

John of Damascus



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Abstract: *John of Damascus, also known as Saint John of Damascenes, was born in the second half of the seventh century, between 674 and 675 in Damascus (Sahas, 1984). He was a monk, a priest, a hymnographer, and a scholar. He was born in an Arab - Christian family. His grandfather “Mansur ibn-e-Sarjun was the financial governor of Damascus” until it was conquered by Muslim general Khalid bin Waleed. This Research paper is a qualitative content analysis that employs analytical and interpretative tools to examine John of Damascus's most referenced and notable polemics against Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet.*

Key Words: Damascus, John of Damascus, Orthodoxy, Bible, Content Analysis

Introduction

On Mid-April 634 Khalid bin Waleed with his Muslim army knocked at the door of the city of Damascus. His army surrounded the whole city and starved them without food. After some time a small group of Christians came as a negotiator to Khalid bin Waleed. Among those were Mansur the grandfather of John. An agreement was made according to which the Christians will be allowed to practice their religion and their sacred religious places will not be hurt and anyone who left the city of Damascus is allowed to move within three days. But after three days Khalid realized that the agreement was too lenient and many of the

Christians had left the city. His army followed the refugees and surrounded them in the desert, killing them and looting them. In this way, the city of Damascus officially fell under Muslim rule. After the city was besieged, Mansur was appointed as a tax collector in Umayyad caliphate under the reign of caliph Muawiya 1 (Sahas, 1984). For Arabs John was Mansur ibn e Sarjun, the same name as his grandfather whereas among Christians he was John of Damascus. John and his father Sarjun ibn e Mansur both inherited the financial position from Mansur and after Mansur, Sarjun became the chief financial officer of

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Damascus under the reign of caliph Abd al-Malik. Following the footsteps of his father John also joined as a civil servant to caliph Al Walid in Damascus. John is said to have served Muslim caliphs Abd Al-Malik, his son Al Walid and Umar II.

John knew both Arabic and Greek. His father made sure that he perform well in both languages. He learnt Greek from Cosmas, a slave from Sicily captured by Arabs. John's father Sarjun paid for the ransom money of Cosmas and made him teach Greek to his kids John and Cosmas (Not to confuse the namesake of Cosmas discussed earlier, this one is an orphan kid adopted by Sarjun). John is believed to have died in 749. Living a major portion of his life with the Umayyad his life coincides with the reigns of the Umayyads in Damascus, so according that way Damascus's John was born right after the Muawiya's death and he left this world during the mighty reign of Marwan II. His work gave a base to Christian apologists and helped them shield their people from the rising and powerful attraction and influence of Islam.

During the later tenures of the Umayyad caliphate, the rulers started to replace Greek with Arabic and in addition, they started to remove the Christian population from important government positions. It is believed that "some things yet required Greek language which held the necessity of Christians in government offices (Turtledove, 1982). Louth (1998) believes that John was expelled out of services when the transition from Greek to Arabic was in process in 706". But Sahas (1984) found no reason for John to be unknown of Arabic which could become a reason for his expulsion. Scholars support their argument with the fact that if John did not know Arabic

he would have been expelled from the government thus he is probably believed to be forcefully retired during the reign of caliph Umar II who was against the Christians occupying government positions (Congourdeau, 1994). Simmons (1959) also reiterates that caliph Umar II deprived and abstained Christians from holding public positions. Thus, "since Umar II was so intolerant of Christians serving in administrative posts, even if they knew Arabic, it is likely that John remained through the reign of Walid I (706–15) and entered the monastic life around the year 716" (Janosik, 2016).

After being removed from the public office John migrated to a monastery near Jerusalem known as St. Sabas. This place is considered a turning point in John's life. This is the place where John became a priest and a monk. This is the place from where Mansur of Arabs became John of Damascus. John started teaching in the Church and accessed the library of St. Sabas which helped him study the older manuscripts as well as citations of different scholars and these studies were the base that developed him into an author and apologist of Christianity.

At the end of the seventh century, Muslims were conquering almost all of the world. Islam was spreading with an enormous speed. At this stage, the Christians thought Islam and Muslims to be punished by Jesus for their sins and they started repenting of their sins. Many Christians were influenced by the new religion and many believed that this is an advanced religion many others who did not have had answers to the arguments and logic of Muslims were also being influenced. So many Christians started to convert and

embrace Islam. Upon seeing this situation and putting a hold on the flow of Christians being converted he started writing polemics against Islam. He constructed simple dialogues in an attempt to teach the Christians answers to the common questions of Muslims that they previously did not have had. One of his famous works is his famous three treaties against Emperor Leo. Leo banned the veneration of icons in his territory. John when heard about it wrote the first treaty condemning his act in 726. He again wrote two treaties in 730. Leo in response was in a rage but he could not do anything against John because John at that time was in Arab territory under the protection of the Caliph.

There were three aspects of John's apologetic approach towards Islam and Muslims. First of all, John considered Islam a heresy. This means that John and his other Christian fellows did not consider Islam to be worthy of being considered as a religion and they instead called it a Christian heresy, which means that Islam is a Christian's own internal problem. Secondly John believed that Muslims were reviving the idolatry in the form of the stone in the Kaaba, he considered that stone to be the idol of Muslims and them being worshipping that stone. Thirdly he attacked the prophet and accused him of constructing a heresy just to meet his own sexual desires.

John refers to Islam as the Heresy of the Ishmaelites. He is one of the main known Christian pundits of Islam. John guarantees that Muslims were once admirers of Aphrodite who trailed Mohammad in light of his "appearing show of devotion," and that Mohammad himself read the Bible and, "similarly, it appears," addressed an Arian priest that showed him Arianism rather than

Christianity. A portion of the Muslims, John says, asserted that the Old Testament that Christians accept predicts Jesus' approaching is confused, while different Muslims guaranteed that the Jews altered the Old Testament to delude Christians (perhaps into accepting Jesus is God, yet John doesn't say).

John likewise claims to have perused the Quran, or if nothing else parts of it, as he censures the Quran for saying that the Virgin Mary was the sister of Moses and Aaron and that Jesus was not killed but brought alive into paradise. While describing his supposed discourse with Muslims, John asserts that they have blamed him for symbol love for adorning the Cross and loving Jesus. John asserts that he let the Muslims know that the dark stone in Mecca was the top of a sculpture of Aphrodite. Additionally, he guarantees, the Muslims were off-base not to connect Jesus with God assuming Jesus is the Word of God. John asserts that assuming Jesus is the Word of God, and the Word of God has existed all the time with God, then, at that point, the Word should be a piece of God, and accordingly be God himself, by which, John says, it would be off-base for Muslims to call Jesus the Word of God yet not God himself.

John further cases to have addressed Muslims about Mohammad. He utilizes the plural "we", regardless of whether concerning himself, or to a gathering of Christians that he had a place with who addressed the Muslims, or concerning Christians overall. Notwithstanding, John asserts that he asked the Muslims what witnesses can affirm that Mohammad got the Quran from God - since John says, Moses got the Torah from God within the sight of the Israelites, and since Islamic law orders that a Muslim can wed and

do exchange the presence of witnesses - and what scriptural prophets and sections anticipated Mohammad's coming - since, John says, Jesus was predicted by the prophets and entire Old Testament. John guarantees that the Muslims addressed that Mohammad got the Quran in his rest. John asserts that he tongue in cheek replied, "You're turning my fantasies." John additionally guarantees that Islam licenses polygamy, that Mohammad submitted infidelity with a buddy's better half prior to prohibiting infidelity, and that the Quran is loaded up with crazy stories, for example, the She-Camel of God.

Literature Review

John is probably best known for his writings which are divided into three categories: theological exposition and defence of Orthodox faith, sermons and homilies, and liturgical poetry and hymnody. John has written two treatises that criticize as well as put accusations as well as defend the Christian arguments against the religion Islam. These two treatises are *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* and *Disputation between a Christian and Saracen*. John's larger work is called "Fount of Knowledge" consists of 100 chapters and is categorized into four books. The first book is about the relationship between God and the trinity. Whereas the second one is focused on the questions related to the creation of God. Meanwhile, the third book is all about Christology and the fourth book covers a variety of topics related to Christian beliefs. This book fount of Knowledge is considered one of the bases of the Christian religions. John compiled and interpreted as well as cited different Christian teachings into a single book. Many people say

that Fount of Knowledge proves that John was not only a compiler but also a good writer and critique because in the book fount of knowledge many of the thoughts and interpretations of John are written along with the compiled teachings of the Christian religion.

His writing "The Heresy of the Ishmaelites" talks about Islam and calls Islam heresy and calls Muhammad a false prophet and names Muslims as Saracens. In this book, John terms Islam a heresy of Christianity. He clearly sets Christianity as a standard religion and sees all other religions through the lens of his own religion and in this way he terms the religion Islam as the heresy of Ishmaelites. In this writing, he calls Muslims, especially Arabs by three names: Hagarenes, Ishmaelites and Saracens. Hagarenes because of the Arabs being descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael whose mother was Hagar. And Ishmaelites itself is related to Ismael whereas Saracens were the term of Arabs at times. Right around 1300 years prior John of Damascus initially fostered his remorseful way to deal with Islam. The initial phase in this approach was to completely comprehend the Saracen convictions. The subsequent stage gave a clarification with regards to how the Christian Scriptures and regulations countered those convictions. He likewise gave re-contextualized reasoning for questioned regulations like the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Because of his struggles, John drove the way in creating an apologetic that was utilized for a really long time even after his death. In this book John called Mohammad a false prophet giving his argument that according to Islam witnesses are required during any business deal or even during marriage then how come there

are not any witnesses during the “wahi” on Muhammad, thus calling him a false Prophet as there is no verification or evidence of him receiving any information from God. John also criticizes the Islamic concept of “Shirk” which abstains Muslims from associating anything with God and it is considered the greatest sin in Islam which God will never forgive; while criticizing this concept John says that this concept is utterly against the concept of trinity and if the concept of trinity shatters then the God is a lesser God. Another objection of Islam written in this writing is that Muslims criticize Christians and name them as idolaters because of their worshipping or we can say venerating the holy cross but he, in turn, criticizes the Muslims and says that if they term Christians as idolaters then how they themselves can escape from the same term as this practice is common in their religion too as they kiss and worship the holy stone in Kaaba. In his other objection, he raises finger at the Islamic family system by saying that in Islam a man is allowed to have four wives whereas a woman is allowed to have only one, in addition, a man can also have thousands of concubines. During this argument, he gave the example of the son of Muhammed who divorced his wife and prophet Muhammad married her.

Another writing of John “Disputation between a Christian and Saracen” is written in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and Saracen (Janosik). While heresy of Ishmaelites is written to address the dangers of the new religion Islam whereas this book is written as a tool of training the Christians against the new religion and the arguments of Muslims. The arguments of Muslims were so strong that many of the questions raised could not be answered by Christians thus Christians were

more inclining towards the new religion. So this book was written specifically for the Christians so that they could answer the questions or arguments raised by the Muslims. There are two main themes in this book; the first theme is related to the man’s relation with his creator and the second theme covers the different angles of Christology. The dialogues in this book reflected that John was more concerned about Christians getting hold of their beliefs in contrast to what he termed as heresies of Muslims (Saracens).

[Ables \(2010\)](#) carried out a study to compare the transfer of perichoresis from Christology to trinitarian theology between John of Damascus and Pseudo-Cyril. [Ables \(2010\)](#) claimed that the credit for the transfer of perichoresis from Christology to trinitarian theology goes to John of Damascus whereas another author G.L. Prestige claimed it to be the work of Pseudo Cyril. The expression “perichoresis” principally represents the “interpenetration” in each other of the heavenly people in the Trinity, however, sometime before this, it was first utilized for the “interpenetration” of the heavenly and human instincts in Christ. It was not until the eighth century that John of Damascus initially utilized the term the Trinity. The author carried out a study using the content analysis method and analyzed the claims of G.L. Prestige regarding the transfer of perichoresis from Christology to trinitarian theology to be related to Pseudo Cyril and then he analyzed the writings of John of Damascus. [Ables \(2010\)](#) while not reaching a clear conclusion argues that the evidence, after comparing both of the writings inclines more towards the writings of the John of Damascus but he does not clearly reach a conclusion

because of his reliance on the secondary sources rather than the primary ones. So he shed a light and gave researchers a new area to conduct research on.

Another author [Koval \(2019\)](#) carried out a study to analyze and evaluate the arguments of John of Damascus on the veneration of icons. Icons are the paintings or images considered sacred among Christians, especially orthodox catholic Christians. Veneration of icons is a long-living conflict between orthodox Christians and Protestant Christians. The protestant Christians are against the veneration of icons and the arguments against it citing the theological authors who are in the favor of their arguments especially John Calvin and his writing "Institutes of the Christian Religion". The protestants want the orthodox Christians to review the veneration of icons. Whereas orthodox Christians do not want to hear or talk about their beliefs. Reviewing their beliefs is much more to ask from them. They see their orthodox religion as a whole and for them rejecting any part of the religion means destruction as a whole. John of Damascus, the author of the writings being studied and analyzed is said to be the biggest supporter and originator or the defender of the faith of veneration of icons. So the author carried out a study to analyze and evaluate what crucial theological arguments are used by famous VIII century theologian John of Damascus to support the veneration of icons in Orthodoxy. The author carried out a content analysis to study three things. First of all, he studied the origins of veneration of icons and then he studied the writings of John of Damascus in relation to this concept and then he studied the concepts of John of Damascus from the lens of the Bible to decide whether the concepts of

John are in line with the teachings of Bible or not. His study concludes that John of Damascus had strong philosophical writings that strongly supported the concept of veneration of icons. John created strong arguments and focused on the images and their relations with reality. He also clearly defined the difference between worship and veneration to make the concept of veneration of icons clear. The author concludes that although John had very strong arguments these icons were not in line with the teachings of the Holy Bible.

[Himmerich \(1985\)](#) conducted research to study the concept of deification in the writings of John of Damascus and relate it with another popular concept of John, perichoresis. He defined deification as a relationship between humans and God in which the human has a free will to incline towards God and by approaching God and remaining steady in his path, the man at a level becomes God. He explained deification as a replaceable phenomenon in which man can become God and God can become man and man can even communicate with God. While relating the concept of deification with the concept of perichoresis the author describes that such united nature of God and man can be achieved through the process of perichoresis. And the author explains the concept of perichoresis as explained by the John of Damascus that which means that the nature of two things can interpenetrate each other while remaining distinct. The concept of perichoresis given by the John of Damascus paves the way for this other concept of John. Unfortunately in today's world especially after the separation of church and God, today's man who is the follower of science and who weighs things according to the concepts of science does not see much logic in

these concepts of deification and perichoresis. [Himmerich \(1985\)](#) after analyzing the content with the method of content analysis completed his study of deification in the writings of John of Damascus with the following findings. Firstly he found that deification is the real purpose of human life. God has created humans for the purpose of deification. He also found that deification solely is upon a person's freewill. It is not forced by God and if it would then there would not be any humans out there. And he says that the road to deification lies in virtue. Doing prayers and other pious practices can lead to deification as these practices help a person to get rid of evil.

Framing Theory

In 1972, Gregory Bateson first introduced the concept of framing. He described emotional pictures as an interactive spatial and temporary limitation of messages. Framing is associated with the establishment of the agenda, but it extends the study by concentrating not on a specific issue but on the essence of the problems. The theory of framing is based on the media which focus on certain events and place them within a region of significance. The basic concept is vital if a second-tier agenda is to be established. Within the framework of the agenda, the media emphasize certain elements of reality and downplay other elements.

Framing is the delicate choice by the media of certain elements of a problem to make it more meaningful and to highlight a certain phenomenon. In a communication text, Entman states that the objective is to choose and encourage certain aspects of perceived reality to encourage a particular question definition, causal interpretation,

moral evaluation, and/or treatment suggestions for the item described. It aims to make them more important. Framing is used to depict the aspect of communication that causes people to choose another meaning. Framing promotes decision-making by emphasizing certain components through their elimination. Framing is a significant element in which the occurrences can be underscored. It can control the perception of the audience and also the recognition of a special significance. The adverse framing can have a major effect on the individuals because the media plays a significant part in the opinions.

The main framework distinctions (Mass communication theory (Online), 2017) are twofold: natural and social. Both help individuals interpret data. They play a role. In a broader social context for understanding their experiences. The two are functionally distinguished. Focusing on how media looks at particular subjects—setting the agenda and then taking a further step to develop a framework for the public to understand these data. The creation of story frames is usually a thoughtful decision by sources, reporters, journalists or publishers. In some ways, the press justifies itself as gatekeepers that collect, pick, arrange and present their thoughts, activities and subjects.

Content Analysis

Content Analysis started with the establishment of a methodology by Alfred R. Lindesmith that would refute the current hypothesis. 1940's- research method is already frequently used. It is a study instrument or method that helps the analysis of current content, and it includes characteristics of any

kind, including words, pictures, subjects, texts, and an objective and quantitative effort in presenting content. They are used to determine the existence of certain words, thoughts, subjects, phrases, characters or sentences within texts or sets of records and quantify this presence objectively. The content analysis technique allows the scientist, by finding the more significant structures of his communicational content, to include a big amount of textual data and systematically recognize its characteristics such as the frequencies of most of the keywords. There are two ways through which content analysis can be processed. The researcher used content analysis for this study. Content analysis is a common and popular technique used extensively in the social sciences. The researcher has taken data from various research. The researcher tried to cover and analyze every story that has been published in research about John of Damascus. We've analyzed the story that tells about John of Damascus's work. And in this research, we have included the opinions of various researchers.

This is a qualitative study that employs analytical and interpretative tools to examine John of Damascus's most referenced and notable polemics against Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet. As previously said, three major domains for research are Islam as a religion, the Quran, and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). A qualitative and quantitative methodology was used for mixed approaches. This includes literature review, dialogue and content analysis of official documentation, plans and reports, a compilation of official statistics, surveillance and analysis of information received by agencies and NGOs, and recording and

analyzing various platforms including social media, regulations, manuals and manuals. We have compared sources, if possible, and consulted experts, supporters and main informants in advance to endorse our media-informed conclusions for the reasons for these disparities and inconsistencies. We agree that it does not cover every case in full but is intended to include as much information and scope as possible in the problems and circumstances involved. This report will encourage efforts to create an academic study group that is committed to this issue and can tackle the challenges highlighted. This paper demonstrates the continuing growth and inculcation of Islamophobia in the world.

Conclusion

By calling Islam "Heresy" and terming Muslims as Saracens the author seemed to be covered by the fright of fast-spreading new religion. He was trying to protect his fellow Christians under the umbrella of putting false accusations on religion Islam. In his book "The Heresy of Ishmaelites" John named Prophet Muhammad as a false Prophet and while giving logic to his argument he said that Prophet Muhammad did not have had miracles as the Prophets preceded him. Whereas it is clearly mentioned in Quran and Hadith the story of the Prophet making the moon into two pieces just by raising his finger in the sky and there are hundreds of such narrations related to the different miracles of the Holy Prophet.

John's major goal was to use his pen to get together the Christian beliefs and not only did he try to bring Christians to one point especially focusing on the Holy Trinity, but he

also wanted to keep them away from a new religion which they were constantly being attracted to. Being a religion of equality, justice and truth, it was very fascinating for not only Christians but other non-Muslims too. Besides Christian believers had no arguments when confronted with the sayings of ALLAH in the form of the Quran and the teachings of his messenger the last Prophet (peace be upon him). So, in this hard time, John took responsibility on his shoulders to put his

fellow believers again on the path of their religion and in this regard he maintained two strategies. On one side he started working on his religious beliefs to gather believers on one points and on the other side he started to write polemics against Islam accusing the religion in his two works and showing himself as the person for this task due to his believed credibility in relation to major of his past spent with Muslims and having seen them from a much closer perspective.

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