

**John of Damascus on the Qur'an:
Evidence for an 8th Century Canonization**

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John of Damascus was one of the earliest Christian theologians to mention the scriptures (“writings”) of Muhammad. He lived between the years of 675 and 750 AD and served in the court of several caliphs as the chief financial officer of the Umayyad Empire. Thus, he was an eyewitness to many of the developments that transpired at that time. In 743, John wrote a treatise called the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites,” where he detailed a number of observations concerning Muhammad, the religion of Muhammad, and the “scriptures” of Muhammad. His handling of these issues calls into question traditional Qur’anic canon dating. For example, John demonstrates a fairly accurate knowledge of the religion and the founder, and reveals that he is aware of some of the main doctrines, especially in regard to Christological controversies, Muhammad’s prophet hood, the writing of “scriptures,” the story of Zayd, and the description of Paradise. However, followers of Muhammad were only referred to as “Ishmaelites” or “Saracens,” and not “Muslims,” the terms “Qur’an” and “surah” were not mentioned, and the scant portions of the “scriptures” that were analyzed by John were only from the later Medinan period. In fact, he refers primarily to three Medinan surahs by name, *The Women* (Surah 4), *The Table* (Surah 5), and *The Heifer* (Surah 2). His reference to these separate “books,” or “writings” (*graphe*, GK) rather than directly to a Qur’an in its final form may be an indication that the Qur’an had not been finalized during the time in which John was writing. In addition, he writes at greater length on a “surah” that is not even in the Qur’an, *The She-Camel*. The extended allusion to the She-Camel in John’s treatise may indicate that the Qur’an had not yet been canonized. Otherwise, why would there only be short references to the story in the present Qur’an rather than John’s longer rendition? Although this may demonstrate that John only had a partial understanding of the text of the Qur’an, it better indicates that a 7th century canonization would not, in fact, be feasible. This paper will analyze the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” and seek to uncover what John knew about Islam, Muhammad and the Qur’an. It will also explore the issue of

whether the Qur'an was still in the process of being written in the early 8th century, one hundred years after its supposed canonization.

Muslims believe the Qur'an was finalized around twenty years after the death of Muhammad under the direction of the third Caliph, Uthman. Thus, if John's work on the Heresy of the Ishmaelites demonstrated that the Qur'an could not have been finalized, or canonized by the middle of the 8th century, one hundred years after the Muslim date, then this discrepancy indicates that the Traditional Muslim view is flawed, at the least.

The Development of the Qur'an

What if the Qur'an is not divine? R. Stephen Humphreys emphasizes that the Qur'an is the document that gives Islam its *raison d'etre*. If the Qur'an is not directly from God, then it is a human document; and since it claims a perfect, divine source, human authorship would undercut its authority. In fact, Humphreys states boldly that "if the Qur'an is a historical document, then the whole Islamic struggle of fourteen centuries is effectively meaningless."¹

The Traditional Account says that the oral revelation given to Muhammad over a 23 year period was crystallized in the written Qur'an in the time of Uthman, 20 years after Muhammad's death. The early Revisionists and later Neo-Revisionists,² however, interpret the development very differently. Andrew Rippin, in the preface to Wansbrough's book, *Quranic Studies*, argues that "the emergence of a fixed and explicit script for the Arabic language suggests a considerably longer time frame than the community's account, on its surface, seems to allow."³ In other words, the development of the Arabic script itself was still too indeterminate for a fixed text to be present in the time of Uthman, barely 20 years after Muhammad's death. Rippin contends that there is

¹ Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?," chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and*

² Revisionists, like John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Andrew Rippin and G.W. Hawting, were prominent in the 1970s and 1980s and tried to construct a more feasible understanding of early Islam through a textual-critical approach which viewed history as something that could be "scientifically" studied. Those whom I call Neo-Revisionists, like Robert Hoyland, Yehuda Nevo, Jeremy Johns, Sidney Griffith, Reuven Firestone, Christoph Luxenberg, Gerd-R. Puin, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, and Kevin Van Bladel, have corrected some of the shortcomings of the Revisionists and bring to bear a much more scientifically accurate interpretation of the first two centuries of Islam based on a higher level of investigative research using a type of historical forensics, which involves the study of archaeological sites, epigraphic and numismatic material and 7th century non-Muslim eyewitness written accounts.

³ John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), xv.

far too much evidence showing that, while Arabic as a written language was in limited use in the 7th century, as a consonantal language it was still too much in flux with too many variant readings for it to be considered fixed and authoritative until later in the 8th century after vowels and diacritical marks used to identify otherwise identical letters came into existence. By the end of the 8th century, with the standardization of Classical Arabic, the collection of material could finally be put together in a cohesive whole with a fixed text. However, some of the Neo-Revisionists contend that by that time a number of the original words, some of them possibly transliterations from Syriac words, were no longer understood by those compiling the Qur'an.⁴ In other words, if the Qur'an could not have been written in Arabic in the 7th century, and indeed, if some of it came from other religious sources, then it could not have been divine, or God's perfect book from heaven.

Rippin goes on to point out that even in the traditions of the Muslims there are "elements such as the fixing of the Arabic script, the establishment of written formats of manuscripts, and the codification of the variant readings."⁵ However, the Traditional Account compresses all of these things within the time frame of Muhammad's death to the finalization of the Qur'an under Uthman's direction twenty years later. Rippin regards this compressed time scale as "quite anachronistic" since it would not account for the steps that would be necessary for a "full meaning" of the "Qur'an" to be fulfilled. In other words, the creation of a written text under Uthman is considered an "anachronistic element" because, for one thing, the "form of the Arabic script in early manuscripts is far too ambiguous to have accomplished the purpose of unifying the reading of the text."⁶ Among other things, this would indicate that the fragments or "Qur'anic material" dated to the end of the 7th century and into the first half of the 8th century may simply be religious passages that later made their way into the final Qur'an. After all, a number of

⁴ Toby Lester, "What Is the Koran?" chapter in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 110. Rippin even contends that to this day about 20% of the Qur'an is still considered "unreadable," even by Muslim scholars themselves. Christoph Luxenberg also comes to the same conclusion: "In spite of all these efforts one would not be far from the truth if one were to estimate the proportion of the Koran that is still considered unexplained today at about a quarter of the text." See Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007, 108).

⁵ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xv.

⁶ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xv.

these fragmentary writings and inscriptions left on rocks merely give testimony to a monotheistic faith, which could easily fit a Jewish or Christian framework. It was not until the time of Abd al-Malik that an intentional pattern of scriptural material appears which distinguishes the beliefs as being neither Jewish nor Christian, yet somehow related to the two.⁷

Like many Revisionists and Neo-Revisionists,⁸ Yehuda Nevo concludes that the Qur'an is a late compilation of a number of assorted literary and scriptural sources, and therefore the canonization could not have taken place before the end of the 2nd century AH or early in the 3rd. "This conclusion," he says, "is supported by an analysis of extant rock inscriptions and an examination of the references to the Arab religion in the works of the peoples with whom they came in contact."⁹ John Wansbrough also believes that the Qur'an and supporting literature seems to have grown out of sectarian controversies in the late 8th to early 9th centuries, almost 200 years after the fact, and then "projected back" onto an invented Arabian point of origin.¹⁰ He indicates that the process may have been more "educative rather than merely communicative" and concludes that

a concomitant homogeneity of subject-matter is reflected in the overlapping of genres: poetry placed within a narrative frame, prose relieved by poetic insertions both as exegesis and ornatus, juridical and lexical problems solved by reference to scripture, scriptural problems solved by reference to jurisprudence and lexicography, all with approximately the same end in view: historical description of a situation two centuries earlier.¹¹

In other words, according to Wansbrough, the Qur'an is used to explain the sira literature and the hadith, and the sira literature and the hadith are used in order to make sense of the Qur'an. This close correlation indicates that both genres developed at the same time. Wansbrough also seems to indicate that the earlier chancery language, used for communication, politics and business, was quite different from what became Classical Arabic in the late 8th century. Thus, he concludes that the chancery Arabic developed first and got its real boost under Abd al-Malik when he promoted Arabic as the language of

⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁸ Nevo mentions Schacht and Wansbrough specifically, but Crone, Cook, Mingana, Rippin, Hawting and others could be added to the list.

⁹ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, 11.

¹⁰ see Warraq, "Introduction," 24. Ibn Warraq also states that Wansbrough argued that "Islam emerged only when it came into contact with and under the influence of Rabbinic Judaism."

¹¹ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 90.

the empire. In time it would be developed poetically and scripturally, with the culmination being the Qur'an at the end of the 8th century or early 9th century.¹² Toby Lester, in his article called "What is the Koran?" writes that Wansbrough's conclusion as to why no Islamic source material from the first century survived is that "it never existed."¹³

Patricia Crone also says that there is no hard evidence for the existence of the Qur'an "in any form before the last decade of the seventh century."¹⁴ Even the verses found inscribed in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (AD 691) attest only to the presence of material similar to verses found in the Qur'an. However, they display minor variations from the standard text, and Crone says that the existence of these verses "does not of course give any indication of the literary form in which these materials normally appeared at the time."¹⁵ In other words, the inscriptions could very well be indications of an early attempt to express the developing beliefs of the Ishmaelites. After all, as Crone points out, the earliest reference to a book called the "Qur'an," outside the Islamic literary tradition, is from a dialogue between an Arab and the monk at Bet Hale in the late Umayyad period.¹⁶

On the other hand, if the Qur'an was not fully canonized until at least the end of the 8th century, almost 165 years after Muhammad's death, what do we do about these earlier inscriptions and textual fragments of the "Qur'an"? Do they not prove that the Qur'an was present in the 7th century? Rippin believes that the fragments are inconclusive and states that "the simple existence of written portions of the Qur'an in manuscript form, for example, does not tell us the full picture of the history of the text any more than the traditional collection stories or the language and structure of the text itself do."¹⁷ In other words, the earlier fragments may have been gathered later into the final canonized Qur'an, but that does not mean that the Qur'an as we know it today first existed as a perfect, completed form in the days of Muhammad. Rippin also points out

¹² Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 85-91.

¹³ Toby Lester, "What Is the Koran?," chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 122.

¹⁴ Crone, *Hagarism*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. It is important to note that the Islamic literary tradition dates to the late 8th century, **after** the dialogue of the Arab and the monk at Bet Hale.

¹⁷ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xvii

that the evidence does not support a "canonized closed text" in the first 50 years after Muhammad's death. First of all, he says that there were too many contradictory texts floating around in the late 7th and early 8th centuries. It is not until the end of the 8th century that a consistent text can be accounted for.¹⁸ What are the other fragments and variants, then? Some of them may be from earlier Christian liturgy translated into an early Arabic script by Christian missionaries trying to reach their Arabic neighbors. Some may have been translations of the Jewish Psalms and commentaries into Arabic from a Syriac text. Some may have been early poetry to the monotheistic God who would shortly be known as the Allah of Islam. Claude Gilliot even believes that parts of the Qur'an may have come from a Syriac form of the Diatessaron, an early Greek compilation of a harmony of the gospels.¹⁹

Variations at San'nā'

One of the most fascinating recent archaeological finds that sheds light on the development of the Qur'an is the 1972 discovery of thousands of fragments of old Qur'ans in the attic of a mosque in San'nā, Yemen. A few scholars, like Gerd Puin, believe that some of the fragments may even date back to the late 7th century.²⁰ This veritable scriptural "gold mine" should have been lauded in the Muslim press, except that many of these old texts contain variations from the standard text of the Qur'an. Toby Lester comments that "such aberrations, though not surprising to textual historians, are troublingly at odds with the orthodox Muslim belief that the Koran as it has reached us today is quite simply the perfect, timeless, and unchanging Word of God."²¹ The man behind much of the controversy is Gerd Puin, a "specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Koranic paleography," who was sent by the German government to help unravel the mass of decaying documents. As he studied the crumbling manuscripts and the 35,000 pictures

¹⁸ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xvi. See also, Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?" p. 110. See also Gilchrist's conclusion on the Samarqand and the Topkapi manuscripts in *Jam' al-Qur'an*, where he dates both manuscripts no earlier than the end of the 8th century.

¹⁹ Claude Gilliot, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'an: Is the Qur'an Partly the Fruit of a Progressive and Collective Work?," chap. in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (London: Routledge, 2008), 99. For example, part of Q. 48:29 resembles the combined pericope in Mark 4:26-7 and Matthew 12:23 found in the *Diatessaron*.

²⁰ Lester, "What Is the Koran?" 108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

of the texts he noticed many minor variations as well as the presence of palimpsests, even earlier versions that had been washed off so that the parchment could be used again. From his study Puin concluded that “the Koran is a kind of cocktail of texts that were not all understood even at the time of Muhammad . . . *Many of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself.* Even within the Islamic traditions there is a huge body of contradictory information, including a significant Christian substrate” (my emphasis).²² In other words, it would not necessarily be a problem to find an early fragment, say mid-7th century, with Qur’anic-like verses on it because it may indeed be from a pre-Islamic source, even from the gospel of Jesus or Psalms.

Birmingham Qur’an

One of these possible mid-7th century Qur’ans is known as the “Birmingham Qur’an” since it resides in the Mingana collection at the University of Birmingham, UK. Recently, in response to an alert given by a doctoral student studying the manuscript, the two folios making up the manuscript were dated using the radiocarbon method at the Oxford Radiocarbon lab, which is one of the best in the world. The resulting range is for the parchment, not the ink or the writing style, which is Hijazi. The lab concluded that the radiocarbon date is within a range between 568 and 645 AD with a 95% confidence interval. This means that there is a 95% chance anywhere between this interval that the date may be correct. Again, it must be emphasized that this date is for the time that the animal contributing its hide for the later parchment died. The parchment then may have been treated and stored for a later use, though the common habit was to use parchments fairly recently after they were produced.

In regard to the manuscript itself, there are only two folios, or four pages total. One two-page leaf contains verses that make up Surah 18:23–31 in the present Qur’an, while the other leaf contains Surah 19:91-98 and Surah 20:1-12. These verses are said to conform very closely to the standard text of the present Qur’an, though there are some slight differences. A number of scholars testify that this portion of the Qur’an could have been written shortly after the death of Muhammad. However, other scholars (some from

²² Lester, "What is the Koran?," 112. See also Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 67: "The Hijazi fragments seem to suggest that, even in the eighth century C.E., the text of the Koran was yet to be defined, and the "reading" options that the meagre *rasm* allowed had to be limited by officially recognizing only a part of them as admissible *qira'at*."

Saudi Arabia) point out that the type of script (Hijazi), the colored ink, the chapter decorations all point to a later period of writing at the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 8th. This range fits with recent studies that demonstrate that the Qur'an continued to be edited until later in the 8th century when it was canonized.

In conclusion, the prescribed radiocarbon range indicates that this document could have been written before Muhammad was born (570 AD), or it could have been written before Uthman supposedly collected the verses of the Qur'an in 650 AD. It also allows the possibility that these verses may have come from pre-Islamic liturgy. Another possibility is that this may have been a competing version of the Qur'an that escaped the flames of the traditional Uthmanic destruction of all rejected accounts. However, since the radiocarbon method dated the parchment, and not the ink or the script, and since the script compares best with late 7th century/early 8th century manuscripts, then it is possible that this is simply one of the fragments gathered together in the time of Abd al-Malik (685-705) that would later form parts of what would become known as the Qur'an.

Content of the Heresy of the Ishmaelites

Origins of the Saracen religion

In his treatise, *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, John of Damascus refers to the “coercive religion of the Ishmaelites,” which is the “forerunner of the Antichrist.”²³ Having used strong words in his description of the religion of the Ishmaelites, it is curious that John refers to them as a “heresy” of Christianity rather than a false religion. For John, Christianity is seen as the truth and the standard by which all other religions or cults should be judged. Whenever a religion proclaims something that is contrary to the Bible or a distortion of its truth, it is then deemed to be “heretical.”²⁴ We also need to

²³ HER, 1-2 (lines 1-2) — the author's translation of Kotter's critical edition of John's *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

²⁴ Traditionally, heresy refers to false doctrine and a heretic is one who believes and teaches what is contrary to the orthodox beliefs of the Church. It is significant that John of Damascus used this term in reference to the teachings of Islam, since in his time a heresy would have been false teaching against the established doctrine of the Christian church. However, John did not view the beliefs of the Ishmaelites as a separate religion, such as Manichaeism or even Judaism, but rather as a competing system of doctrines within a Christian context that claimed to be true yet were contrary to the orthodox teachings of Christianity.

remember that at that time there were no references to a universal religion called Islam, but rather that the conquering people group, referred to as Ishmaelites, Saracens or Hagarenes, espoused beliefs and traditions that seemed to be distorted extractions from the two major religions in the area, Judaism and Christianity. It may be that during the first half of the 8th century the religion that was to become Islam was still in its formative process, and the rules, the traditions and the Qur'ān may still have been developing as the Arabs absorbed more and more land, money and power. Thus, Islam was not very distinct from Christianity in the time of John of Damascus and it is only in the latter half of the 8th century, when the earliest biographies on Muhammad were being written and the first *hadiths*²⁵ were being penned, that the finalization of the Qur'ān was also taking place and the distinctions were becoming sharper and more defined, both in a theological and a cultural sense. It is important to note that John was probably writing this in the early 740s, so it is likely that the religion that became Islam was not yet seen as distinctive enough to be called anything more than a distant relative of Judaism, or, in John's eyes, a strange admixture of twisted, erroneous beliefs coming from both Judaism and Christianity— in other words, a heresy.²⁶

Muhammad

In the next section, John indicates that this “false prophet,” Mamed, only knew the Old Testament and New Testament superficially and probably learned aspects of his heresy from an Arian monk.²⁷ In linking Muhammad to Arianism, John perhaps is indicating that he recognizes the essence of the Muslim objection to Christianity, since Arianism denies that Jesus Christ is consubstantial with the Father, making Jesus only a created being, much as the Muslims argued that God could not have any associates.²⁸ If this is the case, is it possible that what became Islam grew out of a partial mixture of the Arian heresy and other Semitic influences? This could also explain John's tendency to call it a heresy rather than a false religion.

²⁵ Hadiths are the purported “sayings of Muhammad” that were used to formulate the law code of Islam. The earliest collection is from *al-Bukhārī* in the 9th century. Therefore, it can only be inferred that some of these sayings originated around the time of John of Damascus.

²⁶ Sahas, “John of Damascus, Revisited,” 112-114. Here Sahas has some good comments on John's usage of “heresy.”

²⁷ HER, 11-13.

²⁸ Sahas, “John of Damascus. Revisited,” 108. See Qur'ān 5:73.

John also finds fault with Muhammad's "rumor" that the scriptures that he gave to his people were brought down from heaven without witnesses, even though other ordinary acts such as marriage and buying property required witnesses. This knowledge of the transmission of the teachings of Muhammad from heaven, however, reveals that in the time of John there was at least recognition of the existence of some type of scriptures that the Arabs collected and followed.

Muhammad's teaching on Christ

John also detects that the core of the false belief is the Saracen portrayal of one God without any associations. At this point John seems to be referring to sūrah 112:1 and 3, or the Sūraht al-Ikhlās,²⁹ which says, according to John, "that there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten."³⁰ His familiarity with this verse at least shows that John had knowledge of at least portions of the Qur'ān around AD 743. He then uses his knowledge of these writings to counter the beliefs of the Saracens.

In John's first counter-argument, he deals with the three main objections the Saracens have to Christianity: belief in the Trinity, belief in the deity of Jesus Christ, and belief that Jesus really did die on the cross and then rose triumphantly from the dead. Realistically speaking, these are the cardinal doctrines of the church, and John took the heretical views of the Saracens seriously in his arguments.

The Saracens taught, however, that God could not be a Trinity since He has "neither been begotten, nor has begotten."³¹ Although they admitted that "Christ is the Word of God and his Spirit,"³² they believed that the greatest sin, which they referred to as "shirk (širk)," was to associate God with a created being. Therefore, since they believed that Christ was only a created being, it was "širk" to say that he was also in the very nature, God. The conclusion that Jesus died on the cross was also problematic, for an admission to an actual crucifixion would open the door to the understanding that Christ therefore died for our sins (which only God could do).

²⁹ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'ān* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana publications, 10th ed., 1999) 112:1 "Say: He is Allāh, the One and Only;" 112:3 "He begetteth not, nor is He begotten"

³⁰ HER, 17-18.

³¹ HER, 17-18.

³² HER, 18.

In the next counter-argument, John ridicules the Saracen story of Jesus denying his deity before God when he arrives in heaven. This must have been something that the Saracens brought up in their arguments, and rather than counter their beliefs with a review of the applicable passages in the Bible, John merely sweeps it aside as a saying that is only “worthy of laughter.”³³

In the area of prophet hood, John confronts the Saracens’ argument that Muhammad is a true prophet of God and therefore should be heeded. According to the Bible that both the Jews and the Christians use, there are strict conditions for prophets of God (see Deuteronomy 18:17-22). Muhammad did not fulfill any of these conditions, so John concluded that Muhammad could not rightfully be called a prophet.

John’s Critique of Muhammad’s Teaching

In the fourth section John criticizes Muhammad’s teaching on Jesus Christ and His relationship with God, the Father. According to the religion of Muhammad, Christians are called “Associators” for ascribing a partner or son to God. John, in turn, calls them “Mutilators” for tearing apart the Trinity, for he reasons that if God’s Word and Spirit are taken away from Him, then He is less than God. Indeed, if there were a time when God did not have his Word or his Spirit, John argues, then God would have been incomplete. If God then attached himself to the Word and the Spirit, something would have been added to him and therefore he would have been changed. However, change is something that only a creature can experience, not the Creator. Thus, in order for God to have always been the Creator rather than a created being, he must have always had his Word and his Spirit, which necessitates the eternal nature of his Word, Jesus Christ. In other words, since God’s Word and His Spirit cannot be separated from Him, then Christ must also be God, for otherwise they are mutilating Him by tearing Him apart!

In all his arguments John is either trying to demonstrate what he considers the superiority of Christianity or the foolishness of the religion of Muhammad, more for the sake of boosting belief in Christianity in the eyes of his Christian readers than for

³³ HER, 32-33.

offering detailed arguments against the new “heresy,” though he is interested in countering their false beliefs.

The Qur’ān and the Sūrahs used

In this fifth section, John refers to the “scriptures” of the Ishmaelites and the doctrines of Muhammad, especially as they are related in four sūrahs.³⁴ In fact, he refers primarily to three Medinan Sūrahs:³⁵ Sūrah 4: *The Women (al-Nisa)*; Sūrah 5: *The Table (al-Ma’idah)*; Sūrah 2: *The Heifer (al-Baqarah)*; and a sūrah that is not in the Qur’ān: *The She-Camel* (though there are allusions to this story in other Sūrahs).³⁶

In the book John identifies as “The Woman,”³⁷ he presents his description in a way that emphasizes the foolishness of the practices involved. First of all he deals with polygamy, which he says is allowed, but only for the man. The husband is allowed up to four wives, and he may also have “one thousand concubines.” However, the woman can only have one husband. Clearly John is trying to show the lasciviousness of these religious beliefs. He brings up the example of Zayd (Muhammad’s adopted son-in-law), divorcing his wife, Zaynab (who is not mentioned by name), so that Muhammad could satisfy his lust and marry her. John also seems to delight in demonstrating how ridiculous it is for Muhammad to reason that it is fine for a man to divorce his wife, but that if he wants to marry her again he must wait until she has married and been divorced by another. It is also important to note that John accuses Muhammad of committing adultery with Zayd’s wife before he made a law making it legal (or actually God granting special conditions to Muhammad). John then alludes to even more immorality that is too obscene for him to mention and then moves on to the next point of ridicule.³⁸

³⁴ It is important to remember that John uses the Greek term γραφή (“writings”) and does not mention the words “Islam,” “Qur’ān,” or “sūrah,” which may indicate that the words were not in use during his lifetime.

³⁵ The Qur’ān was allegedly revealed in two cities, Mecca and Medina, which represent different phases in the “revelations” given to Muhammad.

³⁶ HER, 95-148. Similar parts to the story of the camel are found in sūrahs 7, 11, 17, 26, 54, 91.

³⁷ The actual name of the sūrah is pluralized, *Al-Nisa* — “*The Women*.”

³⁸ John quotes Muhammad as saying “till the land which God has given you, and beautify it. And do this and in this manner,” which may be referring to verses such as Q. 2:223 which says, “your wives are as a tilth [“the plowing of land in preparation for growing crops”] unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will.” This is an obvious reference to overtly sexual behavior where the man has complete dominion over the woman and the woman is seen as merely a sexual object.

The *Camel of God* is not a separate sūrah in the Qur'ān, though parts of the story are found in several sūrahs. John elaborates in the telling of this story so that he can bring about the pinnacle point of his exposé of foolishness to his readers. Yehuda Nevo even reminds his readers that this story is not in the Qur'ān, though there are references to it in sūrah 7:73, 77 and 91:13-14. Nevo also mentions that John devotes more attention to this account than any other canonical sūrah, specifically for the purpose of ridicule.

John then makes brief mention of two more sūrahs, *The Table* and *The Cow*. As far as the reference to The Table is concerned, John is accurate in what the sūrah says – “Christ requested a table from God and it was given to him.”³⁹ However, the Qur'ān suggests that this “miracle” from God was to provide food for the followers of Jesus, and this provision was the true meaning of the Last Supper, not the biblical idea that Jesus was instituting a core belief that he was going to give his “body” and “blood” in exchange for the eternal lives of his followers. This sūrah is one of the longest ones in the Qur'ān and provides many of the laws for Muslim society, such as what to eat, how to live, what to do about thieves and non-believers as well as a number of injunctions against Christians and Jews that abrogate some of the earlier Meccan sūrahs. There are also a number of passages that counter any belief that Jesus is God, such as ayah 72 which starts out “They do blaspheme who say: ‘Allāh is Christ the son of Mary.’” In this sūrah there is a very conscious effort to persuade the reader that this core belief in Christianity is incorrect and misleading. It seems strange, then, that John does not comment on some of these passages that contradict his beliefs. Was he really aware of all that is contained in the sūrah as we now have it, or was he only aware of some of the major issues that he brings up earlier that may be found in this sūrah? It may just be a matter that the brevity of his treatise limited what he could cover. On the other hand, a lack of information on the part of an involved and generally informed scholar may also indicate that he was familiar with only a portion of the Quranic material.

Lastly he mentions the second sūrah, the sūrah of The Cow, but apparently believes that he has already provided enough foolish sayings and declines any comment on the sūrah other than to state that it is also full of foolish sayings. Yehuda Nevo notes that John's lack of knowledge in regard to passages in the Qur'ān is very revealing:

³⁹ HER, 149-151.

The text of the *De Haeresibus* reveals that John was familiar with many Arab traditions, and part but not all of the Qur'ān. In our opinion, it supports Meyendorff's conclusions that John knew only the sūrahs he paraphrased (nos. 2-5), plus some locutions which also appear in the Qur'ān but probably antedate it.... The most interesting aspect of John's account, to us, is that he relates to the Qur'ānic material as separate 'books,' not as one book, and that he presents a story called 'The Camel of God' as one of these books.⁴⁰

It is interesting that the four sūrahs he is somewhat familiar with are all from the so-called "Medinan" period, which was considered to be revealed to Muhammad in the later period of his life when he was living in Medina. It is also curious that John limits his critique of the Ishmaelite religion to these particular sources. This could mean that Nevo and Meyendorff are correct in their assessment that John only knew some of the sūrahs as well as a limited number of stories concerning Muhammad that were circulating at that time. However, John spent at least the first forty years of his life in the midst of the Saracen stronghold. It is only logical to conclude that he must have been well informed in regard to the prevailing writings and doctrines of the Saracens. Therefore, the limited selection of sūrahs and stories may simply be explained by John not having access to a Qur'ān in the monastery and therefore relying on his memory of discussions that he may have had while a civil servant in Damascus. It could also indicate that, while there may have been much more that he could say, he may have felt that he made his point and it would be unnecessary to go on. It certainly would have been helpful for us today if he would have written more on these subjects.

Practices of the Saracens

John's *Heresy of the Ishmaelites* closes with a list of Muslim customs and practices,⁴¹ such as the circumcision of men and women, orders not to observe the Sabbath, orders not to be baptized, contradictory orders to eat certain forbidden foods and to abstain from other foods that were permissible, and absolute orders not to drink any wine. John does not comment on these practices, but he may have selected them in order to show polemically how each practice is contrary to the truth of Christian teaching.

⁴⁰ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, 238.

⁴¹ HER, 153-156.

What does John know about Islam?

At the end of his detailed examination of John's *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, Daniel Sahas summarizes what John knows about Islam:

He presents the facts about Islam in an orderly and systematic way, although not at all complimentary; he demonstrates an accurate knowledge of the religion, perhaps higher than the one that an average Muslim could possess; he is aware of the cardinal doctrines and concepts in Islam, especially those which are of an immediate interest to a Christian; he knows well his sources and he is at home with the Muslim mentality.⁴²

Others concur with Sahas in regard to John's expert knowledge of this area.

Hoyland contends that John is well informed about the "Islam" of his day.

This composition exerted great influence upon the language, tone and content of subsequent Byzantine polemic against Islam. The subjects of Christology, Muhammad's prophet hood and scripture, worship of the cross and Muslim licentiousness, as evidenced by the story of Zayd and the description of paradise were all to feature time and time again and to be presented in the same hostile fashion. But though unsympathetic, the author is well informed.⁴³

Andrew Louth also believes that John has a fairly accurate picture of early Islam, for

He dates Muhammad correctly, and knows about the revelations that came to form the Qur'ān; he seems to know of the Qur'ān as a book, and knows certain of the sūrahs, though he appears to be mistaken about 'the Camel of God,' though much of the story he relates is authentic enough; his summary of Muslim teaching, especially as it affects Christian beliefs, is accurate; and his account of the charges Muslims make against Christians is precisely what one would expect, though John's replies seem to reveal some misunderstanding of Muslim practice.⁴⁴

If these experts in their fields are correct, then John's assessment in his *Heresy of the Ishmaelites* demonstrates a fairly accurate knowledge of the religion and the founder, and reveals that he is aware of some of the main doctrines of the religion, especially in regard to Christ. He also knows some of the Sūrahs which must have been available in some form at that time. However, as Nevo stated above, John related to the Qur'anic material as separate "books," rather than a single book with chapters, and he also included a story called "the Camel of God," as one of the books even though there is no

⁴² Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 95.

⁴³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, 488.

⁴⁴ Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 80.

such surah in the present Qur'an. This seems to indicate that in the mid 8th century the writings that would become the Qur'an were still being edited and corrected according to a master plan for a book that would become the scriptures for a religion that soon would become known as Islam. For John, writing around 743 AD, the stories of Mahmed were still inchoate, the religion was considered a heresy of Christianity, and the teachings were erroneous at best and ludicrous at the worst. In any case, if his perception is accurate, then his testimony indicates that the Traditional Views of Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Islam are very much in jeopardy. Moreover, if the Qur'an is not directly from God, then it is a human document; and since it claims a perfect, divine source, human authorship would undercut its authority. Thus, it is imperative that we study this issue more thoroughly, for if the Qur'an was not canonized until late in the 8th century, it cannot be a revelation given to Muhammad, and certainly not a revelation given by the one God of the universe.

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