.<sup>54</sup> The history of the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>48</sup> Kennedy, 99.

<sup>49</sup> Hawting, 65. Islam’s brand of iconoclasm will be examined in the fourth chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, 99. Hawting (Hawting, 63-64) stresses that these changes did not occur overnight, but should be seen as a process originating with Abd al-Malik.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Kennedy, 102-103.

<sup>53</sup> Hawting, xv.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 83. See chapter four for a discussion of Islamic iconoclasm.

conquest given above introduces an evaluation of John Damascene's context. The Ummayyads continued to rule until the 745 rebellion in Syria and the third *fitna*, which removed Syria as the center of power. Syria was demoted to the same status as any other province and the Ummayyad Dynasty ended with the death of Caliph Marwan II in 750.<sup>55</sup>

### ***1.2 The effect of the Arab conquest on disputes within the Christian community***

Disputes within the Christian Church are greatly significant to the work of John Damascene, and the debates and schisms within Christendom in the seventh and eight centuries date back to decisions made at the Council of Constantinople in 451. It was there that Cyril of Alexandria's position was vindicated and declared to be orthodoxy; that Christ has two distinct natures (diophysitism) as opposed to one (monophysitism), and that these two natures function in one person—the hypostatic union.<sup>56</sup> However, this decision from Chalcedon did not put an end to the debate, and the schism resulted in separate groups in the East. Both parties proclaimed their own doctrine in relation to Chalcedon, either anathematizing the decision (the “Jacobites” as well as the Nestorians) or endorsing it (the “Melkites”).<sup>57</sup> The schism raged on and imperial policy proved impotent to resolve the dispute. In 532, Emperor Justinian attempted to heal the schism, but was unsuccessful in doing so.<sup>58</sup> Later, Justinian and Justinian II actively imposed the Chalcedonian formula on the empire.<sup>59</sup> These distinctions were still present in the Christian community during the Ummayyad caliphate and they played a significant role in shaping John Damascene's work. The

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<sup>55</sup> Hawting, 98-103.

<sup>56</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Carlisle, PN: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 105, 107.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-09.

<sup>58</sup> Sarris, 44-45.

<sup>59</sup> Sidney Griffith, “Melkites”, “Jacobites” and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria,’ in David Thomas, ed., *Syrian Christians Under Islam: The First Thousand Years* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 12.

schism itself played an important role in the social context of the Arab conquest, because the imperial persecution of the anti-Chalcedonians led to unrest and bitterness within the Monophysite community.

Of particular interest to the religious context of Byzantium at the time of the Arab conquest is that the shift in power effectively ended the Byzantine persecution of the anti-Chalcedonians. It would seem that some who were opposed to Chalcedon and faced continued imperial pressure to submit to Chalcedonian Christology saw the Arabs as liberators who now gave them freedom of religious expression. This idea is not without contestation, however. Suermann states emphatically that those opposed to the Chalcedonian definition did not regard the Arabs as liberators, but rather as instruments of God to bring about a final apocalypse.<sup>60</sup> Suermann refers to the work of C. Detlef G. Muller to support his thesis, noting, ‘Muller does not find...that the Arab conquest was a liberation from the Byzantine yoke. Rather, [it] represents a return to “normality”.’<sup>61</sup> Moorehead also finds the assessment unsatisfying, and points out that many Monophysites were fighting against the invaders and that it was Chalcedonian supporters like Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem, who led opposition to the emperor.<sup>62</sup>

While it has been shown that the anti-Chalcedonians by no means universally welcomed the Arabs, there is certainly evidence to show that positive responses from Monophysites were at best sporadic and, at worst, commonplace. Brock notes that the time before the Arab conquest had been one of “vicious persecution of the dominant Monophysite community by the Byzantine (Chalcedonian) authorities.” Brock continues, “In view of this background, the sense of relief at the change of rule, from Byzantine to Arab, that we

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<sup>60</sup> Harald Suermann, “Copts and the Islam of the Seventh Century,” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson and David Thomas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill), 96.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>62</sup> J. Moorehead, “The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions,” *Byzantion* 51 (1981): 583-84.

find in these Monophysite chronicles is hardly surprising”.<sup>63</sup> Tolan adds, “The invasions could look quite different depending on one’s perspective: an orthodox Christian safe in Constantinople bewailing the loss of territory...or a Monophysite happy to be liberated from Byzantine oppression.”<sup>64</sup> Brock’s reference to a “sense of relief” helps to clarify the difference between supposing that the anti-Chalcedonians supported the Arabs or whether they simply welcomed the shift in power, the latter being the more likely occurrence.<sup>65</sup> Kennedy notes, “There is no evidence that...the Monophysites of Syria actually co-operated with the Islamic conquests. What can be said is that they felt little enthusiasm for the Byzantine cause.”<sup>66</sup> Kennedy also points out that by the time the Arabs came into Egypt, the Monophysite Egyptian Coptic Church had been under a severe persecution from Cyrus, the Bishop of Phasis. During the first conquest of Egypt under the military commander Amr, victory came to the Arabs due in part to the “passive attitude of the local people.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, there is evidence that leadership in the anti-Chalcedonian Churches as well as historians and chroniclers of an anti-Chalcedonian persuasion sought to paint the Arab invasion as God’s judgment against their persecutors. In the *Chronicle of 1234* the Syrian historian Dionysius declares,

However, the God of vengeance, [when] He saw the measure of the Romans’ sins was overflowing and that they were committing every sort of cruelty against our people and our churches, bringing our Confession to the verge of extinction, He stirred up the Sons of Ishmael and enticed them hither from the land of the south...By their hands we ac-

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<sup>63</sup> S.P. Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in Juynboll, 10.

<sup>64</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>65</sup> Tolan (Ibid., 45) echoes Brock’s comments, declaring that Monophysites “breathe[d] a collective sigh of relief. No longer subjected to pressure (and intermittent persecution) from Constantinople, they were granted broader religious freedoms by their new Muslim rulers.”

<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 64–65.

quired salvation. In this manner it was no light benefit for us to be delivered from the tyrannical rule of the Romans.<sup>68</sup>

Brock calls this interpretation, “The standard one in Monophysite circles”.<sup>69</sup> To be fair, the interpretation of God’s judgment was used by the Chalcedonians as well. Anastasios, for example, who was a supporter of Chalcedon, saw the Arab successes as punishment for the anti-Chalcedonian policies of Constans II (641-668).<sup>70</sup> Despite the reality that both sides used divine judgment to favor their own private theological leanings—an assumption that permeated all of Christendom, and will be mentioned again in chapter two—the anti-Chalcedonians were the only ones who actually perceived the Arab conquest in a somewhat favorable light, with the understanding that the new leadership would mean liberation from Byzantine oppression.

### ***1.3 John Damascene: his life and work***

Having detailed the historical backgrounds of the conquest itself, it is now fitting to introduce the reader to John Damascene with more detail. It is important to first understand the difficulty in establishing exact certainties concerning dates in the life of John Damascene. There is no comprehensive account of John’s life. There is a *vita* in Arabic, translated by John of Jerusalem, yet some sections of the work raise questions of authenticity.<sup>71</sup> There are other *vitae* but authenticity and authority are again problematic. Authorship is also difficult to determine, and two of the *vitae* are anonymous.<sup>72</sup> An-

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<sup>68</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 236-37/185, cited in Jan J. van Ginkel, “The Perception and Presentation of the Arab Conquest in Syriac Historiography: How did the Changing Social Position of the Syrian Orthodox Community Influence the Account of their Historiographers?” in Emmanouela, Swanson, and Thomas, *The Encounter*, 177. Also see Brock, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Brock, 11. Also see Tolan, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> John of Jerusalem identifies himself as the translator. Whether this is the Patriarch who died in 969 or John VI (838-842) or John VII (964-66) of Jerusalem is uncertain. See Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 32-35.

<sup>72</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 36-37.



other problem comes in the attempt to date John Damascene's birth and death. Most place his birth at 675, while others prefer a range between 655 and 660 based on the presupposition that John Damascene was acquainted with Caliph Yazid I.<sup>73</sup> Sahas, however, puts forth an excellent argument for an earlier date. One of the aforementioned anonymous *vitae* indicates that when John was twelve, his father Ibn Mansur met Cosmas, an Italian monk and captured slave who was brought into the market in Damascus. Upon recognizing Cosmas' Greek background and education, Ibn Mansur requested permission from the caliph to free the monk so that his sons could receive a Greek education.<sup>74</sup> Sahas notes, "Theophanes records a Muslim expedition against Sicily in the year 664, in which many people were captured and taken to Damascus".<sup>75</sup> If Cosmas came to Damascus that same year, and John was twelve years of age, that would place his birth date at 652. The introduction of Cosmas explains John Damascene's familiarity with Greek categories of philosophy and theology. His education would have included "rhetoric, physics, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy, and theology".<sup>76</sup>

The topic of John Damascene's education raises another question that will be useful when analyzing his work on Islam. It is whether or not John had an education in Arabic prior to his Greek education from Cosmas. Sahas endorses the affirmative on the question, pointing out that it was likely that he received the same education that the other children under the caliph received. The previously mentioned anonymous *vita* that tells of the account of Cosmas indicates that Cosmas' freedom was requested by Ibn Mansur so that his children could learn "not only the books of the Saracens (taV twN Sarakhwnn biblouV), but those of the Greeks as well."<sup>77</sup> It would seem likely then that John Damascene was acquainted with and perhaps even memorized "the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature as

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 40.

well as Arabian poetry”.<sup>78</sup> Further evidence lies in the work of Constantine Acropolite who, in his *Sermon* on John Damascene, honours him for having learned the Greek language rapidly through history, mythology and other elements of Greek education.<sup>79</sup> That Constantine Acropolite would specifically congratulate John Damascene on the speed on which he acquired his knowledge of Greek further supports the idea that he was under an Arabic education for the first twelve years of his life.<sup>80</sup> It has even been suggested that perhaps John went to school with Prince Yazid I, which would not be impossible considering Ibn Mansur’s connections within the caliphate.<sup>81</sup> An education in Arabic would then require that John Damascene was fluent in both Arabic and Greek. Sahas defends this thesis and it is indeed quite plausible. If one dates John Damascene’s departure from the caliph’s court into the monastery at St. Sabas in 724—as Sahas insists—or even the earlier date of 718, given by Joseph Nasrallah, it still places John Damascene in the caliph’s court after the reforms of Abd al-Malik (d. 705). Al-Malik officially instituted the use of Arabic in the court; his son Walid I (d. 715) continued that reform. Vaglieri notes that any employee of the court had to learn Arabic to keep his post.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, Cameron points out that the monastery of St. Sabas was “a highly cosmopolitan place during the eighth and ninth centuries”.<sup>83</sup> Arabic would have been used at St. Sabas due to the Bedouins living near the monastery and the Arab background of some of the monks.<sup>84</sup> It is therefore quite likely that John Damascene had a grasp of both Arabic and Greek.

An examination of John Damascene’s involvement with and function in the court of the caliph will be helpful here. Ibn Mansur

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Vaglieri, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Averil Cameron *The Church in the Byzantine Dark Ages* (London: Friends of Dr. Williams’s Library, 1993), 8.

<sup>84</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 47.

had held a position in the financial administration of Heraclius at the time of the Arab conquest. When the Arabs came to power, Ibn Mansur remained in his position.<sup>85</sup> After Ibn Mansur's death, John Damascene became secretary to the caliph, which was a promotion from his father's position.<sup>86</sup> The Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council indicate that John's position involved fiscal administration.<sup>87</sup> The Greek *vita* refers to John's position as *prwtosumbouloV*, meaning, "head advisor".<sup>88</sup> The exact meaning is difficult to ascertain, but it can be said that John Damascene certainly held a position of importance in the caliphate. John served during the rules of Abd al-Malik (684-705), Walid I (705-715), Sulayman (715-717), and perhaps Umar II (717-720). Determining whether John Damascene served under later caliphs is completely contingent on where one dates John Damascene's departure to St. Sabas. Considering Yazid II's (720-724) stringent iconoclasm, this author finds Sahas' dating of 724 to be unrealistic and instead supports Nasrallah's date of 718.<sup>89</sup>

This chapter discusses the role of the Arab conquests in shaping John Damascene's context. The new regime instituted reforms and a new Islamic theocracy, and these are changes that happened outside of and were imposed on the Christian community. The next two chapters will focus on changes and paradigms within the Christian community that are significant to grasping a picture of John's context. One of the most significant ideas that did a great deal to shape the context of John Damascene was the radical shift in how the Christian community dealt with the death of an empire thought to be holy and incorruptible.

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<sup>85</sup> Kennedy, 87.

<sup>86</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 42.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> The date of 718 is also supported in David Thomas, "Christian Theologians and New Questions," in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 258.

## 2 The crisis of faith for the Eastern Church

### 2.1 Introduction: wrath and reason

History has shown that the political backdrops of culture have had a strong influence on Christianity's self-identity. How Christians in a particular century would define the mission and nature of the Church often depended on the events happening around them. The definition of the Church was often guided by the context of the culture. For example, before Constantine, the Church's self image revolved around martyrdom. The faithful Christian who endured to the end was seen as the victor who was due additional celestial blessings in eternity. After Constantine, the Church was seen as triumphant, and her victory was a victory of worldly power and imperial recognition. It was a victory of the "God-beloved emperors"<sup>90</sup> over and against the vicious emperors of old who had persecuted the Church, as well as a spiritual victory over the Jewish faith and the Jews' claims to divine authority. The Church and state were united under the emperor and the success of the empire meant the success of the Church.

However, the Church in the East experienced a radical shift in self-image during the failures to withstand invasion in the sixth and seventh centuries. The fall of the Christian state introduced a problem for the Christian Church that begged for an explanation. After the fall of Antioch to the Persians in 540, Procopius confessed, "I am unable to understand why indeed it should be the will of God to exalt on high the fortunes of a man or a place, and then to cast them down for no cause which appears to us. For it is wrong to say that God does not do all things with reason."<sup>91</sup> The search for that reason then led to answers from leaders in the Christian community.

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<sup>90</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, IX.9.1, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great and Orations in Praise of Constantine*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 363.

<sup>91</sup> Procopius, *Wars* II. 10.4-5, cited in David M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 41.

For Christians in seventh-century Jerusalem and Damascus, being defeated by the Persian and Arab armies was not just history; it was a spiritual commentary. The Orthodox Church saw their new rulers as a demonstration of the wrath of God. The cause of that wrath and the solution to this problem proved to be difficult things for the Church to pinpoint.

## ***2.2 The doctrine of triumphalism***

Though the primary focus of this work is the Arab invasions and the Church's response to them, the latter parts of the Persian Wars are profoundly important in that they tilled the soil for the Church's response to the Arabs in the late 630's and beyond. The Sassanid wars were certainly not the first failures of Roman imperial strength in this age, but they proved to be one of the last in a series of failures, so they marked the start of a significant shift in the Church's thinking. The Church had, up until this point, used their political and military victories to evince the truth of Christianity and its victory over and against Judaism, paganism and heresy. Olster defines this doctrine of triumphalism as having three central themes: "That victory demonstrated divine power, that divine favour guaranteed victory, and that the emperor was the empire's mediator for, and personal recipient of divine favour."<sup>92</sup> Triumphalism meant that "Constantinople and the Empire [were] under the protection of God, Christ and the saints."<sup>93</sup> It can be seen in statements like that of Procopius, who wrote that the Persian king Chosroes II made war "not against Justinian, the Roman emperor, nor against any other man, but only against the God whom the Christians worship".<sup>94</sup> The rhetoric of triumphalism was known by enemies of the empire and even used against them. After conquering Jerusalem, Chosroes II wrote,

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<sup>92</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> Paul J. Alexander, "The Strength of the Empire and Capital as Seen Through Byzantine Eyes," *Speculum*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (July 1962): 345.

<sup>94</sup> J. Haury and G. Werth, eds. *Wars, Opera Omnia* (Leipzig, 1962), II. 26.2, cited in Olster, 32.

I have thrashed the Greeks, and you pretend to rely on your God. Why has he not preserved from my hands Caesarea, Jerusalem and great Alexandria? Since your hope is vain, do not deceive yourself; for how can this Christ, who could not save himself from the hands of the Jews and was killed by them and attached to the cross, save you from my hands?<sup>95</sup>

The Christian community saw Chosroes as a direct threat to Christ. Olster goes so far as to call Christ “the patron of Roman victory”.<sup>96</sup> Within the Church, this one idea grew at the expense of others.<sup>97</sup> In fact, the missionary aspect of the Church and Roman imperial protection and expansion became one in the same. The Persians were seen less as a religious threat, than as a military threat, and the need to convert them was not heavily emphasized. The invading outsiders were seen rather as a threat to the imperial order, which had been laid down by God.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the conduit of God’s favour rested with the emperor, who was seen as “the Lord’s Anointed.”<sup>99</sup> The office of the emperor was not a human institution, but an image of the divine ruler.<sup>100</sup> Socrates, the Church historian of the fifth century, wrote that the Emperor Theodosius II was able to withstand the barbarian invasion because he “immediately, as his custom was, committed the management of the matter to God; and continuing in earnest prayer, he speedily obtained what he sought.”<sup>101</sup> The union of Church and state meant that “Christ was the god of victory, patron of a Christian Roman race, whose

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<sup>95</sup> Evagrius, *History* III, 79-80, cited in Olster, 42. Olster points out that the letter may not be completely authentic, but there is certainty that Chosroes II wrote something of this nature, thick with accusations that the Christian God had failed to protect his people.

<sup>96</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 32.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander, 345.

<sup>98</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander, 346.

<sup>100</sup> David M. Olster, “Justinian, Imperial Rhetoric and the Church,” *Byzantinoslavica*, 50 (1989): 167.

<sup>101</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.43, trans. A.C. Zenos, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 2: Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 176.

favour guaranteed victory; the emperor was the Romans' mediator for, and recipient of, his aid."<sup>102</sup>

The success of the Visigoths and Huns in the West, followed by the Persian victories in the East began to introduce serious questions to the Church's claims to a monopoly on religious truth justified by the strength of their empire. "It was this triumphalist association of victory, divine power, and divine favour that seventh-century defeats challenged."<sup>103</sup> The initial response was faithfulness in spite of defeat, and "Christian triumphalism bent but it did not break".<sup>104</sup> The reason was that just as the emperor provided a personality to keep the ideas of triumphalist victory intact, he also was the reason for defeat.<sup>105</sup> Defeat at the hands of the Sassanids was seen to be divine retribution for Phocas' usurping of the throne in 602. A 615 letter from the Constantinopolitan Senate to the Sassanid King Chosroes II reveals that the Christians even excused Chosroes' invasion as "an understandable reaction" to Phocas' murder of Maurice.<sup>106</sup> Heraclius then was seen as one who would rescue the empire by returning them to the place of divine favour.<sup>107</sup> Sozomen even blamed natural disasters on Julian's failures. He wrote, "It is however, very obvious that, through the reign of [Julian], God gave manifest tokens of his displeasure and permitted many calamities to befall several of the provinces of the Roman Empire."<sup>108</sup> Thus the sins of the emperor became the framework for explaining defeat at the hands of the Sassanids and those who came before them. Olster comments, "Thus, defeat need not compromise the triumphalist ideal. If one emperor's vice led to disaster, an-

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<sup>102</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 43.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.2, trans. Chester D. Hartranft, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 2: Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories* eds., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 347.

other's virtue could return God's favour and restore the empire."<sup>109</sup> Heraclius enjoyed only a short period of being hailed as the saviour of the empire. In the time to come, following the Arab invasions, some chroniclers would find Heraclius' incestuous marriage to his niece to be the cause of Arab victory.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Maximus the Confessor, while on trial, suggested that Heraclius' invention of Monothelism—an emperor's attempt to resolve the Chalcedonian schism—was the reason for the success of the Arab invasions.<sup>111</sup> The emperor's personal theological leanings were a significant factor in the empire's failures or successes. Alexander notes that

...it was always possible to account for setbacks on the battlefield or for temporary victories of an unorthodox theological doctrine by considering them examples of another fainting spell or "falling asleep" soon to be followed by the reign of another restorer who would reawaken the state.<sup>112</sup>

During the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the hope of imperial restoration was very strong, and Christians anticipated that martial victory would soon be theirs once again.

### ***2.3 Turning inward***

Certainly these questions and struggles were not new. After Rome fell in 410, Augustine of Hippo answered the problem by unravelling the ideal of the theocracy by insisting that the church and the empire are not necessarily connected.<sup>113</sup> Augustine defined the city of man, or the empire, as distinct—though not entirely cut off—from the city of God, or the church.<sup>114</sup> Augustine saw that Christian

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<sup>109</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 35.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>111</sup> Anastasius Apocrisarius, *Relatio motionis inter meaximum et principes*, PG 90.112a-c, cited in Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 37.

<sup>112</sup> Alexander, 356.

<sup>113</sup> Walter Emil Kaegi Jr., *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 147-48.

<sup>114</sup> Marthinus Versfeld, *A Guide to The City of God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 60-61, 63. More specifically, the *Civitas Dei* is the Church, triumphal in heaven.



monotheism was being identified with the Roman monarchy, a reality he found to be scandalizing.<sup>115</sup> Augustine's work did not end triumphalism, and it is evident that he permitted a hope of restoration.<sup>116</sup> However, Augustine is significant because he laid the foundation for a radical shift in the Church's philosophy of history. His work had a profound influence on Christian thought, probably including the leaders in the East, as some of his books were translated into Greek.<sup>117</sup> Augustine was troubled by the depression and dissolution that had settled over the Christian community in light of Roman defeat. *City of God* was more than a reaction to the fall of Rome; it was Augustine's reaction to the reaction of Christians around him.<sup>118</sup> He focused on the sovereignty of God as the final explanation for all things, that God was not only sovereign over every person and event in history, but also that God's goodness ensured that everything worked for the good of his people.<sup>119</sup> Augustine saw the fall of Rome as an opportunity for repentance, and he was frustrated that many were instead blaming Christianity itself for the fall of Rome.<sup>120</sup> He laboured to remind his readers that this earth is nothing more than a temporary pilgrimage; the Christian's true abode is in heaven, as members of the heavenly city.<sup>121</sup> Fur-

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<sup>115</sup> Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background* (Washington, DC: The Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966), 2:725-26.

<sup>116</sup> Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 73.

<sup>117</sup> Edward L Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 185. Kaegi (Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome*, 157) insists that Eastern Christians would not have known Augustine's work and therefore would have been forced to develop their own, unique explanation for Roman defeat. However, Kaegi is generally dealing with 6<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantium, and it is plausible that Augustine's thought would have influenced Eastern thought by the seventh and eighth centuries.

<sup>118</sup> Edward L Smither, "Augustine the Exile and the City of God," (paper presented at the First International Conference, University of Tunis-el Manar, December 4, 2004), 2.

<sup>119</sup> Deane, 70-71.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>121</sup> Smither, "Augustine the Exile," 6.

thermore, “even if the Roman Empire fell, the city of God would not.”<sup>122</sup> Augustine understood that no city of man is eternal, and no earthly empire is impervious to defeat. Rome was not the first great city to fall, and it certainly would not be the last.<sup>123</sup> This perspective eventually began to dominate because the fifth century proved to be only the beginning of Roman defeat. As the Persian Wars drew to a close and the Arabs would soon be invading, there began to be a shift in the method for explaining the failures of the “Christian empire.” This shift did not completely dissolve previous methods, but it was necessitated by the reality that such clichés of historical interpretation were no longer satisfying explanations for the events at hand.<sup>124</sup> In contrast to the triumphalism that had been in vogue for about three centuries, the early seventh century saw the beginning of disenchantment with the Roman Empire. The result was a kind of emptiness—a lack of an answer to the question of why this was happening. The absence of that answer was still a problem that needed to be addressed in the Christian congregations. Olster puts it well when he points out, “Christians did not reject triumphalism because it was insufficiently Christian, nor because of a long-standing dialectic of Greco-Roman and Christian ideologies. Defeat’s bitter reality made triumphalism ludicrously out-of-step with experience, opening a gap between rhetoric and reality that Christians sought to close...”<sup>125</sup>

The most significant answers to these questions came from Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (560-638). Sophronius’ work both as a writer and a leader in the Church is extremely helpful in giving a picture of how Christians perceived their losses to the Persians. Sophronius’ work exemplifies the growing divisions within the empire due in part to the conflicts between Church and state, as

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>124</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 51.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 44. Alexander (Alexander, 356) places the “first expression of dissatisfaction with the prevailing self-image” in 1071, when the Byzantines are defeated by the Seljuq Turks at Manzikert. However, Sophronius’ work clearly demonstrates a dissatisfaction long before 1071, as will be demonstrated below.

well as the death of triumphalism. Sophronius recorded disputes with Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople, over the issue of Monoenergism. At the time, Sergius had the support of Heraclius.<sup>126</sup> The disputes were a source of great frustration for Sophronius, who began to wrestle with the question of the state's involvement with the Church. Sophronius was primarily concerned for his flock in Jerusalem, so he held his peace with Constantinople. He focused instead on the struggles that the Christians around him were experiencing in light of the empire's failure to consistently have victory over her foreign adversaries. Sophronius attempted to answer the question: "How was Christ himself, the giver of all good things, and the chorus leader of this, our splendour, blasphemed by Gentile mouths?"<sup>127</sup> Church leaders prior to Sophronius had attempted to use martyrdom as a motif for victory, not unlike the first and second century days before Constantine.<sup>128</sup> Early in his writings, there are strong elements of a martyrology that is consistent with his contemporaries, and it might be seen as a kind of agreement with Antiochus. His *Orations*, however, takes a sharp turn and shifts his focus away from martyrology to internal purity of the Church and of the individual Christian. Sophronius witnessed the transition of power as the Arabs took Byzantium. The Arabs established themselves as the new regime, conquering the empire and ending Sassanid reign. Sophronius surrendered Jerusalem in 638 to the Arabs, that action alone offering a commentary on the reality that the rhetoric of triumphalism was over. Sophronius knew that the Persian siege of Jerusalem in 614 had been a harsh and bloody defeat; in order to avoid a similar conflict, he met with Caliph Umar to negotiate the surrender. Surrender of the holy city without a fight destroyed any remnants of imperial triumphalism among the Jerusalem Christians. Sophronius' *Orations* makes use of imperial metaphors, but no longer are they focused on a physical empire. Instead, Sophronius

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>127</sup> Sophronius, *Oration on the Holy Baptism*, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Analecta Ierosolimitikes Staxuologias*, vol. 5 (Petersburg, 1898), 166, cited in Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 100.

<sup>128</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 100.

speaks of the internal battle to conquer sin and be holy. Olster writes, ‘Sophronius did not offer his congregation the hope that the Empire of Rome would return, but the hope that ‘we might become rulers in [Christ’s] Empire.’”<sup>129</sup> The use of imperial language would have been familiar to Sophronius’ audience, but his work is a dramatic shift toward a metaphor for the individual struggle, and the “invisible war” over sin.<sup>130</sup> Sophronius focuses intently on the internal battles of the Christian, Christ’s destruction of the power of Satan, and Christ’s intercession on the Christian’s behalf, offering security in a heavenly empire, not an earthly empire.<sup>131</sup> Sophronius’ tool for uniting and encouraging the Church was not the imperial sword or the martyr’s commitment, but rather the Holy Mass. Christian liturgy became the banner of Sophronius’ “empire” and his call was for Christians to be faithfully present in services, celebrations, and participation in the sacraments.<sup>132</sup> His urging to those around him was to “hurry to possess this union with [Christ] than which nothing is more honourable”.<sup>133</sup>

Sophronius still affirmed that the success of the Arab invaders was in fact the judgment of God. The difference was that he framed it to be judgment against the sins of the people and against the heresy that threatened the orthodox faith, not against the sins and shortcomings of the emperor. It was not just a struggle to be a pure Christian that concerned Sophronius. He understood that the Church was in danger from within, from the attack of heresy and anti-Chalcedonian dogma. Hoyland comments that the invasion happening all around did not distract the preachers and bishops of

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>130</sup> Sophronius, *Christmas Oration*, ed. H. Usener, *Weihnachts predigt von Sophronius, Rheinisches Museum* n.f. 41, 9 (1886), 509:28-510.1, cited in Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 102. Olster calls this imperial language, but it is probably more correctly seen as the Pauline conception of the Christian life as a battle against sin, a perspective common to Christian thought since the first and second centuries.

<sup>131</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 102. It is difficult to conceive that Sophronius came to these conclusions completely independent of Augustine’s influence.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>133</sup> Sophronius, *Exaltation of the Cross Oration*, PG 87, col. 3309a, cited in Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 103.

the day. “Indeed, it spurred them to greater efforts, for it was precisely because of these false beliefs and schisms that the Christian community was thus afflicted, as is asserted by almost every writer on the subject in this period.”<sup>134</sup> Olster summarizes that “[b]odily impurity and heresy caused the punishments that God heaped on the Jerusalemites, not political sins.”<sup>135</sup>

Sophronius focused most intently on heresy in his *Feast of Purification Oration*. As was typical with Sophronius, the central vehicle of unity was the liturgy of the Church and the problem facing the Church was heresy.<sup>136</sup> In the sermon, Sophronius condemned Eutyches and Nestorius, identifying them not only as separate from the people of God, but also as individuals who seriously threaten the orthodox congregation’s unity with Christ. He therefore called his congregation to purity and contrasted them with the heretics, who threatened purity. It is helpful to know that Sophronius was not focusing on purity in the sense of sinlessness. Rather, his chief concern was doctrinal and liturgical purity. Additionally, his *Christmas Oration* showed a different side. Written more than a year before the 636 Battle of Yarmuk, Sophronius was preaching to a depressed congregation. The Arab forces were moving in and Bethlehem had been taken, preventing these congregants from participating in their annual Christmas pilgrimage. Sophronius’ encouragement to them cantered on internal purification from sin. He wrote:

Whence we perform a celebration in distress...I accordingly call, preach and beseech your great longing for Christ himself, that we might amend ourselves, howevermuch [*sic*] we can, and shine with repentance and be pure in our conversion...For this, if we might live a life that is beloved and friendly to God, we would rejoice at the fall of our scourge, the Saracens, and we would shortly observe their destruction, and see their utter devastation. For their bloodthirsty sword would be plunged into their hearts, their bow shivered, and their arrows struck in them.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 104.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>137</sup> Sophronius, *Christmas Orations*, 514.29–515.9, cited in Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 107.

A more imperialistic tone was taken here, which reflects the reality that Sophronius did hope for the removal of the Arabs, but the hope of imperial restoration is not found in his work. That is what set Sophronius apart from his contemporaries. He shifted the hope of his people to unity with Christ through the liturgy and purification from sin, not through the hope of political and martial dominance. His chief concern was not whether it was Christians in power or Arabs in power, but rather whether the Church could envision being freed from heresy and false doctrine.

Jacob of Edessa provides another example of this shift in thinking. Jacob was appointed bishop in Edessa in 684. Once elevated to the rank of bishop, Jacob strictly adhered to Church rulings and regulations. He enforced these with zeal, bringing him into conflict with his fellow bishops, especially Julian the Patriarch. The pressure from these parties forced him to resign after four years, whereupon he took up residence at the monastery of Mar Jacob at Kayshum. Once there, he began to speak out against “certain people who transgress the Law of God and trample on the canons of the church”.<sup>138</sup> Jacob had a strong concern for discipline within the Church. Hoyland points out that a large portion of Jacob’s work deals with “purity, both in liturgical and social practice”.<sup>139</sup> Specifically, Jacob was concerned with the purity of the Church in the sense of removing heresy or external pagan corruption. Hoyland’s explanation here is helpful: “In the social sphere this meant caution in one’s dealings with heretics and unbelievers. Thus, one should not make altar coverings, priests’ garments or drapes from cloth on which is embroidered the Muslim profession of faith.”<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, Jacob insisted that Church doors should be locked during services, lest “Muslims enter and mingle with the believers and disturb

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<sup>138</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 160. This is the title of a tract by Jacob.

<sup>139</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 161.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

them and laugh at the holy Mysteries".<sup>141</sup> Hoyland points out that Jacob's advice always centers on purity and separation.<sup>142</sup>

The seventh-century decline of triumphalism was the result of disenchantment with the past explanations for Roman defeat. Sophronius' work marked the start of a radical shift in thinking for the Church. This movement toward a focus on spiritual purity produced a motivation to meet the enemies of Christianity on the intellectual battlefield, rather than the physical one.

#### ***2.4 For such a time as this:***

##### ***Apologies and disputations***

The decline of triumphalism led to the advent of a new context for interpreting defeat. Essentially, the Christian community began to focus on the purity of the faith and this led to a growth of apologetic material. The Muslims in power had undermined the doctrine of triumphalism, and as time went on, the faith of the Arabs became a more serious challenge to the Christian Church. The battles were now over issues of philosophy, theology and truth rather than over military victory and kingdom acquisition. Yet, into the late seventh century, there remained a remarkable absence of apologies, disputations, and dialogues between Christians and Muslims concerning the differences of their respective faiths. This has a great deal to do with the fact that the Christian community first perceived the Arabs to be a military force rather than a threat to the faith itself. Hoyland, while discussing the work of Theodotus of Amida (d. 698), comments, "The Muslims tend to be no more than a hostile background presence".<sup>143</sup> People fled the Arab invaders to avoid hardship. However, it was not until the eight century that the Arabs were universally perceived by the Christian community to be competition for religious truth, a perception that will be discussed below in chapter three. This growth in apologetics and polemics, because of competing religious truth claims, is significant because John

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<sup>141</sup> Jacob of Edessa, *Replies to John*, B9, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 162.

<sup>142</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 162.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

Damascene's work reflects the trends, questions, and debates that were unique and important in the context of the eighth century Arab Empire in Byzantium. This advent of apologetic material is the context of John Damascene's work and will be briefly examined here, focusing on two works: the dialogue of *Patriarch John I and an Arab Commander* (c.715), and the dialogue between *A Monk of Beth Hale and an Arab Notable* (c.717).

The dialogue of *Patriarch John I and an Arab Commander* is said to be the first dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim.<sup>144</sup> John Sedera is the Patriarch of Antioch (631-48) and the text includes seven questions asked by a Muslim *emir*. These questions deal with the nature of the Gospel, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the Trinity, the relationship between Christianity and the Law of Moses, and whether or not the Christian community subscribes to a particular code of law.<sup>145</sup> Of particular interest is the lack of a Christian victory at the text's conclusion. Instead, it ends with a focus on the Christian community which "prayed for the life and preservation of the blessed lord patriarch, and they praised and magnified God who gave the word of truth in abundance to his eloquent speech."<sup>146</sup> Hoyland notes, "On the Christian side...one senses an underlying purpose, namely to present a united front to the invaders: the Gospel is one, the Christian laws are coherent and the patriarch "spoke for all the assembly of Christians."<sup>147</sup> However, the dating of this work is highly contested and that reality supports the point being made here about the Christian community's new awareness of Islam. Dates given by the work itself place the dialogue during John's time as Patriarch in 633, 639 or 644.<sup>148</sup> Reinink points out, "The text demonstrates awareness of Islam as a new faith and of the need for Christians to rally together to meet this challenge. Such awareness...presupposes the Islamisation and Arabisation policies pursued by Abd al-Malik and Walid in

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 459-60.

<sup>146</sup> F. Nau, trans., *Un colloque*, 251/260, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 461.

<sup>147</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 462.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 464.



the years 691-705, and so puts our text into the first decades of the eighth century.”<sup>149</sup> Reinink’s placement of the text confirms the aforementioned idea that apologetic literature against Islam began to take significant strides in the context of the Christian community’s new resolve against heresy and opposing faiths.

The second example of Christian and Muslim dialogue from the early eighth century is that between *A Monk of Beth Hale and an Arab Notable*. The text contains some notes of introduction, describing the Arab as “one of the chief men before the emir... Maslama and by reason of a malady which he had, he came to us and remained with us for ten days. He spoke freely with us and debated much about our scriptures and their Qur’an.”<sup>150</sup> After terms for the debate are set, a series of questions are presented by the Arab, and the monk gives concise responses. Particularly interesting for this discussion is Maslama’s use of Islamic triumphalism. His first question to the monk was, “Is not our faith better than any faith that is on the heart... for we observe the commandments of Muhammad and the sacrifices of Abraham... And this is a sign that God loves us and is pleased with our faith, namely, that he gives us dominion over all religions and all peoples.”<sup>151</sup> The monk’s response is invaluable for this discussion because he rejected the validity of triumphalism when he replied, “There are and have been many other rulers in the world besides the Arabs.”<sup>152</sup> The Arab proceeded to ask questions concerning the New Covenant, the Trinity, the identity of Muhammad, the worship of the cross, and the direction to face during prayer.<sup>153</sup> The conclusion of the dialogue is quite spectacular; the Arab-Muslim is won over and admits the truth of Christianity, yet interestingly enough he still struggles with his own belief in triumphalism. He confesses, “Though I know that your faith is true, and that your way of thinking is superior to ours, what is the

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<sup>149</sup> Reinink, “Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature,” cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 465.

<sup>150</sup> Monk of Beth Hale, *Disputation*, fol. 1a-b cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 466.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, fols. 1b-2a, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 467.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* This is consistent with Augustine’s perspective mentioned above.

<sup>153</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 467-68.

reason that God has delivered you into our hands, and that you are led by us like sheep to the slaughter, and that your bishops and priests are killed and the rest crushed and enslaved night and day by the king's taxes, which are harsher than death."<sup>154</sup> The monk responds by quoting Deuteronomy 9:5, "Not because of your righteousness has God brought you into the land of Promise, but because of the wickedness of the inhabitants." Additionally, the monk cites the New Testament teaching that chastisement is the act of God, which he bestows upon those he loves, to discipline them as children.<sup>155</sup> This response is stunning when it is considered that only a century earlier Christians had used the rhetoric of triumphalism to defend their own faith. Now, the Christian community had prepared an apologetic completely absent of sixth-century triumphalism, even with a goal to respond to an Islamic brand of triumphalism. Hoyland observes that the work itself is probably a fabrication when one considers the Arab's speedy conversion.<sup>156</sup> Yet the work is still useful because, like the previous dialogue discussed above, this work demonstrates a familiarity with Islam and a consistency with the movement to defend the purity of the faith. Hoyland suggests that the work comes after 717, placing it in the earlier part of the Ummayyad Dynasty.

This trend towards a focus on internal purity is why John Damascene wrote his great work, *The Fount of Knowledge*. The first and second sections of the work, which focus on philosophy and heresy respectively, are written so that the reader will be competent to define the heresies of the day and embrace and articulate the orthodox faith. John's concern, as will be shown below in the fourth chapter, is not the restoration of a Christian empire but rather the purity of the Church, the removal of heresy, and the Christian community's need for a thorough exposition of the faith. These developments in the thinking of the Church ultimately proved to do her a great service by permitting Christianity to persevere in times of difficulty.

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<sup>154</sup> Monk of Beth Hale, *Disputation*, fol. 8a, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 468.

<sup>155</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 469.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the movement away from triumphalism and the growth of apologetic material did a great deal to set the stage for John Damascene's work, a picture of John's context would be incomplete without an examination of the secular context of his work. The Arab presence in Byzantium is a time in history that is enormously significant and often misunderstood. John wrote in the context of a culture that was changing, under the rule of an unfamiliar people with an unfamiliar faith. However, as John's work illustrates, the unfamiliar soon became familiar and the Christian community soon found themselves interacting with the Arabs on a regular basis

### **3 Christian-Arab relations during the Arab conquest**

#### ***3.1 Initial Christian perceptions of the Arab invaders***

Daniel Sahas has pointed out, "The dynamics of encounters between people of faith, especially conflicting faiths, are determined by personal predisposition and chemistry. But these are hardly ever recorded and one has to read between the lines of the written record, allowing imagination to fill the gaps."<sup>157</sup> Sahas' point is indeed correct and especially pertinent to this discussion of the social effects of the Arab conquest and how the Byzantines responded to and interacted with their new rulers. This is a key subject that will aid in an understanding of John's context. Here, the focus will be primarily on the Christian perception of the Arab invaders. The perceptions of the Christian community regarding their new overlords varied but, from different accounts from the people of this time, it is possible to construct an understanding of how the Christians viewed the Arabs in both secular and theological contexts. This is especially helpful in light of the modern assumptions about Islam during this time, imagining the Arabs to be a band of bloodthirsty warmongers. What will be shown here is that apart from the invasion and takeover itself, life under Muslim rule in the late sixth and early

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<sup>157</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, "The Face to Face Encounter Between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph 'Umar Ibn Al-Khattab: Friends or Foes?" in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 33.

seventh centuries was relatively peaceful and that Christians had a great many freedoms.

The invasion itself is probably the foundation for the image of Arab Muslims being a bloodthirsty people under a barbaric faith. There is no question that the shift in power that occurred in the early 630s was a bloody transition. For example, a seventh-century manuscript containing the gospel of Mark contains a few lines scribbled on the front flyleaf. Some of it reads:

In January... many villages were ravaged by the killing of [the Arabs of] Muhammad (*Muhma*) and many people were slain and [taken prisoner]... On the tenth [of August] the Romans fled from... Damascus [and there were killed] many [people], some ten thousand.<sup>158</sup>

A manuscript from the British library (Add.14, 643) has been attributed to Thomas the Presbyter of Syria who probably wrote it around 640.<sup>159</sup> Specifically, Thomas mentions the slaughtering of monks by the Arabs “in the year 947 [that is, 635-36].”<sup>160</sup> Thomas also makes mention of a battle in 634: “Some 4000 poor villagers of Palestine were killed there, Christians, Jews and Samaritans. The Arabs ravaged the whole region.”<sup>161</sup> Another mention of the brutalities of the Arab conquests is found in an anonymous Nestorian Chronicle known as the *Anonymous Guidi* or the *Khuzistan Chronicle*.<sup>162</sup> At one point, the chronicle details the capture of Shush and Shushtar, mentioning that the Arabs dug tunnels into the city (with help from those inside, interestingly enough) and that once inside they proceeded in their task of “spilling blood as if it were water. They killed the Exegete of the city and the bishop of Hormiz Ardashir, along with the rest of the students, priests and deacons,

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<sup>158</sup> *Fragment on the Arab Conquests* II.8-11, 17-23, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 117. Bracketed text indicates text that is unreadable and therefore conjectured,

<sup>159</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 118-119.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas the Presbyter *Chronicle*, ed. E.W. Brooks, trans. J.B. Chabot (CSCO 3-4 scr. syri 3-4: Paris, 1904), 148, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 119.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-48, cited in Hoyland *Seeing Islam*, 120.

<sup>162</sup> Hoyland (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 182) mentions that both titles are used among scholars. Guidi is the name of the first editor of the chronicle, and Khuzistan is the most likely place of origin for the text.

shedding their blood in the very [Church] sanctuary.”<sup>163</sup> Sahas mentions the words of Sophronius who speaks of his shock at the “revolt...of all the barbarians, especially the Saracens...who with raw and cruel disposition, impious and godless audacity were ravaging the Christian community”.<sup>164</sup>

The horrors of the invasion are well documented from sources like those given above, yet to be fair it should be pointed out that the horror and intensity of a forced transition of power is hardly a rarity in any part of the world. These writings are helpful because they constitute some of the first mentions of the Arab conquests from the perspective of the Christian community. What is significant about these accounts is that none of them suggests that the Arabs were killing in the name of God or that the battles were fought because the Byzantine inhabitants refused to convert to Islam. For them, the seventh-century Arab conquest had little to do with religion, and more to do with kingdom expansion. As the Arabs began to see success and gain land and power, there is a shift in how they were referenced in writing. The Christian community began to perceive that the Arabs were bringing with them a religion, which was initially perceived as barbaric. For instance, a Coptic homily from the 640’s admonished Christians with the words, ‘Let us not fast like the God-killing Jews, nor fast like the Saracens who are oppressors, who give themselves up to prostitution, massacre and lead into captivity the sons of men saying: “We both fast and pray.”’<sup>165</sup> The author’s vitriol is evident here, and there is, as Hoyland puts it, “no love of Muslim rule.”<sup>166</sup> More importantly, however, there has been a significant change from the Arabs being viewed as a great military power to being viewed as an immoral barbarian horde. Note, however, that the focus remains upon sins

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<sup>163</sup> I. Guidi, ed. and trans., *Chronicon anonymum* (CSCO 1-2 scr. syri 1-2: Paris, 1903), 36-37, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 184.

<sup>164</sup> PG, vol. LXXXVII, cols 3148-3200, cited in Sahas, “Face to Face Encounter,” in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 34.

<sup>165</sup> Henri de Vis, ed. and trans., *Homily on the Saints of Babylon*, §36, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 121.

<sup>166</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 121.

that any pagan might be guilty of, and there has been no attack on Islam specifically. The mid sixth-century Byzantines had lived under Sassanid rule in the century before, so the invasion of a foreign people was not entirely novel to their experience.

In an effort to preserve Christian influence during this time, it was not uncommon for some writers to count the Arab invasion as a sign of apocalypse and the end of the world. The book of Daniel was often interpreted in the context of seventh century events. Muslims were thought to be the “precursors of antichrist”.<sup>167</sup> One anonymous commentator wrote, “We see that the fourth beast, namely Rome, is brought low and ravaged by nations, and henceforth one must expect the ten horns...after the humbling of the fourth beast, that is Rome, nothing else is expected, except the confusion of the nations, the ten horns and the coming of the blasphemous and deceiving devil.”<sup>168</sup> The Arabs are identified here as “the eleventh, little horn,” a very significant role in the drama of the end times.<sup>169</sup> There was a surge in apocalyptic literature in the latter parts of the seventh century (680s and 690s) and this might at first seem to be an oddity. However, the second *fitna* (683-92) brought turmoil into the empire, which took apocalyptic fervour to a high point. During this time, a Syriac apocalypse was composed, which is attributed to Methodius, Bishop of Olympus (d. 312).<sup>170</sup> The *Pseudo-Methodius Apocalypse* predicts that, “...the kingdom of the Persians will be uprooted, and...the sons of Ishmael will come out from the desert of Yathrib.” The text goes on to speak of the horrors committed by these invaders: “captivity and slaughter”, “exact-ing tribute even from the dead who lie in the ground;” “they will not pity the sick nor have compassion for the weak.”<sup>171</sup> The work compares these “sons of Ishmael” to the Midianite Kings in Judges 7-

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<sup>167</sup> Tolan, 45.

<sup>168</sup> V. Deroche, ed. and trans., “Juifs et chretiens,” 183; V.5, 193, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 533.

<sup>169</sup> Tolan, 45.

<sup>170</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 264. Hoyland points out that the likely date of composition is 690, by a Melkite or Monophysite author.

<sup>171</sup> Ps-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, XIII.2, XIII.4, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 264.

8.<sup>172</sup> Reinink explains, “The explanation [is] that the Arabs, like the Midianites in the time of Gideon, are used by God as a temporary scourge wherewith to punish His children for their sins,”<sup>173</sup> yet again demonstrating the Byzantine motif of divine judgment of sin as an explanation for the fall of the empire.

In spite of the use of religious and apocalyptic language to describe the Arab Invasion, the Christian community did not yet perceive their new rulers as challengers of Christianity. Indeed, this was likely due in part to the reality that the conquests, from the Arab perspective, were less about conversion and more about establishing an empire for the fame of *Allah*. Sahas comments, “The Muslims were, primarily, concerned with establishing themselves successfully as rulers in these new territories with a Christian majority.”<sup>174</sup> In fact, Dionysius’ military account of the conquest contains very few references to religion, one of them found here when he writes that Arab troops were given the order to

...kill neither the aged, nor the little child, nor the woman. Wherever you are welcomed by a city or people, make a solemn pact with them and give them reliable guarantees that they will be ruled according to their laws and according to the practices which obtained among them before our time. They will contract with you to [pay tribute], then they will be left alone in their confession and in their country. But as for those who do not welcome you, make war on them. Be careful to abide by all the just laws and commandments which have been given to you by God through our prophet, lest you excite the wrath of God.<sup>175</sup>

The invasions themselves, though bloody and barbaric, were not about conversion by the sword but were rather about establishing a uniquely Arab Kingdom that was unified by the Muslim faith, a faith

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<sup>172</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 266.

<sup>173</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink, “Political Power and Right Religion in the East Syrian Disputation Between a Monk of Bet Hale and an Arab Notable,” in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 166.

<sup>174</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 25.

<sup>175</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 235/184, cited in van Ginkel, “The Perception and Presentation,” in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 178.

which was not necessarily imposed on the land's previous inhabitants.

### ***3.2 Conversion, apostasy and martyrology***

As already mentioned, the brutalities of conversion by the sword in Islam are well known, but it would be wrong to suggest that they were common at this point in history. Intentional persecution of Christianity at the hands of the Muslims is scarce until the ninth century.<sup>176</sup> Conversion by the sword was actually a later occurrence and is virtually absent from the experience of the Christian communities in Byzantium during the seventh century. During his time as caliph in Damascus, Mu'awiya I is quoted as having said, "I never use my voice if I can use my money, never my whip if I can use my voice, never my sword if I can use my whip; but, if I have to use my sword, I will."<sup>177</sup> In fact, historical records indicate that the Arabs initially had little to no concern that the Byzantines should become Muslims. Islam was, in its early years, a religion by Arabs and for Arabs. Kennedy dismisses this idea, insisting, "Islam was to be the religion of all humanity, not just the Arabs, and there was no reason why the...*umma*...should be confined to the Arabic-speaking peoples; the Islamic conquests were a natural continuation of the Prophet's work".<sup>178</sup> While justification for the conquests might be argued from a number of different angles, Kennedy's position may be without solid support. Hawting notes that

...the Umayyads and Arab tribesman who first conquered the Middle East regarded their religion as largely exclusive of the conquered peoples. There was no sustained attempt to force or even persuade the conquered peoples to accept Islam, and it was assumed they would remain in their own communities paying taxes to support the conquerors.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, trans. David Maisel and David Littman (1985; repr. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2005), 61. Ye'or (Ye'or, 60) mentions one episode of persecution under Walid I.

<sup>177</sup> Hawting, 42.

<sup>178</sup> Kennedy, 49.

<sup>179</sup> Hawting, 4.



The reason for the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim was taxation. When Syria was conquered by the Arabs, Umar negotiated the surrender. The burden he placed upon Christians was not a demand for conversion, but rather a tax (*kahraj*).<sup>180</sup> Non-Muslims (*dhimmi*) were to pay a tax that guaranteed them protection.<sup>181</sup> Interestingly enough, this tax was lighter than that which they had paid to the Byzantine Empire.<sup>182</sup> The distinction was necessary because one privilege of being a Muslim at this time was freedom from paying taxes. The empire was supported by the taxation of the conquered people, who were to remain non-Muslim taxpayers.<sup>183</sup> In reality, one of the chief struggles of the caliphs was to keep too many Byzantines from joining the faith, and thus bankrupting the caliphate.<sup>184</sup> It was actually pressure from non-Muslims who wanted to join Islam that led to a more universalistic notion of Islam that, as Hawting points out, played a significant part in Muslim disdain for the Umayyad Dynasty.<sup>185</sup> Hawting summarizes the situation by saying:

The widespread acceptance of Islam caused a decrease in the revenues of the government, so the Umayyad rulers had a vested interest in preventing the conquered peoples from accepting Islam or forcing them to continue paying those taxes from which they claimed exemption as Muslims.<sup>186</sup>

This came to a head under Umar II, who attempted to solve the growing problem of conquered inhabitants wanting to join Islam to be free from taxation. In the end, his solution was to continue imposing the poll tax on conquered converts if they chose to remain

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<sup>180</sup> Ye'or, 52. The *kahraj* was a tax on land that gave those living on the land the right to cultivate it.

<sup>181</sup> Vaglieri, 90.

<sup>182</sup> A.A. Vasiliev. "The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazid II, A.D. 721," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers: Numbers Nine and Ten*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1956), 62.

<sup>183</sup> Hawting, 4-5.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 77.

on the land.<sup>187</sup> Hawting's account offers a surprising look into the distinctions made by the Muslim conquerors and how these distinctions account for the general lack of forced conversions.

While forced conversion by the sword is not generally seen in this era; that is not to say that cases of pressure to convert and even Christian martyrdom were completely absent from the time. However, it is notable that martyrology is rare, generally early, and sometimes of questionable authenticity. One text for instance, the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, recounts an event in 638 during the Arab conquests.<sup>188</sup> It speaks of the siege of Gaza, and the resulting surrender of the citizens and imprisonment of the soldiers therein. They were brought before Amr, who "ordered the Christ-holy soldiers to be presented. Once brought before him, he constrained them to desist from the confession of Christ and from the precious and live-giving cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>189</sup> They are then taken back to prison and beheaded, then buried by Sophronius. The text could be a confirmation of the brutality of the Arabs from an early date, but Hoyland disputes the text's authenticity, pointing out that its only witness is a single Vatican manuscript. Additionally, what should have been the core elements of the story, specifically those involving Sophronius, are only briefly mentioned. Furthermore, the text is not consistent with Muslim sources that place Amr in Gaza in 634, but indicate that the siege of the city was carried out by Alqama ibn Mujazziz in 636.<sup>190</sup> Finally, Sophronius died in March 638, yet the Gaza martyrs' death occurs in November 638, and some even suggest 639. Also worthy of suspicion are the names of the martyrs. "There are 13 Johns, 8 Theodores, 7 Georges, 5 Pauls and 3 Stephens. In other words, 22 percent have the same name and 60 percent share just five names."<sup>191</sup> These problems

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>188</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 347.

<sup>189</sup> H. Delehaye, ed., "Passio sexaginta martyrum," 301, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 348.

<sup>190</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 349.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 350.

bring serious questions of authenticity and should therefore be sufficient to judge the text as less than reliable.

In the interest of fairness, there were legitimate instances of Christians suffering martyrdom at the hands of the Arabs. Yet these episodes have a very specific context and give support to Hawting's claims concerning the distinctions Arabs made among the conquered peoples. Generally speaking, those Christians martyred for their faith fit one of two categories: they were former Muslims who later converted to Christianity or they were Christians who spoke ill of Muhammad.<sup>192</sup>

For instance, the account of George the Black (d.650s) describes the martyrdom of a young man who was taken prisoner by the Arabs at a young age and made to be the servant of a Muslim in Damascus. George embraced Islam at the age of eight.<sup>193</sup> Later, as an adult, he converted to Christianity and was subsequently reported by a fellow servant. George's master commanded him to recant, and George refused. In response "his master commissioned four Saracens who were gathered there to hold the servant by his hands and legs while he cut him in two with a sword."<sup>194</sup> Hoyland points out that this text, as opposed to the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, is probably authentic.<sup>195</sup>

Another example is found in the account of *A Christian Arab of Sinai* who was probably martyred around 660. The story suggests an exception to Tolan's two categories of Christian martyrs, yet the story confirms Hawting's claims that the Arabs seem to have been chiefly concerned about converting other Arabs. Hoyland acknowledges it as well and writes, "Christian Arabs do seem to have sometimes been the targets of Muslim missionary efforts and occasionally to have faced the choice between conversion to Islam and great hardship, even death".<sup>196</sup> Khalid ibn al-Walid, a Muslim general, is recorded as saying, "No Arab who refrains from our religion do we

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<sup>192</sup> Tolan, 55. There are also a few cases of Christian Arabs who refused to convert.

<sup>193</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 351.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 352.

leave alone, rather we kill him.” Umar I, when speaking of the tribe of Taghlib allegedly said, “They are a people of the Arabs and not from the people of the Book, so they must become Muslim.”<sup>197</sup> Mu’adh and Sham Allah were two chiefs in the Taghlib tribe who were threatened to convert to Islam. Mu’adh was later executed for his refusal to apostatize. Sham Allah was left alive but was told by Walid, “While you are a chief of the Arabs, you shame them all by worshipping a cross.”<sup>198</sup> Another pertinent account is the story of a tribesman of Iyad who was captured during a raid of Maslama ibn Abd al-Malik. He was beheaded by Hisham at Harran for refusing to adopt Islam.<sup>199</sup> These accounts are somewhat rare because Arabs tended to convert to Islam under persecution, and these conversions tended to be mass conversions of the entire tribe. The threat of torture resulted in Arab conversions being the rule, and steadfastness the exception.<sup>200</sup> The common thread in these accounts, however, seems to be the desire to avoid torture and death rather than any significant measure of love for the Muslim faith. One account provides helpful insight into the rationale for conversion; it records the conversion of the Arabs of Sinai.

When, in accordance with the just judgment of God, the nation of the Saracens came out of their native land to the holy mountain of Sinai to occupy this place and to dislodge from the Christian faith the Saracens who were found there and who were formerly Christians, these latter, who had their abode and tents near the fort and the holy bush, heard of this and went up with their families to a secure spot up on the holy summit, from there to combat, as from a height, the approaching Saracens. They did thus, but being powerless to resist much the oncoming

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<sup>197</sup> Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-kharāj* (Cairo, 1933), 121, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 352

<sup>198</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed. *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* 11.XVII, 451-52/480-82, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 352. Hoyland also points out that one account records Sham Allah undergoing brutal torture before the Arabs relented.

<sup>199</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 352-53.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

host, they surrendered and went to live with them and to believe with them.<sup>201</sup>

The Arabs of Sinai were converting because they failed to sustain a competitive military force. The alternative was failure and death, perhaps demonstrating why triumphalism led to Christian apostasy. One of the Christian Arabs of Sinai refused to convert. He fled and eventually died from illness in the monastery of Sinai. Hoyland mentions that the dating of the story is difficult but places this Christian Arab's death "around the year 660", after the 640 invasion of Egypt.<sup>202</sup> A final account of interest is that of Peter of Capitolias who was martyred for speaking ill of the Prophet Muhammad. He is mentioned by John Damascene and will therefore be discussed in greater depth below.<sup>203</sup>

These accounts provide evidence that the spread of Islam was indeed a motivation for the Arab conquests, though this effort was limited to those of Arab descent. There seems to be little or no effort during the Arab conquest to convert the Greek Christians.

### ***3.3 Life under Arab rule***

There has been some question as to whether those Christians in positions of power and authority were actually apostates and received their position by means of denying their faith.<sup>204</sup> Hoyland points out that martyrologies consistently presented the scene of the hero or heroes being tempted with the offers of wealth and power if they would convert to Islam.<sup>205</sup> However, this idea would seem to be an exaggeration. Theophanes indicates that, in 758, the Arabs attempted to "expel the Christians from government chanceries, but

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<sup>201</sup> K.H. Uthermann, ed. *Viae dux* (CCSG 8: Turnhout and Leuven, 1981), C4, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 353.

<sup>202</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 354.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>204</sup> Hoyland (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 338) presents this as a common argument within non-Muslim communities to avert their peers from converting to Islam. Specifically, Hoyland refers to the account of a Zoroastrian priest who converted because of his desire for worldly pleasures.

<sup>205</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 339.

were once again obliged to entrust the same duties to them because they were unable to write numbers”.<sup>206</sup> Even in the late tenth century—long after the Ummayyad Dynasty—Muqaddasi, an Arab historian, records that most of the physicians and scribes in Egypt and Syria were Christians.<sup>207</sup> This would indicate that Christians held positions of authority and power during the first two (and perhaps three) centuries of Islam.<sup>208</sup> Sahas notes that Christians found their way into the court of the caliph “as administrative advisors...as admirals in the newly built Muslim fleet, as poets, instructors of the princes and artists”.<sup>209</sup> One Syrian chronicler indicates, “Christians were still the scribes, leaders and governors of the land of the Arabs”.<sup>210</sup> John Damascene is thus an example of a common reality. John Damascene’s position in the caliph’s court was not at all an oddity in eighth-century Byzantium. Ibn Mansur was on good terms with the caliph,<sup>211</sup> and Kennedy points out, “In Syria, financial administration was almost entirely in the hands of local Christians, including Sarjun, [John Damascene] son of Mansur”.<sup>212</sup> In fact, he is not the only Christian to have such a notable position. Zacharias, Bishop of Sakha, was a secretary in the Muslim administration and a contemporary of John Damascene. Like John, Zacharias received the position because of his family’s position in the court.<sup>213</sup> Interestingly, he also left his position later to become a monk.<sup>214</sup> Simeon of the Olives is another example of the peaceful relations between the Christian community and their Arab rulers. Simeon built a Church

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<sup>206</sup> Carl de Boor, ed. *Theophanis chronographia*, vol.1, 430-31, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 339.

<sup>207</sup> M.J. de Goeje, ed. *Ahsan al-taqāsim* (Leiden, 1877), 183, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 339.

<sup>208</sup> Hoyland (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 339) goes a step further and writes, “...administrative and medical professions were dominated by non-Muslims.”

<sup>209</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 25.

<sup>210</sup> Dionysius of Tellmahre as preserved in Michael the Syrian 11.XVI, 449/474, and the *Chronicle of 1234*, 1.294, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 158.

<sup>211</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 29-30.

<sup>212</sup> Kennedy, 87.

<sup>213</sup> *Coptic Synaxary*, “21 Amshīr,” cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 167.

<sup>214</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 168.

at Nisibis with the permission of “the great king of the Arabs” demonstrating that the Arabs in power during the early stages of Umayyad rule had no agenda to handicap Christian worship.<sup>215</sup> All of this demonstrates that the relations between Christians and Arabs in the early centuries of the transition of power were generally peaceful, with instances of martyrdom and tension being the exception rather than the rule. In general, the Arabs were quite lenient with their Christian subjects. As a rule, the Christian community enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and functioned without fear of interference or persecution.<sup>216</sup> Vaglieri suggests that this might have been because they were “a force which was not to be underrated”.<sup>217</sup> The size and potential strength of the Christian community was likely a factor in their autonomy, but it would be oversimplification to call the freedoms extended by the caliphate nothing more than preventative measures. Mu’awiya seemed genuinely interested in extending peace to his subjects, as evidenced in his statement above about refraining from the using the sword.

Jon bar Penkaye, a resident of the monastery of John Kamul, penned his *Ktaba d-rish melle* (Book of Salient Points) in 687.<sup>218</sup> It is a chronicle of the world from creation to his own day. Maintaining consistency with those before him, he writes that the Arabs are the chastisement of God, yet he points out that the first civil war is an indication of God’s judgment on the Arabs.<sup>219</sup> The most important aspect of John’s work is that he is “noticeably unhostile towards Arab rule”.<sup>220</sup> John’s chronicle reveals that once the Arabs were in power, standard policy was actually quite lenient toward the Christian faith. John says of the Arab invaders, “Before calling them, (God) had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honour; thus they also had a special commandment from God concerning

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<sup>215</sup> Philoxenus Y. Dolabani, ed., *Maktabz bne d-umra qaddisha d-Qartmin* (Mardin, 1959), 125, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 168.

<sup>216</sup> Vaglieri, 88.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 194-95.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

our monastic station, that they should hold it in honour”.<sup>221</sup> John continues his comments on the Arabs, “Their robber bands went out annually to distant parts and to the islands, bringing back captives from all the peoples under the heavens. Of each person they required only tribute (*madatt*□), allowing him to remain in whatever faith he wished.”<sup>222</sup> John even speaks of the peace during this time in very positive terms, “Justice flourished in his time and there was great peace in the regions under his control; he allowed everyone to live as they wanted.”<sup>223</sup> John’s only criticism is a kind of longing for the old imperial Christianity, because the result of religious freedom under the Arabs meant that these rulers made no formal distinction between the believers and the unbelievers. He laments, “There was no distinction between pagan and Christian, the faithful was not known from a Jew.”<sup>224</sup> Neither was there any distinction between an orthodox Christian and a Monophysite. Kennedy points out that the Egyptian Coptic Church was permitted the same rights as the Melkite supporters of Chalcedon.<sup>225</sup>

Some accounts even intimate that relations between Christian and Arabs were very positive and even pleasant. One example involves Sophronius and his demand to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem with Caliph Umar himself. Umar responded and came to Jerusalem and prayed with Sophronius. The caliph intentionally refrained from praying inside the Church of the Resurrection, instead praying on the steps to the church because he knew that the Muslims would have taken the church after his death, naming it a holy site because the caliph had prayed there. To further protect the church, Umar wrote a document instructing other Muslims not to pray even on the steps of the church. He later prayed in Bethlehem, afterward writing a similar document to protect the church

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<sup>221</sup> Alphonse Mingana ed., *Ktaba d-rish melle*, 141, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 196.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 146/175, cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 196.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Kennedy, 67.



therein.<sup>226</sup> Sahas points out that ‘Islamic and Christian traditions both connect the name of “Umar with holiness, piety and kindness”.’<sup>227</sup> Another example involves Khalid, the governor of Iraq under Caliph Hisham. Khalid is criticized by some Muslim sources for showing the Christian community excessive favor. “He is said to have remarked on one occasion that Christianity is superior to Islam and to have had a church built for his Christian mother behind the mosque in Kufa.”<sup>228</sup>

### **3.4 Conclusion: Perceptions of the Islamic faith**

As a result of the Arabs’ primary concern with conquering their Byzantine subjects, as opposed to converting them, it is not difficult to see why the incoming invaders were at first seen simply as the next dynasty of rulers, not as an opposing faith. They were simply Arabs, not Muslims.<sup>229</sup>

However, that perception begins to change, not because of the efforts of Christian theologians, but rather because of the proclamations made by Islam. When the construction of the Dome of the Rock began under the reign of Abd al-Malik, many thought that it was going to be the next Jewish temple.<sup>230</sup> It was later understood by the Christians to be an assertion of power on the part of the Muslims.<sup>231</sup> The Dome of the Rock was a holy site for the Muslims, in competition with the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.<sup>232</sup> Late in the seventh century, Islam began to present itself as “the religion of truth”.<sup>233</sup> Specifically, this statement can be found on a coin dated

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<sup>226</sup> Sahas, “The Face to Face Encounter,” 38.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>228</sup> Hawting, 81.

<sup>229</sup> Van Ginkel, 175.

<sup>230</sup> G.J. Reinink, “Early Christian reactions to the building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem,” *Xristianskij Vostok* 2 (8). (St. Petersburg/Moscow: 2001), 227-28.

<sup>231</sup> Oleg Grabar, “Islamic Art and Byzantium,” in *Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, Dumbarton Oaks Papers: Number Eighteen* (Washington, DC: The Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1964), 80. Also Kennedy, 99.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>233</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 457.

696, during the reign of Abd al-Malik.<sup>234</sup> Reinink acknowledges that these new coins “proclaimed a strong politico-religious message”.<sup>235</sup> One of the coins contained the inscription; “There is no god but God alone. He has no partner.” On the reverse appears the text of *surah* 112, “God is One, God is the Everlasting. He does not beget nor is He begotten, and there is none equal to Him.” Also on the coin is *surah* 9.33, “Muhammad is the messenger of God whom he sent with guidance and the religion of truth in order to make it victorious over all religions, even though the polytheists detest [it].”<sup>236</sup> These statements were distinctly anti-Christian and were asserting that Islam was the true religion.<sup>237</sup> This was a direct challenge to Christianity, and John Damascene was one of the first Christians who chose to attempt an answer to the challenge. Once again, the context is significant. John Damascene lived in Syria, the center of Ummayyad power, and in Damascus, the seat of the caliph. The Syrian communities were such that the Arabs lived among the people, providing plenty of opportunities for discussion, debate and identification of distinctions in belief.<sup>238</sup> All of this contributes to John Damascene’s ability to articulate the beliefs of “the Ishmaelites.” Furthermore, it uniquely enables him to provide an apologetic that is well acquainted with Islam’s particular disputes with Christianity.

#### 4 John Damascene and the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”

##### 4.1 *On The Fount of Knowledge*

Having established the context for John Damascene’s apologetic to Islam, it is now fitting to investigate that apologetic and expose that John’s context was one of the most significant elements in the shaping and presentation of his work. Specifically, I will investigate his work on Islam, the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”, found in his chapter,

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Reinink, “Political Power,” in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 153.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>238</sup> Hawting, 38.

“On Heresies” (*De Haeresibus*) within the larger work, *The Fount of Knowledge*.

John’s great work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, relies heavily on the great Christian thinkers and writers of the past, and he is explicit about not producing something new, but rather his aim is summarizing the orthodox faith. He writes in his preface, “I shall add nothing of my own, but shall gather together into one those things which have been worked out by the most eminent of teachers and make a compendium of them...”<sup>239</sup> John Damascene’s goal is to bring together the great thinkers of Christianity; hence Sahas calls him the first classical systematic theologian.<sup>240</sup> By 727, John Damascene was well established in his career as a monk and Griffith points out that his work ‘did as much as any other to define the frame of mind of the “Byzantine conformists” [that is, Chalcedonian Orthodoxy] in the caliphate.’<sup>241</sup> Thomas’ comments are also illuminating. He writes, “John composed *The Fount of Knowledge* on the basis of considerable experience at the centre of Islamic rule, and in a religious milieu in which Islam was increasingly influential.”<sup>242</sup>

*The Fount of Knowledge* is composed of three chapters. The first is an introduction of Philosophical Categories (*Dialectica*), followed by an exposition of heresies contemporary to John’s day (*De Haeresibus*), and finally a third chapter divided up into four sections explaining the particulars of Christian orthodoxy (*De Orthodoxa Fide*). The first chapter is likely a product of John Damascene’s Greek education under his tutor, Cosmas. Louth suggests that John’s study of the *enkyklios paideia*—the modern equivalent of a curriculum in Greek education—is the reason for the *Dialectica*. Louth argues that John’s knowledge of the *enkyklios paideia* would have motivated him to define particular philosophical categories so that they might serve as the foundation for apologetic common

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<sup>239</sup> John Damascene, *The Fount of Knowledge*, 6. All English translations of this work are from Frederic Chase, *Saint John of Damascus: Writings* (New York: The Fathers of the Church, 1958).

<sup>240</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 52-53.

<sup>241</sup> Sidney Griffith, “Christological Controversies,” in Thomas, *Syrian Christians*, 15.

<sup>242</sup> Thomas, “Christian Theologians,” in Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 258.

ground.<sup>243</sup> Sahas also points out that John's view toward philosophy was that it should be a servant to theology and, indeed, the *Dialectica* can be seen as a demonstration of that conviction.<sup>244</sup> Following the *Dialectica* is the *De Haeresibus*, which is the focus of this study because it includes John Damascene's explanation of Islam (the "Ishmaelites"). The *De Haeresibus* is an explanation of over one hundred different heresies, mostly focusing on their origins, their errors and their influence on Christendom at the time of John's writing. *The Fount of Knowledge* was a summation of all the Christian should know, and that is why it included this chapter on heresies.<sup>245</sup> The *De Haeresibus* is a demonstration of John's commitment to lay down the Orthodox Faith as he understood it, rather than to create new material. With the exception of the chapter on the Ishmaelites, the work is a near verbatim copy of a text on heresies by Epiphanius.<sup>246</sup> Finally, the *De Orthodoxa Fide* is a lengthy exposition of the Christian faith, which is the greater purpose of *The Fount of Knowledge*. John Damascene articulates numerous aspects of Christian belief, defining and defending the dogmas of the Church. The value of the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites" cannot be overstated. It constitutes "the earliest explicit discussions of Islam by a Christian theologian".<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, John's substantial use of the Qur'an makes his work "the earliest recorded Christian reading of the Qur'an".<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>244</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 51-52.

<sup>245</sup> Cameron, 18.

<sup>246</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 56. There is some debate as to whether "The Heresy of the Ishmaelites" was part of the original *De Haeresibus*. Janosik (Daniel Janosik, "John of Damascus: First Apologist to Muslims" (paper presented at the Evangelical Theology Society Conference, Providence, RI, November 20, 2008)) notes that the scholarly consensus is that John is the author and Sahas (Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 57-58) demonstrates that it is indeed consistent with the rest of the work.

<sup>247</sup> Louth, 77.

<sup>248</sup> Mark Ivor Beaumont, "Early Christian Interpretation of the Qur'an," *Transformation* 22, no.4 (October 2005): 195.

#### 4.2 On The Ishmaelite Heresy

Arguably, the most immediate question that comes up in a discussion of John Damascene's exposition of the "heresy" of Islam is whether or not he considered it a heresy by the traditional meaning—a corruption of the Christian faith—as opposed to an entirely separate religion. The trouble comes in how one interprets the opening statement in "The Heresy of the Ishmaelites" which reads, "There is also the superstition (skeia) of the *Ishmaelites*..."<sup>249</sup> Sahas notes that the word skeia is translated as *superstitio* in a Latin edition of the text, but the Greek word itself cannot be identified.<sup>250</sup> Additionally, it has been suggested that the word is related to skia 'which means, figuratively, "spiritual darkness" or "error"'.<sup>251</sup> Sahas goes on to suggest, 'It is difficult to conclude...that John of Damascus did not consider Islam as *another* religion, but as a "deceptive superstition" and a "heresy"'.<sup>252</sup> It is likely that John Damascene would have endorsed a definition of Islam that used such terminology as "spiritual darkness" and "error", but that certainly does not prove that he did not see it as a heresy. Griffith points out, "By the first half of the [ninth] century, the indigenous Christian communities in the Islamic world had already begun to take on the outward trappings of...Islam".<sup>253</sup> Griffith goes on to point out that some churches had even added Arabic to their liturgy.<sup>254</sup> This very likely would have included the churches within Christendom that rejected Chalcedon and would have been regarded as heretics by John Damascene. As will be discussed below, John discusses at length the Ishmaelites' denial of the Trinity, using the same argumentation that he uses against the other anti-Trinitarian heresies.<sup>255</sup> Sahas also points out that other Christians around John would have shared

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<sup>249</sup> John Damascene, from Chase, 153.

<sup>250</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 68.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Griffith, 9.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Tolan, 51.

his perspective and that the initial perception of Islam by the Christian community was that it was “another Judeo-Christian heresy with strong Arian or Monophysite elements in it”.<sup>256</sup>

The second element in the title that raises questions is the label of “Ishmaelites”. Certainly Muslims are not well known by such a name today, and it raises the questions as to whether this reflects a pejorative label on the part of the monk. The chapter regarding the Ishmaelites actually uses three terms for a Muslim: Ishmaelite, Hagarene and Saracen. Sahas notes that all three of these names involve the heritage of the Islamic faith.<sup>257</sup> Hagarenes from Hagar, mother of Ishmael, is perhaps a term from Christian authors, based on biblical genealogies.<sup>258</sup> Sahas adds that the label “is widely used by the later Byzantine authors”.<sup>259</sup> Saracen refers to Genesis 16:8 where Sarah sends Hagar away empty-handed.<sup>260</sup> Sahas suggests that John seems to be aware that the name is fairly arbitrary and clarifies that the name is not of his own invention.<sup>261</sup> However, the term “Ishmaelite” is, according to both Christian and Islamic sources, the name that the Muslims gave to themselves. Brock shows that though there may have been pejorative terms used for the Islamic faith at this time, the designation “sons of Ishmael” is common and seems to be a neutral label.<sup>262</sup> Furthermore, the understanding that “the Arab people...descended ultimately from the biblical Ishmael” is completely consistent with Muslim tradition.<sup>263</sup> The term “Ishmaelite” therefore does not indicate that John Damascene was uninformed concerning the correct designation of Islam. Given his context, the opposite is found to be true.

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<sup>256</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 26. Anastasius, for example, calls the Muslims Monophysite heretics (Tolan, 43).

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>258</sup> Tolan, 52.

<sup>259</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 70.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> Brock, 15.

<sup>263</sup> Hawting, 21.

### ***4.3 Monotheism, Christology and idolatry***

John's apologetic work directed toward the Ishmaelites is the longest chapter in *De Haeresibus* and is a demonstration of numerous elements of context discussed in the previous chapters. John Damascene deals with questions of theology, revelation and authority. The themes of the work can be summarized in three categories: the Ishmaelite Doctrine of God and Christ, the authenticity of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet, and the inspiration of the Qur'an. John's work on the Ishmaelites's doctrine of God begins with a discussion on the origin of the doctrine - that is, the teachings of Muhammad. John's first mention of Muhammad comes early in the text:

From that time to the present, a false prophet named Mohammed (Mamed) has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise it seems having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy.<sup>264</sup>

The reference to an "Arian monk" is of particular interest. John is likely referring to a *hadith* that tells the story of Bahira, a monk who supposedly bore witness to Muhammad's status as a prophet and predicted his prophetic career.<sup>265</sup> Separate accounts of the story indicate that upon their meeting in Syria, Bahira instructed Muhammad in monotheism and "beliefs and practices which will be acceptable to the Arabs and match their capabilities".<sup>266</sup> Some versions of the story even suggest that Bahira wrote for Muhammad large portions of the Qur'an.<sup>267</sup> John Damascene does not explain

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<sup>264</sup> John Damascene, 153.

<sup>265</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 73. Beaumont (Beaumont, 196) asserts that the account is speculative and that it has no foundation in Islamic sources. However, Beaumont's assertion is discredited by Ibn Ishaq's (Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 70-80) reference to Bahira as a Nestorian monk. John—an earlier source than Ishaq—calls Bahira an Arian. Arian influence on Islam would be more believable than Nestorian influence, and John's perspective here is helpful in interpreting early Islam.

<sup>266</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 478.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

the story in such detail, but rather simply uses it to “identify the source and explain Muhammad’s theology”.<sup>268</sup> Interestingly, another version of the story surnames the monk Nestorius and indicates that he taught Muhammad Nestorian theology.<sup>269</sup> Also, the monk of Beth Hale mentions that Muhammad learned monotheism “from Sargis Bahira”. The account of Bahira is significant because it connects Islam with a heretical form of Christianity. John’s mention of the monk is then completely consistent with the apologetic thought of his time. Sahas also notes that if John’s primary knowledge of the story came from *hadith* literature, it further demonstrates his thorough knowledge of the Ishmaelite faith.<sup>270</sup> Furthermore, John’s emphasis on the monk’s Arianism gives further evidence that John Damascene spoke of the heresy of Islam in the same context as he would the heresy of Arianism. John sees the story of Bahira as a kind of indictment, associating the Ishmaelite beliefs in it with the familiar heresies of his day.<sup>271</sup>

John then transitions to discuss the nature of Islam’s monotheism. As already mentioned, Christendom was very familiar with the reality that Islam was a monotheistic faith, though Christians by this time generally understood that their Arab rulers denied the deity of Christ and, therefore, the Trinity.<sup>272</sup> Yet John Damascene acknowledges that Muhammad did bring the Arabs out of their former paganism and polytheism into a doctrine of monotheism, once again demonstrating his familiarity with the Qur’an.<sup>273</sup> After this, John Damascene proceeds to more specifically articulate Muhammad’s monotheism. He writes, “He says that there is one God, creator of all things who has neither been begotten nor has begotten”.<sup>274</sup> Sahas first points out that this is a quotation from *surah* 112:

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<sup>268</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 73.

<sup>269</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 479.

<sup>270</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 74.

<sup>271</sup> Tolan, 52.

<sup>272</sup> Brock, 12-13.

<sup>273</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 71.

<sup>274</sup> John Damascene, 153.



*Ikhlas* (or purity of Faith).<sup>275</sup> Furthermore, he quotes Marmaduke Pickthall who calls this particular *surah* “the essence of the Qur’an”.<sup>276</sup> It is worth noting then that this gives further evidence that John Damascene not only possessed knowledge of the Qur’an but also had studied it well enough to know the core teachings and differences with Christian doctrine.<sup>277</sup> The *ayahs* before the one reference here by John Damascene stress the oneness of God, instructing the reader to, “Say: He is God, the One and Only; God the Eternal, Absolute.”<sup>278</sup> Certainly John would have no quarrel with the Ishmaelites on this point. In *De Orthodoxa Fide*, John writes, “God, then, is one, perfect, uncircumscribed, the maker of the universe, the maintainer of order and governor, preceding and transcending all perfection.”<sup>279</sup> Once again this exposes the reality that John’s indictments of Islam are not those that one would give to a separate religion. In fact, Beaumont asserts that John believed the Qur’an affirmed Christianity, and that he even used the Qur’an to teach Christian doctrine.<sup>280</sup> John’s apologetic is that the Ishmaelites have misunderstood the Scriptures, thus further evidencing that John did indeed see Islam to be an adulterated Christianity.<sup>281</sup> John’s next theological point centres on Christology. He details the Christology of an Ishmaelite:

He says that the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant, and that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For he says, the Word and God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she brought forth Jesus who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and

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<sup>275</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 75. See also, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur’an* (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., 2005), 1806.

<sup>276</sup> Marmaduke Pickthall, *Koran*, 545, cited in Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 75.

<sup>277</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 75.

<sup>278</sup> Yusuf Ali, 1806.

<sup>279</sup> John Damascene, 173.

<sup>280</sup> Beaumont, 195, 199.

<sup>281</sup> David Thomas, trans. and ed., *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Early Muslim polemic against Christianity: Abu `Isá al-Warraq's "Against the Incarnation"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

crucified this. But the Christ himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven. And he says this, that when the Christ had ascended into heaven, he asked him: "O Jesus, didst thou say: 'I am the Son of God and God?'" And Jesus, he says, answered: "Be merciful to me, Lord. Thou knowest that I did not say this and that I did not scorn to be thy servant. But sinful men have written that I made this statement, and they have lied about me and have fallen into error." And God answered and said to Him: "I know that thou didst not say this word."<sup>282</sup>

Sahas puts it well: "This passage is one of the most convincing evidences of the accuracy of John of Damascus' knowledge of the teaching and wording of the Qur'ān!"<sup>283</sup> Swanson notes that by John's time, the Christian community would have at least been aware of this Islamic doctrine, pointing out that they denied the *fact* of the crucifixion, "to say nothing of its meaning and redemptive significance."<sup>284</sup> There were even extravagant hagiographical accounts of Muslims suffering supernaturally inflicted pains and humiliations as judgment for mocking the cross.<sup>285</sup> Lacking in John Damascene's explanation of the Ishmaelite's denial of the crucifixion is a substantive response to said denial. He follows up his detail of the denial stating that, "There are many other extraordinary and quite ridiculous things in this book which he boasts were sent down to him [Muhammad] from God".<sup>286</sup> This response of throwing out the Muslim's argument with incredulity is seen both throughout this work and the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*, a separate work that claims John Damascene as author and details a hypothetical discussion between a Christian and a Muslim.<sup>287</sup> John later, however, moves deeper into another central issue of Christian Christology against Islamic Monotheism: the Trinity. He writes,

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<sup>282</sup> John Damascene, 153-54.

<sup>283</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 79.

<sup>284</sup> Mark N. Swanson. "Folly to the *hunafā*: The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy," from Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas, 238-39

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-43.

<sup>286</sup> John Damascene, 154.

<sup>287</sup> See Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 142-155.

Moreover, they call us *Hetaerists*, or *Associators* because, they say, we introduce an associate with God by declaring Christ to the Son of God and God. We say to them in rejoinder: “The Prophets and the Scriptures have delivered this to us, and you, as you persistently maintain, accept the Prophets. So, if we wrongly declare Christ to be the Son of God, it is they who taught this and handed it down to us...As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Hetaerists?... If, however, He is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated him. It would be far better for you to say that He has an associate than to mutilate Him, as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object. Thus you speak untruly when you call us Hetaerists; we retort by calling you Mutilators of God.”<sup>288</sup>

Once again, John Damascene has demonstrated his familiarity with Islam by explaining the Muslim understanding that nothing can be associated with God (*shirk*), a teaching that occurs frequently in the Qur’an.<sup>289</sup> Sahas writes, “John of Damascus has a correct knowledge of this Qur’anic notion and he is well aware of the meaning that the Muslims ascribe to this issue”.<sup>290</sup> His response is to call the Ishmaelites “mutilators” (Koptai) because they have, in a sense, torn from God the doctrine of tri-unity. Of particular interest is John’s reference to Christ being “Word of God and Spirit”. This is a reference to *surah* 4:171, which calls Christ the Word of God and says that *Allah* bestowed on Christ “a Spirit proceeding from Him”.<sup>291</sup> John has brilliantly used his knowledge of the Qur’an to expose a contradiction and even teach Christian doctrine. John understood that the Muslims of his day believed God’s word—the Qur’an—to be “eternal and uncreated, sent down from heaven”.<sup>292</sup> He is using *surah* 4:171 to expose the reality that the Qur’an calls Jesus the Word and Spirit of God. If he is the Word and Spirit of

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<sup>288</sup> John Damascene, 155-56.

<sup>289</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 82.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Yusuf Ali, 234.

<sup>292</sup> Keith E. Swartley, “Qur’an, Hadith, and Shari’a,” in Keith Swartley, ed, *Encountering the World of Islam* (Atlanta: Authentic Media, 2005), 83.

God, he must then also be uncreated and eternal. John confronted the Ishmaelite with this problem and in doing so, used the Qur'an to teach Christian doctrine.<sup>293</sup> This argument became popular after John's death and Griffith points out, "Almost every Christian apologist in the world of Islam from John of Damascus onwards quotes or alludes to this Qur'an verse".<sup>294</sup> This is yet another indication, not only of John's impressive knowledge of the Islamic faith, but also John's impact on the Eastern Christian community.

The last point not yet addressed that would be categorized as an element of John Damascene's theological debate is his mention of the Ka'ba. He notes,

They furthermore accuse us of being idolaters, because we venerate the cross, which they abominate. And we answer them: "How is it that you rub yourselves against a stone in your Ka'ba and kiss and embrace it?" Then some of them say Abraham had relations with Agar [Hagar] upon it, but others say that he tied the camel to it, when he was going to sacrifice Isaac. And we answer them: "Since Scripture says that the mountain was wooded...from which Abraham cut wood for the holocaust and laid it upon Isaac...why do you talk this nonsense? For in that place neither is it thick with trees nor is there passage for asses." And they are embarrassed, but they still assert that the stone is Abraham's. Then we say, "Let it be Abraham's, as you foolishly say. Then, just because Abraham had relations with a woman on it or tied a camel to it, you are not ashamed to kiss it, yet you blame us for venerating the cross of Christ by which the power of the demons and the deceit of the Devil was destroyed..." This stone...is a head of that Aphrodite whom they used to worship and whom they called Khabar.<sup>295</sup>

The veneration of the Ka'ba was not an uncommon criticism in apologies to Islam contemporary to John Damascene.<sup>296</sup> The Chris-

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<sup>293</sup> Beaumont, 199.

<sup>294</sup> S.H. Griffith "The Qur'an in Arab Christian Texts; The Development of an Apologetical Argument: Abu Qurrah in the Maglis of Al-Ma'mun" *Parole de L'Orient* 24 (1999): 216, cited in Beaumont, 199.

<sup>295</sup> John Damascene, 156-57.

<sup>296</sup> Barbara Roggema. "Muslims as Crypto-Idolaters—A Theme in the Christian Portrayal of Islam in the Near East," in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church*

tian community generally perceived the Ka'ba to be a pagan affair with no connection to the divine.<sup>297</sup> An example can be found within a supposed correspondence between Leo III (717-41) and Umar II (717-20) wherein Leo declares that Mecca is inhabited by demons who “draw you, by occult machinations to the loss of your souls, for example, by a stone that is called *rukn* that you adore without knowing why.”<sup>298</sup> Germanus also mentions the Ka'ba in a letter written in 725 to the iconoclastic Bishop Thomas of Claudiopolis, saying that the Muslims “venerate in the desert an inanimate stone which is called Khobar (Kobar).”<sup>299</sup> This particular accusation from the Ishmaelite camp is unique in that it has no Qur'anic foundation.<sup>300</sup> There is *hadith* literature that states Jesus himself will return and destroy the cross,<sup>301</sup> but no specific Qur'anic passage that condemns the Christians as idolaters for this action. Furthermore, it is clear that the Islamic community was itself severely iconoclastic, particularly during the reign of Yazid II. In 721, Yazid II issued an edict endorsing iconoclasm for the Islamic faith and decrying the worship of images by Muslims.<sup>302</sup> The edict declared that there

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*Life and Scholarship In □ Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 3.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>298</sup> A. Jeffery, “Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III”, *Harvard Theological Review* 37, (1944) 269-332; 323, cited in Roggema, “Muslims as Crypto-Idolaters,” in Thomas, *Christians at the Heart*, 4.

<sup>299</sup> Mansi, XIII, 109 B-E, cited in A.A. Vasiliev, “The Iconoclastic Edict,” *Dumbarton Oaks Research*, 26. See also J. Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views of Islam,” in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Number Eighteen*, Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1964), 119. Vasiliev (Vasiliev, 27) points out that Germanus was a supporter of icons and was probably condemning the Arabs as the true idolaters, contrasted to the Christian supporters of icons.

<sup>300</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 84.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>302</sup> Vasiliev, 25. Vasiliev points out some difficulties in dating the edict, observing that some place it in 722 and others in 723. Vasiliev mentions various sources, but points out that the edict was read at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, and John of Jerusalem, who lived in the same century and territory where the edict was issued, dates it at 721. Vasiliev (Vasiliev, 47) argues that this makes John of Jerusalem's dating the most accurate, with which this author agrees.

were to be no representations of human beings in mosques. Certainly there are reorientations of humans in Islam, but the edict of Yazid II specifically forbids them in mosques.<sup>303</sup> This was imposed on Christian churches throughout the empire, in contrast to the tolerance shown by Mu'awiya I.<sup>304</sup> During the early stages of Umayyad rule, Christians were allowed to display their crosses and other insignia.<sup>305</sup> Conditions changed under Yazid II, and the historian Severus records that the governor of Egypt "ordered the destruction of all the crosses which were in the land of Egypt, even the crosses of gold and silver".<sup>306</sup> At the 787 Council of Nicaea, the bishop of Messana commented, "I was a boy in Syria when the Caliph of the Saracens was destroying the icons."<sup>307</sup> It is likely that these tensions were present at that time among the people in Syria, particularly the Arabs, but the kindness of those early caliphs prevented the brash iconoclasm seen during the reign of Yazid II.<sup>308</sup>

John's response is both a challenge and a defence. He answers the charge of idolatry that the Ishmaelites level against the Christian community while turning the tables and challenging the Ishmaelites to defend an idolatry of their own. Furthermore, John is writing to educate the wider Christian community concerning the Ka'ba.<sup>309</sup> Sahas adds that John's reference to "Khabar" is likely a reference to the statement "*Allahu akbar*".<sup>310</sup> The Ka'ba continued to be a point of contention well into the tenth century, and there is a similar account in the work of Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *De administrando imperio*. He writes,

They pray to the star of Aphrodite which they call Koubar, and in their supplication cry out Alla oua Koubar, that is, God and

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 26.

<sup>306</sup> B. Evetts, "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria," cited in Vasiliev, 41.

<sup>307</sup> Mansi, XIII, 200, cited in Vasiliev, 30.

<sup>308</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 86.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 87.

Aphrodite. For they call God Alla and oua they use for the conjunction and... they call the star Koubar. And so they say Alla oua Koubar.<sup>311</sup>

Meyendorff clarifies that this is also a reference to *Allahu akbar*, an Arabic phrase that translates “God is very great.”<sup>312</sup> The phrase was—and is today—used as a part of the call to prayer,<sup>313</sup> and it seems to have “puzzled the Byzantine authors from the eighth century onwards.”<sup>314</sup> Meyendorff explains the reason for the confusion. He writes, “That some cult of the Morning Star existed among the Arabs before the rise of Islam seems certain, and this was known to the Byzantines, who attempted, of course, to find traces of paganism in Islam itself.”<sup>315</sup> Meyendorff ends his discussion by lamenting that John added nothing to this discussion and that he simply used a common argument to accuse the Arabs of lechery.<sup>316</sup> However, Sahas disagrees and asserts that while John’s accusations concerning the Ka’ba are consistent with historical records and Christian polemics in John’s day, John’s accusation is hypocrisy—not lechery. John is pointing out that the Ishmaelites have no room to indict the Christian for worshiping the cross in light of their Ka’ba idolatry.<sup>317</sup>

#### ***4.4 The authenticity of Muhammad’s revelation***

A second theme in the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” worth examining is the authenticity of Muhammad’s prophetic revelations. The shift toward apologies and disputations, mentioned above in the second chapter, is significant with regard to this topic. Hoyland writes that prior to the late seventh century, the question of how to recognize a true prophet “was scarcely considered by pre-Islamic Christian and

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<sup>311</sup> Constantine Prophyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, I, 14, ed. Moravcsik, trans. R.J.H. Jenkins (Budapest, 1949), 78-79, cited in Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views,” in Dumbarton Oaks Center, 118.

<sup>312</sup> Meyendorff, “Byzantine Views,” in Dumbarton Oaks Center, 119.

<sup>313</sup> Swartley, 490.

<sup>314</sup> Meyendorff, 119.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 88-89.

Jewish authorities and was clearly provoked by Muslim claims about Muhammad's prophetic credentials".<sup>318</sup> It is significant that John raised the issue when one considers that debating the topic was, in essence, a statement against Muhammad's claims to be a prophet. Speaking ill of Muhammad was a potentially fatal decision during the Arab conquests, an example being that of Peter of Capitolas, mentioned above in chapter three. It is however, the context of Peter's death that highlights John Damascene's boldness. *The Fount of Knowledge* is dedicated to Cosmas, who was Peter's successor after Peter's martyrdom.<sup>319</sup> Peter was martyred for condemning "Muhammad, his mythography and all who believe in it".<sup>320</sup> As previously mentioned, John's opening paragraph in the chapter on the Ishmaelites includes the statement, "From that time to the present, a false prophet named Mohammed has appeared in their midst."<sup>321</sup> At another point in the tract, John Damascene introduces his line of questioning concerning Muhammad's authenticity as a prophet.

Then when we say: "How is it that God did not in your presence present this man with the book to which you refer, even as He gave the Law to Moses, with the people looking on and the mountain smoking, so that you, too might have certainty?"—they answer that God does as He pleases.<sup>322</sup>

John first demands to know which prophet foretold that Muhammad would arise—a demand for prophetic authenticity.<sup>323</sup> John insists that Muhammad had no witness to his prophetic authority, since no person came before him and predicted his coming. John is drawing out the Muslim's apologetic problem; namely that Islam "had no divine corroboration of the prophethood of Muhammad outside of the Qur'an, whereas Christians had confirmation of the

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<sup>318</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 456.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. Not to be confused with Cosmas, his Greek tutor.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>321</sup> John Damascene, 153

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-55.

<sup>323</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 79.



status of Christ outside of the gospels.”<sup>324</sup> The response he receives is, “God does as He pleases”,<sup>325</sup> a statement which became very important in later discussions on predestination.<sup>326</sup> This can be seen, for instance, in particular questions posed in the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*, including a discussion on the origin of evil.<sup>327</sup> Furthermore, John details the Christian perspective on predestination in *De Fide Orthodoxa*, in which he declares that “predestination is the result of the divine command made with foreknowledge.”<sup>328</sup> It is likely therefore that John would have rejected the determinism of Islam, despite the fact that he does not respond to the Ishmaelite’s defence through sovereignty. A few sentences later, John Damascene writes concerning the nature of Muhammad’s revelation from God:

When we ask again: ‘How is it that when we enjoined us in this book of yours not to do anything or receive anything without witnesses, you did not ask him: “First do you show us by witnesses that you are a prophet and that you have come from God, and show us just what Scriptures there are that testify about you”—they are ashamed and remain silent. [Then we continue:] “Although you may not marry a wife without witnesses, or buy, or acquire property; although you neither receive an ass nor possess a beast of burden unwitnessed; and although you do possess both wives and property and asses and so on through witnesses, yet it is only your faith and your scriptures that you hold unsustained by witnesses. For he who handed this down to you has no warranty from any source... On the contrary, he received it while he was asleep.”’<sup>329</sup>

John, in this passage, is likely referring to the night of power mentioned in *surah* 97 of the Qur’an, though if that is the case it is noteworthy that the Qur’an does not mention that Muhammad was

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<sup>324</sup> Beaumont, 197.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 142-43

<sup>328</sup> John Damascene, 263.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 155.

sleeping.<sup>330</sup> This is part of a Muslim tradition, which was later recorded by Ibn Ishaq.<sup>331</sup>

Within the context of this discussion, the Ishmaelite only gives two answers. The first is the already mentioned explanation through determinism and the second is no response at all. John writes, “They are ashamed and remain silent”.<sup>332</sup> Characterizing the opponent as being unable to respond is common in John’s work and other apologies contemporary to John’s. Some apologies, like the disputation between *A Monk of Beth Hale and an Arab Notable*, end with the Muslim confessing the truth of Christianity, sometimes with responses and counter-arguments being few or absent.<sup>333</sup> Of further interest is that John Damascene accuses the Muslims of having no scriptural support to testify to Muhammad’s coming as a prophet. Sahas suggests that this argument from John is consistent with the Damascene’s time period and is therefore a good argument for authorship. He writes, “This is another indication that [this chapter of *De Haeresibus*] belongs to an earlier period than the ninth century, the time when Muslims started to use biblical texts to defend the prophethood of Muhammad.”<sup>334</sup>

Finally, John Damascene questions a number of passages found in the Qur’an, further presenting a challenge to the authenticity of Muhammad’s revelation. He begins with Qur’anic texts concerning marriage and divorce, telling his reader:

As has been related, this Mohammed wrote many ridiculous books...For example there is the book *On Woman*, in which he plainly makes legal provision for taking four wives and...a thousand concu-

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<sup>330</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 79.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> John Damascene, 155.

<sup>333</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 468-69. A triumphal ending is common in these apologies, which obviously puts the authenticity of the event they describe into question. Yet the value lies in what they demonstrate about Christianity’s knowledge about Islam and *visa versa*.

<sup>334</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 81. Sahas suggests that this tract may have been instrumental in motivating the Islamic community to develop a defense for Muhammad’s prophethood based on the Old and New Testaments.

binés...He also made it legal to put away whichever wife one might wish, and, should so one wish, to take to oneself another in the same way. Mohammed had a friend named Zeid. This man had a beautiful wife with whom Mohammed fell in love. Once, when they were sitting together, Mohammed said: "Oh, by the way, God has commanded me to take your wife." The other answered, "You are an apostle. Do as God has told you and take my wife."<sup>335</sup>

John's charge against Muhammad here is not surprising. Christians in John's day understood the Old Testament allowance of polygamy to be abrogated by the New Testament's prohibition of the practice.<sup>336</sup> "Muhammad's desire for many wives had to be seen as evidence of a failure to obey the will of God."<sup>337</sup> Sahas points out that the reference to Zeid's wife is "a favorite subject for polemics." John is referencing *surah 4, The Women (al-Nisa)*.<sup>338</sup> Sahas defends the Ishmaelite position regarding the text on marriage, insisting that John has taken the passage out of context or failed to study it enough to discuss it competently.<sup>339</sup> The particular section John Damascene is referencing is the third *ayah*, which reads:

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them). Then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.<sup>340</sup>

Yusuf Ali and Sahas both comment that this permission was given after the battle of Uhud when the Muslims were left with several orphans, widows, and captives following the war.<sup>341</sup> Though the verse is taken out of context, neither Sahas nor Yusuf Ali defend the permission to take four wives, but to say that monogamy is "the

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<sup>335</sup> John Damascene, 157.

<sup>336</sup> Beaumont, 195.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 90.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>340</sup> Yusuf Ali, 179.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid. Also Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 90.

recommendation.”<sup>342</sup> Next, concerning the reference to divorce, Sahas again argues against John Damascene’s polemic, accusing the monk of refusing to take into consideration the more complicated cases of the rights of divorce occurring in other *surahs*. Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that Sahas’ response ends there, with no specifics regarding these separate cases nor why they pose a significant problem to John Damascene’s point.<sup>343</sup> Sahas is willing to speak of context and misunderstanding concerning the first two topics (marriage and divorce), but he does not follow these up with a defence of why this move by Muhammad should be seen as acceptable.<sup>344</sup>

John Damascene then mentions “the book of *The Camel of God*”,<sup>345</sup> telling the story of a camel that drank an entire river and was too large to pass between two mountains. She therefore remained among a city of people and provided them with milk to drink. Some evil men then came and killed the camel, yet before she died she gave birth to an offspring, which called down God’s judgment and caused the evil men to die.<sup>346</sup> Sahas rightly points out that this story is not in the Qur’an and there is no *surah* called “The Camel of God”.<sup>347</sup> This is therefore likely an oral tradition that was common in the Islamic community.<sup>348</sup> John’s purpose in mentioning *surah* 4 and the texts on marriage, divorce, and Zeid’s wife were to call into question Muhammad’s character. However, it seems that his inclusion of the story of the she-camel is referenced simply to mock its fanciful plot. John’s response is thick with sarcasm, demanding to know where the camel came from and whether she is in paradise. He finishes his line of questioning by telling his Ishmaelite reader, “We plainly assure you that this wonderful camel of yours has preceded you into the souls of asses, where you, too, like beasts are destined to go. And there is the exterior darkness and

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<sup>342</sup> Yusuf Ali, 179.

<sup>343</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 90-91.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>345</sup> John Damascene, 158.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* See also Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 91-92.

<sup>347</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 91.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.* Sahas calls it a “story”.

everlasting punishment, roaring fire, sleepless worms, and hellish demons.”<sup>349</sup> John’s sarcasm stands out here, and as the work moves on, John gets progressively more cavalier in his responses until, at a latter part of the work, he says that Muhammad “says some other stupid and ridiculous things, which, because of their great number, I think must be passed over.”<sup>350</sup>

Following the story of the she-camel, John Damascene mentions the story of “The Table,” taken from the fifth *surah* called *Maida*, which means “The Table Spread”.<sup>351</sup> Specifically John is referencing *ayah* 114, which reads,

Said Jesus the son of Mary: “O God our Lord! Send us from heaven a table set (with viands) that there may be for us—for the first and last of us—a solemn festival and a Sign from Thee and provide for our sustenance for Thou art the best Sustainer (of our needs).”<sup>352</sup>

John writes, “Mohammed says that the Christ asked God for a table and that it was given Him. For God, he says, said to Him: ‘I have given to thee and thine an incorruptible table.’”<sup>353</sup> Sahas correctly points out that Muhammad understood the Lord’s Supper to be an actual meal and John was likely referencing the sacrament to once again substantiate his conviction that Islam was a heresy.

Finally, and to further vindicate this point, John closes the work with a mention of a law made by Muhammad in which he instructed the Islamic community,

that they be circumcised and the women, too, and he ordered them not to keep the Sabbath and not to be baptized. And, while he ordered them to eat some of the things forbidden by the Law, he ordered them to abstain from others. He furthermore absolutely forbade the drinking of wine.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> John Damascene, 159.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Yusuf Ali, 238.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>353</sup> John Damascene, 159.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 159-60.

Sahas mentions that circumcision is part of a larger conception of “ablution and cleanliness” within Islam.<sup>355</sup> This is likely John’s last effort to expose Islam as a corruption of Christianity. The rejections of the Sabbath and baptism were intentional moves by the Muslim community to separate themselves from the Christians,<sup>356</sup> and it is likely that John perceived these decisions to be further proof of his thesis that Islam was indeed a heresy. He also likely would have seen the abstinence from wine as an element of legalism, given his defence of the use of wine in the mass in *De Orthodoxa Fide*.<sup>357</sup>

The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” was likely designed by John Damascene to serve as a kind of introduction to Christians who were unfamiliar with the particulars of the faith that now ruled in Syria and beyond. It was meant to inform the Christian both of what these Ishmaelites believed and of why the Christian faith was intrinsically superior.<sup>358</sup> Sahas’ final sentence concerning this particular work calls the heretical designation of Islam “its significance and its weakness!”<sup>359</sup> This quick dismissal of John’s work is somewhat surprising and much too hasty. Though many if not most would disagree with John’s decision to call the Islamic faith a corruption of orthodox Christianity, John Damascene’s decision frames his approach and exposes the powerful reality that these two faiths raise many of the same religious questions. John thought Islam to be a heresy, and that the Ishmaelites themselves were infidels. Yet John’s decision to place Islam in a class of adulterated Christianities reveals something that John himself missed. Christianity and Islam should be more capable than any other two faiths (except perhaps Christianity and Judaism) to gain much by dialoguing and debating with one another because apologetic common ground exists in great abundance.

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<sup>355</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 94.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> John Damascene, 357.

<sup>358</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 94.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 95.

## 5 Conclusion: the value of context affirmed

The Arab conquest and subsequent transition of power profoundly changed the landscape of seventh and eighth-century Byzantium. John Damascene witnessed shifts in culture, language, politics and even faith as the Byzantines began to respond and submit to Arab rule. John's work is like a mirror, reflecting the changes that were in progress in the places where he lived, worked and wrote, and these changes help explain why John called Islam a heresy. The end of Heraclius' reign and the establishment of the caliphate meant that the ruling authorities no longer distinguished between the Orthodox and Unorthodox Christians. Heresy, as defined by the Byzantine Christians, was permitted to grow and did not face the persecution known under the now crumbling Byzantine authority. *De Haeresibus* discusses the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites" as one among several heresies that defy and endanger orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church was now under pressure to deal with heresy on its own, without the aid of state influence and intervention. This stimulated a renewed commitment to Orthodoxy, as things are often more fiercely protected when they are endangered. John Damascene's systematic work, *De Orthodoxa Fide*, provided the firm foundation that eastern Christians were looking for, and it gave concise definitions to those things that were being fiercely disputed.

The Arab victories all over the empire sealed the fate of waning triumphalism and stimulated the growth of apologies and disputations. The focus was now internal, and the bishops issued heartfelt calls to their congregation to do warfare of a spiritual kind. The Christian's victory was no longer in battles and banners, but in the sacraments, the liturgy and personal purity from every kind of sin. The Christian was now fighting for the internal purity of the faith, and understood the need to have a clear answer to this new faith that challenged the core elements of the Christian message. Islam was one of the many challenges that threatened the Christian faith, and so it was seen in a similar light to the heresies of Nestorianism and Arianism. The claims to truth made by Islam over and against the doctrines of Christianity forced the Church to establish a re-

sponse to these new challenges. The criterion for evaluating the authenticity of a prophet was now a central question in dialogues with the new rulers of Byzantium, and this reality can be seen in John Damascene's work when he attempts to address this problem. John confronts the Ishmaelite heresy by attempting to demonstrate that Muhammad was not a true prophet and, by doing so, he was answering a question that, apart from his context in the now Arab kingdom, would not have been significant or even discussed. Furthermore, these Ishmaelites denied Jesus' deity, death and subsequent resurrection, arguably the core elements of the Christian gospel. John Damascene understood that these were and still are foundational aspects of the Christian message and his work seeks to protect Orthodox Christology in light of the challenges from Islam.

Finally, John's Arabic education and familiarity with the books of the Arabs—and likely the Qur'an itself—allowed John to present a picture of Islam that was remarkably accurate. His work therefore would have been an invaluable resource to the Christian community in Damascus and beyond in aiding the Church to address the threat of this new "heresy". John's work would likely have been useless if it did nothing but perpetuate misunderstandings and straw men. Fortunately for those eighth-century Byzantines, John's familiarity with Islam and his time spent in the caliph's court make his work and specifically his exposition of Islam to be a useful resource to those seeking answers concerning this new faith. Because of his context, his education, his background and his experience, John Damascene was able to offer the Christian community resources that could be used by Christian leadership and layman alike. He helped the Church to arrive at conclusions illuminated by knowledge and strengthened by understanding. This could not have happened had John not possessed the background and experience that he did, enabling him to be the most one of the most excellent candidates to aid the Byzantine Christians in understanding this new faith of the Arabs, and providing a competent, accurate apologetic.

With regard to further research, I would recommend an investigation into John's mention of Bahira being an Arian monk—not a



Nestorian. When John Damascene calls Islam a heresy, he is very likely perceiving it to be an offshoot of Arianism. John's designation of Bahira as an Arian comes before Ibn Ishaq's designation as a Nestorian. Therefore, the question of Arian influence on early Islam is worthy of further inquiry.

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