

# **John of Damascus: Jesus Christ in Scripture versus Isa in the Qur'an**

Daniel Janosik  
Southern Evangelical Seminary

## **Introduction**

The deity of Jesus Christ is one of the uncompromising beliefs of Christianity. It is also one of the main doctrines countered by the early Muslim apologists. As the chief financial officer in the Umayyad court, John of Damascus (675-750) witnessed the rise of Islam and the subjugation of Christianity. When he retired from civil service he took on the robes of a priest and monk and spent his last years at a monastery near Jerusalem writing not only great doctrine of the church, but also treatises against Islam. Some scholars even suggest that most of John's doctrinal works were either penned in order to educate Christians so that they would understand the true doctrine of the Church in contrast to the new doctrine of Islam, or so that they would be able to defend their Christian beliefs and refute the errors of what he called the "heresy of the Ishmaelites." One of the core issues he focused on was the doctrine of the deity of Christ.

The Qur'an states that Isa/Jesus is a prophet, but cannot be the son of God because God cannot have any associates or sons. On the other hand, John of Damascus wrote that the writings of Muhammad were influenced by an Arian monk and the teachings of the new religion were guided by the antichrist. John then focuses on how these new beliefs distort the New Testament views of Jesus Christ and he seeks to help his fellow Christians defend themselves against the heretical views of this new "coercive religion."

This paper will explore the differences between the Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus/Isa of the Qur'an and also view some of the new considerations that the heretical views presented in the Qur'an came from Nabataean Arabs centered around Petra rather than Mecca. This new twist is gaining more legitimacy and actually answers many of the remaining questions concerning the origins of Islam. John of Damascus opens up the door to a number of these new revelations.

## **Background**

John was born in Damascus, Syria around 675 A.D.<sup>1</sup> He was part of a prominent family in the civil administration of Syria<sup>2</sup> and succeeded his father as the chief financial officer of the Umayyad Empire during the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705).<sup>3</sup> John resigned from his post in the Umayyad government and retired to a monastery near Jerusalem, perhaps St. Sabas,<sup>4</sup> and wrote most, if not all, of his theological works while in this post, including his most famous work, the *Fount of Knowledge*.<sup>5</sup> This is also where He probably died around 750 AD (at the age of 75).<sup>6</sup>

## **The Trinitarian Beliefs of John of Damascus**

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. Revisited (Abr-Nahvain, 23. 1984)*, 106.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972)*, 17-19, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 26-29, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Chase, *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church: Vol. 37 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), xvii, n. 32.

John of Damascus' *Orthodox Faith* is the third part of his larger work, the *Fount of Knowledge*, which was written around AD 743.<sup>7</sup> It contains 100 chapters divided into four books. The first book deals with God in unity and Trinity, the second book deals with God's creation, the third book focuses on Christology and the fourth book discusses a number of theological issues such as faith, baptism, the Eucharist and the resurrection.

In Chapter 6 of Book 1, John follows Gregory of Nyssa's prologue in his Catechetical Discourse<sup>8</sup> and he concentrates on the Word of God. Not only is there one God, but the word of God, the λόγος, is "identical with God."<sup>9</sup> John also emphasizes that it was necessary that the Word had always existed in the Godhead: "For there never was a time when God the Word was not."<sup>10</sup> This is important because in his critique of Islam, John demonstrates that if God is without his Word in the beginning then there would be a time when he is "mutilated or torn apart."

In chapter 8, John intimates a far deeper theme that centers on his concept of the perichoresis (περιχώρησις)<sup>11</sup> of God, in which the three persons of the one God merge mystically within each other in a kind of "circle dance" of God's triune nature.<sup>12</sup> John often cautions the reader that the true essence of God is beyond understanding, but his perichoretic model of the Trinity seeks to give shape to the ineffable by describing the relationship of the three persons of the one God. Regarding this relationship, Robert Letham explains that,

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<sup>7</sup> Chase, *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, xxv.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6, 174.

<sup>11</sup> In general, περιχώρησις refers to a recurrence or cyclical movement, such as in a "circle-dance." Christologically it refers to reciprocity in a relationship, and in regard to the Trinity there is a sense of the interpenetration of the three persons. See Lampe, 1077–78.

<sup>12</sup> See Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting The Trinity* (NY: Paulist Press, 1999), 132; and David Macleod, "Trinity in Scripture," in John H. III Fish, *Understanding the Trinity* (Dubuque, IA: ECSMinistries, 2006), 56–57.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit has the same order and nature toward the Son as the Son has toward the Father. The Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son, and so also is the Holy Spirit in the Son and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Spirit cannot be divided from the Word. So also the Spirit is in God the Father and from the Father. As the Son comes in the name of the Father, so the Holy Spirit comes in the name of the Son. There is one efficacy and action of the Holy Trinity, for the Father makes all things through the Word by the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

In regard to the Father, John develops the idea of the hypostasis who is uncreated and unbegotten. In regard to the Son, John explores the concept of the hypostasis who is uncreated and eternally begotten.

In this relationship the only *essential* difference between the three persons is that the Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds. Although John admits that it is beyond comprehension to truly understand these differences, he does concede that they must be “one simple essence, eminently and antecedently perfect, in three Persons,”<sup>14</sup> without being compounded, since that would make them imperfect. The only way this “unity within a community” could exist, then, is for the three Persons to exist in one another, “uncompounded and without confusion.”<sup>15</sup> Otherwise there would not be the eternal motion that is the still point of the turning world: The unbegotten Father eternally begetting the Son through whom the Holy Spirit is being communicated to the world; who in turn proceeds from the Father and glorifies the Son, and together, both the Son and the Holy Spirit bring glory to the Father, as the three are one and the one God is three in a unity of community that is the dance, the perichoresis, the motion that never ceases and yet is in all as each Person is in one

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, And Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 214.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8, 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8, 185.

another; and still there is only One, for, as John concludes, “God and His Word and His Spirit are really one God.”<sup>16</sup>

This perichoretical relationship emphasizes the idea that God’s Word and Spirit must be inseparable from God; otherwise, if God is without his Word and Spirit then he would be incomplete and therefore less than perfect. This aspect of the Father’s relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit contributes greatly to John’s chief argument for the deity of Christ against the Saracens. Let us now turn to the way John applies his understanding of the Trinity and the deity of Christ to the belief system that developed into Islam.

### **The Trinity and the deity of Christ in *Heresy of the Ishmaelites***

In his treatise called the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, John addresses the Saracens’ denial of the divinity of Christ and their absolute rejection of the Triune nature of God. The followers of Muhammad considered belief in a Trinity to be the greatest of all blasphemies, since in their view it associated a created being with the eternal God. They called this sin “shirk,” and those who associated another with God were called “mushrikun.” For example, the Qur’an states in 5:72–73 that, “They do blaspheme who say: ‘Allah is Christ the son of Mary’.... Whoever joins other gods with Allah—Allah will forbid him the Garden, and the fire will be his abode.... They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a trinity: for there is no god except One God.” Also in surah 9:31 we find that the Ishmaelites were “commanded to worship but one Allah: there is no god but he. Praise and glory to him: (far is he) from having the partners they associate (with him).” However, the Qur’an also acknowledges that Jesus Christ is known as both the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1.8, 185.

“Word of God” and the “Spirit of God.” In surah 4:171 we find the words: “O People of the Book! commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth.

Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one God.”

In his response John acknowledges that the Ishmaelites accepted Jesus Christ as God’s Word and Spirit. He then raises a very important question: “Since you also say that Christ is Word and Spirit of God, why do you accuse us of being Associators?”<sup>17</sup>

John 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.

John may not have been aware of the full extent of *širk* in his time, but he still counters the misrepresentation of the Son of God by reminding the Saracens that their book claims that “Christ is Word and Spirit of God.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, 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! Mark Beaumont feels that this was a good move by John for

Denial of this argument by Muslims would result in an inadequate understanding of the nature of God, so that the Christian can say; ‘if, on the other hand, this is outside of God, then God, according to you is without word and without spirit.’ In John’s logic, since Muslims wish to deny that Christ is God they have to accept that the word and spirit are split off from God as a result of the appearing of

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2016), Appendix C: lines 69–70.

<sup>18</sup> HER, 69-70.

Christ. Christians can drive the point home; 'thus trying to avoid making associates to God, you have mutilated him.'<sup>19</sup>

This argument became one of the most popular ones developed by John and was used for centuries as Christians confronted Muslims in the defense of the Trinity. Perhaps the reason for the success of John's argument is that it is based on his foundational theological explanations of the nature and roles of the three persons of the Trinity in his *Orthodox Faith* where John takes great care to show that it was necessary that the Word had always existed in the Godhead: "For there never was a time when God the Word was not."<sup>20</sup> Also, unlike human speech, which dissipates in the air, the Word of God is always subsistent, "always existing in Him."<sup>21</sup> John makes it clear that the Word could not be "outside of 'god,' but since the Word is always begotten of the Father, he "must be always existing, living, perfect, distinctly subsistent, and having all things that His Begetter has."<sup>22</sup>

### **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,<sup>23</sup> which says, according to John, "that there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten."<sup>24</sup> He also may be alluding

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue With Muslims: A critical analysis of Christian presentations of Christ for Muslims from the ninth and twentieth centuries* (Regnum, 2005), 15.

<sup>20</sup> OF, 1.6, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1.6, 174.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1.6, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of The Holy Qur'ān* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana publications, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., 1999) 112:1 "Say: He is Allāh, the One and Only;" 112:3 "He begetteth not, nor is He begotten"

<sup>24</sup> HER, 17-18.

to Sūrah 4:171,<sup>25</sup> and perhaps Sūrah 19:16-30<sup>26</sup> when he refers to the Saracen belief that “Christ was the Word of God and his Spirit, but only a creature and a servant, and that he was born without seed from Mary, the sister of Moses and Aaron.”<sup>27</sup> Or, on the other hand, John may be referring to Sūrah 4:156-158<sup>28</sup> when he relates that Jesus, without human father, was born a prophet, and that the “Jews unlawfully wanted to crucify him, but after arresting him they only crucified his shadow; for, he says, the Christ was not crucified nor did he die, for God, took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him.”<sup>29</sup> In Heaven, Jesus denies telling people that he was the Son of God, as well as God Himself,<sup>30</sup> which is similar to the dialogue found in Sūrah 5:116ff.<sup>31</sup>

In his counter-argument, John ridicules the Saracen story of Jesus denying his deity before God when he arrives in heaven. According to the story, God questions Jesus after he is miraculously swept into heaven to avoid the crucifixion and says, “O Jesus, did you say that ‘I am the Son of God and God?’”<sup>32</sup> Of course, according to the story, Jesus vehemently denies that he ever said such a thing and assures God that it was a lie told by those who had turned away from God and the truth. This must have been something that

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<sup>25</sup> Q. 4:171 “O People of the Book! commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allāh aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allāh, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allāh and His Messengers. Say not “Trinity”: desist: it will be better for you: for Allāh is one God: glory be to him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To him belong all things in the heavens and on earth.”

<sup>26</sup> Sūrah 19:16-30, and perhaps, Sūrah 3:45. John even records the error of the Qur’ān when it states that Mary, the mother of Jesus is the sister of Moses and Aaron! (Sūrah 19:28).

<sup>27</sup> HER, 18-20.

<sup>28</sup> Q. 4:157 “That they said (in boast), “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allāh”- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not-“ 4:158 “Nay, Allāh raised him up unto Himself;”

<sup>29</sup> HER, 22-25.

<sup>30</sup> HER, 25-27.

<sup>31</sup> Q. 5:116 “And behold! Allāh will say: “O Jesus the son of Mary! didst thou say unto men, “Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allāh?” He will say: “Glory to Thee! never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden.”

<sup>32</sup> HER, 26-27.

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.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Muhammad**

Moving on to Muhammad, 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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. This could also indicate that Islam developed from a type of intermediate monotheism that held Arian views of Christ. This opens up a whole new field of research into the origin of Islam. However, before we look into the origins of Islam, let us review some of the ways the Qur’an viewed Jesus, or rather Isa.

### **Jesus/Isa in the Qur’an**

In the Qur'an, Jesus is referred to in at least twenty-nine passages, or over ninety verses in fifteen surahs. In these passage, the Isa of the Qur’an was born to a virgin, was sinless, performed miracles, and was superior to other prophets. He is referred to by name 25 times (third-person 48 times, first-person 35 times, and the rest as titles and attributes) while Muhammad was only named 4 times. He was also referred to as the “son of Mary”

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<sup>33</sup> HER, 32-33.

<sup>34</sup> HER, 11-13.

<sup>35</sup> Sahas, "John of Damascus. Revisited," 108. See Qur’ān 5:73.

(33 times), and as an “apostle” (4 times). However, **he is never referred to as the Son of God** (4:171; 9:30-31; and 72:3).

- **4:171** O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth.
- **9:30** The Jews call 'Uzair a son of Allah, and the Christians call Christ the son of Allah.
- **9:31** They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah, and (they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but One Allah: there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).

**He is never referred to as God himself** (3:59-62; 5:17, 72-75).

- **3:59** The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam . . .
- **5:17** In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary.
- **5:72** They do blaspheme who say: "Allah is Christ the son of Mary." But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Whoever joins other gods with Allah,- Allah will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode.
- **5:75** Christ the son of Mary was no more than a messenger; many were the messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They had both to eat their (daily) food.
- *Even though he performed miracles:*
- **5:110** O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount My favour to thee and to thy mother. Behold! I strengthened thee with the holy spirit, so that thou didst speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold! I taught thee the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel and behold! thou makest out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird by My leave, and thou healest those born blind, and the lepers, by My leave. And behold! thou bringest forth the dead by My leave. And behold! I did restrain the Children of Israel from (violence to) thee when thou didst show them the clear Signs, and the unbelievers among them said: 'This is nothing but evident magic.'

**In fact, Islam teaches that Jesus was no more than a prophet,**

- **19:19** He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son."
- **19:30** He said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet."

**Islam denies the central message of Christianity by denying Jesus' divinity** (5:116, 19:91, 92)

- **5:116** Allah will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart . . ."
- (Denying that God could have a son)
- **19:91** That they should invoke a son for (Allah) Most Gracious.
- **19:92** For it is not consonant with the majesty of (Allah) Most Gracious that He should beget a son.

**Islam denies the crucifixion of Christ**

- **4:157** That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah" -- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.

**Islam denies the resurrection**

- **19:33** "So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)!"

**Islam claims that Jesus will be merely a sign of Allah's power**

- **43:61** And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment): therefore have no doubt about the (Hour), but follow ye Me: this is a Straight Way.
- **43:63** When Jesus came with Clear Signs, he said: "Now have I come to you with Wisdom, and in order to make clear to you some of the (points) on which ye dispute: therefore fear Allah and obey me."

**Islam claims that Jesus is a forbearer of the coming of Muhammad**

- **61:6** And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me,

and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad."

In some ways, Islam is the direct opposite of Christianity. Recent research in the fields of Archaeology, Linguistics, and Geography have revealed some major inconsistencies in the traditional story of the development of Islam and the life of Muhammad.

### **Implications of Archaeology, Linguistics, and Geography**

One of the most problematic issues with the traditional story of Islam is the historicity of Mecca itself. This concern has increasingly arisen in recent research, which suggests that Mecca as a city did not exist in the time of Muhammad, and therefore could not have actually been the locus of early Islam.

#### Primary source material

There are a number of scholars who claim that Islam could not have originated in Mecca or even in the Hijaz region of Arabia. For example, Peter Townsend, the author of *The Mecca Mystery*, writes, "To put it as bluntly as possible: there is not a single shred of uncontested primary source evidence confirming the existence of an ancient city at the spot where the modern city of Mecca is located."<sup>36</sup> Instead, Townsend goes on to list numerous reasons that Mecca could not be the birthplace of Muhammad, or the Qur'an, or even Islam. First of all, he points out that there is no primary source evidence of the existence of an ancient city in the present location of Mecca.<sup>37</sup> There are numerous mentions of Taif, just 70 miles away, as well as Najran, Sana'a, Medina, and Petra – but no Mecca. There is even an absence of the name of Mecca in any of the ancient inscriptions found in the records of cities that occupied the Arabian peninsula.<sup>38</sup> If Mecca was known as the "mother of all cities," then surely there would be documents from the

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 48.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 49.

7<sup>th</sup> century, or earlier, that would mention the city as well as the people. However, there is nothing in the literature that even alludes to a city called Mecca until the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when the city is mentioned in the *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*, written around 741AD.<sup>39</sup> In addition, it is not found on a map until around 900 AD,<sup>40</sup> and any reference to trade with Mecca is absent in the records of that time.<sup>41</sup> Even Patricia Crone, former professor of Islamic History at Princeton University, in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, was dubious of the claim that Mecca was a major center of trade and worship due to the barren landscape and the absence of any reference to historical sources.<sup>42</sup>

In summary of all the evidence that fails to mention the city of Mecca in any of the primary source material surviving from the time Islam came into existence, Townsend writes, “To put it as simply as possible: If Mecca existed in ancient times, the scribes and kings of Arabia and Northeast Africa would have noticed. They clearly did not. It is entirely absent from the historical record and implications of this should be abundantly obvious.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Petra was at the crossroads of trade between Arabia and the rest of the Middle East, and it was very well known in the literature of that time as well as for hundreds of years earlier. This is why some scholars are considering the city of Petra as the real birthplace of Islam instead of Mecca.

### Physical Features

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Hoyland,

<sup>40</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Gorgias press, 1987), 7. See also Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword* (Little, Brown, 2012), 303.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 54.

In addition, Townsend gives evidence that the physical and geographical features of Mecca do not line up with the Qur'an or the Hadith.<sup>44</sup> For example, the mountains of Safa and Marwah, which mark the journey of Hagar in her quest for water, do not fit with the description in the Hadith. They are too small and close to each other. Also, the Hadith references to Mecca describe a place where the soil is suitable to grow fields of grain, trees, and grapevines. However, Mecca does not have olive trees, and it cannot even support the growth of food for camels and sheep. The Hadith also talks about two parallel valleys with a stream in between, but Mecca does not have these features.<sup>45</sup> However, all of these features are found in the ancient city of Petra.

#### Geographical and Archaeological Features

It is also noteworthy that the scant geographic references to the people groups in the Qur'an are concentrated in Northern Arabia near the city of Petra. Of the 65 references, 54 refer to three people groups which did not reside in the Hijaz area of South Western Arabia where Mecca is situated.<sup>46</sup> The people of 'Ad (Uz or Ud), were allies of the tribes led by Edomites living in the land. These could have been the Hyksos, or shepherd kings, who invaded Egypt from Arabia in the time of Moses. The second group of people mentioned were the Midianites, who were descendants of Abraham through his second wife Keturah. Like the people of 'Ad, the Midianites once controlled Northern Arabia and united the Arabian tribes throughout the region. The Thamuds referred to the people "after 'Ud ('Ad)" who united the tribes of Ishmael and were also known as the Nabataeans.<sup>47</sup> These were the ones who settled in a canyon area that became known as

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 110-13.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 137.

Petra. Thus, the majority of the people groups and the geographical places mentioned in the Qur'an centered in Northern Arabia around the city of Petra, and not the Southwestern city of Mecca.

Another major discrepancy, made known by Middle Eastern archaeologist Dan Gibson, is that recent archaeological examinations of the mosques from the first 100 years of Islam indicate that the *qibla*, or the direction of prayer, did not face toward Mecca, but rather to a more northern location, the Nabataean area around Petra where the people of 'Ad, Midian, and Thamud all resided. Due to this archaeological evidence, Gibson does not support Mecca as the birthplace of Islam. Instead, based on his research Gibson concludes that, "Islam was founded in northern Arabia in the city of Petra. It was there that the first parts of the Qur'an were revealed before the faithful were forced to flee to Medina. Thus, the prophet Muhammad never visited Mecca, nor did any of the first four rightly guided caliphs. Mecca was never a center of worship in ancient times, and was not part of the ancient trade routes in Arabia."<sup>48</sup> In addition, Gibson mentions that at a 2002 conference on Nabataean Studies held in Petra he had the opportunity to speak to several Jordanian and Saudi archaeologists who admitted that the archeological record at Mecca was basically non-existent before 900 AD.<sup>49</sup> This may be why the Saudi government is destroying most of the ancient buildings and sites in Mecca.<sup>50</sup> They may be trying to cover over something that was "not there" before the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Linguistic evidence

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<sup>48</sup> Gibson, Qur'anic Geography, 379.

<sup>49</sup> Gibson, Qur'anic Geography, 223.

<sup>50</sup> "Destruction of early Islamic heritage sites in Saudi Arabia," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction\\_of\\_early\\_Islamic\\_heritage\\_sites\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction_of_early_Islamic_heritage_sites_in_Saudi_Arabia)

The final link to Petra can be found through a linguistic study of the Qur'an itself. Robert M. Kerr, a professor of Comparative Semitic Linguistics at Waterloo University, suggests that the language of the Qur'an places it in the context of North Arabia, 600 miles north of Mecca, centered around the city of Petra.<sup>51</sup> He bases his evidence on the fact that the script used in the Qur'an is from the North Arabian Nabataeans and not the South-Arabian alphabet that was used in the Hijaz where Medina and Mecca were located. He also suggests that since the Qur'an's vocabulary is "largely borrowed from Aramaic, especially Syriac, the liturgical language of the local churches," this further indicates that the Classical Arabic used in the Qur'an had its origin in the *Arabia Petraea* of Syro-Palestine with its capital in the city of Petra. He points out that if the Qur'an had been written in Mecca or Medina, it would have been in "a different Semitic language and written in a different script."<sup>52</sup> Based on these linguistic differences, Kerr concludes that "all of the contemporary epigraphical, literary and linguistic evidence points to Islam being a product of Arabs living in Syro-Palestine."<sup>53</sup>

Mark Durie, who has a Ph.D. in Linguistics and a Th.D. in Islamic Studies, agrees with Kerr and points out that there are a number of linguistic features that demonstrate that the Arabic of the Qur'an was not a Meccan dialect, but rather developed in the Southern Levant (the area around Petra) as a Nabataean dialect. Durie concludes that the orthographic and phonological features of the Qur'anic *rasm* (root consonants) provide clear evidence that what became the Classical Arabic of the Qur'an was never the native dialect of Mecca, but rather reflects the Nabataean Arabic dialect of the region

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Kerr, "The Language of the Koran," *Tingis Magazine*, February 18, 2013. <https://www.tingismagazine.com/articles/the-language-of-the-koran/>

<sup>52</sup> Robert Kerr, "The Language of the Koran."

<sup>53</sup> Robert Kerr, "The Language of the Koran."

surrounding Petra.<sup>54</sup> If these assertions are correct, then it will be necessary to revisit the question of not only the origin of the Qur'an, but also the origin of Muhammad and Islam itself, for if Mecca did not exist at the time of Muhammad, then he could not have lived there. Also, it would be much more possible for the Qur'an to reflect the beliefs of the Nabataeans who were familiar with the Jewish-Christian heresies and perhaps responsible for creating the greatest Christian heresy of all time.

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<sup>54</sup> See Mark Durie, *The Qur'an and its Biblical reflexes: Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).