Creating a Theology of Icons in Umayyad Palestine: John of Damascus' 'Three Treatises on the Divine Images'

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John of Damascus (c. 655–745) is a striking figure in church history as a defender of icon veneration and as a Church Father who maintained Byzantine Orthodoxy despite living under Muslim rule. His life amongst Muslims and his association with the Umayyad Melkite Christian community, the Christian Church which attempted to maintain an adherence to Byzantine Orthodoxy after the Arab conquest, is often associated with his defence of icons. However, most scholarship claims that his Three treatises on the divine images *were written solely against Byzantine iconoclasm. This article provides a close reading of his* Treatises *focusing on themes which overlap with contemporary Jewish and Muslim debates on figurative images, arguing that John wrote his* Treatises *in an attempt to create a seminal Melkite theology on icons for both Byzantine and Umayyad Christians faced with iconoclastic arguments from all three Abrahamic faiths.*

J ohn of Damascus (*c.* 655–745) is a striking figure in church history as a defender of icon veneration and as a Church Father who maintained Byzantine Orthodoxy though he lived his entire life under Muslim rule. While his life amongst Muslims is often associated with his defence of icons, most scholarship claims that his *Three treatises on the divine images* were written solely against Byzantine iconoclasm. With few exceptions, the religious diversity of the areas in which he lived is virtually ignored.[1]

DOP = Dumbarton Oaks Papers; PG = Patrologia Graeca

[1] An exception is the work of Sidney Griffith, who associates John of Damascus' *Three treatises on the divine images* far more with Umayyad policy and a Muslim *milieu*: 'Images, Islam and Christian icons: a moment in the Christian/Muslim encounter in early Islamic times', in Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (eds), *La Syrie de Byzance a l'Islam VIIe–VIIIe siècles*, Damascus 1992, 121–38; 'Christians, Muslims, and the

John lived through two iconoclastic edicts. The first was that of the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd II (r.720–4), which potentially affected him or people he knew directly as he was a priest at the Anastasis in Jerusalem at this time. The second was the iconoclastic edict of the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r.717–41) which is largely considered to have begun with his 726 destruction of the icon on the Chalke gate and to have escalated in 730 when Leo III forced Germanus to abdicate from his office as patriarch of Constantinople for remaining an iconophile.[2] John experienced Leo III's iconoclasm vicariously through reports from Byzantine Christians but never directly. Despite official iconoclastic edicts, the Jewish, early Muslim and Christian populations of the eighth-century Near East were entrenched in debate and were far from unified regarding images.[3] Some forms of Byzantine Christian iconoclasm even saw veneration of the cross as potentially idolatrous.[4]

Recent research by Christian Sahner and Daniel Reynolds on the iconoclastic edict of Yazīd II and eighth-century Palestinian iconoclasm have shed new light on the attitudes of eighth-century Christianity, Judaism and Islam towards images in sacred space. Sahner demonstrates the widespread effects in both Christianity and Islam of Yazid II's edict while Reynolds posits a possible local 'idoloclasm' based on archaeological evidence.[5] Both the edict and the idoloclastic debate could have played a role in prompting John to write his *Three treatises on the divine images* as a *summa*

image of one God', in Brigitte Groneberg, Hermann Spieckermann and Frauke Weiershäuser (eds), *Die welt der götterbilder*, New York 2007, 347–80; and 'John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad era: the intellectual and cultural *milieu* of Orthodox Christians in the world of Islam', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* xi/2 (2011), 207–37.

[2] A. A. Vasiliev, 'The iconoclastic edict of the Caliph Yazid II, AD 721', *DOP* ix (1956), 26–7.

[3] For discussion on late antique Byzantine use of icons in the Christianisation of space in competition with Jewish communities see Paul Dilley, 'Christian icon practice in apocryphal literature: consecration and the conversion of synagogues into churches', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* xxiii (2010), 285–302.

[4] While imperial iconoclasm did not explicitly consider cross veneration problematic, the pieces of the 'True Cross' which served as a relic for veneration, particularly during the 'Lenten feast of the Veneration of the Cross' and the 'September Exaltation of the Cross', were kept hidden by the Byzantine emperors throughout the Byzantine iconoclastic period: Averil Cameron, 'Intervention de Averil Cameron sur la communication de Sidney Griffith', in Canivet and Rey-Coquais, *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam*, 138, and 'Blaming the Jews: the seventh-century invasions of Palestine in context', *Travaux et mémoires* xiv (2002), 71–2.

[5] Christian Sahner, 'The first iconoclasm in Islam: a new history of the edict of Yazīd II (AH 104/AD 723)', *Der Islam* xciv/1 (2017), 5–56; Daniel Reynolds, 'Rethinking Palestinian iconoclasm', *DOP* lxxi (2018), 1–64. Reynold's 'idoloclasm' argument can be found throughout, but is introduced at p. 4.

theologica for how Christian tradition should treat images and the cross in sacred space.[6] Keeping local Jewish, Christian and Muslim iconoclastic debates in mind, as none of these communities found a consensus during John's lifetime, this article will argue that John's *Three treatises on the divine images* are directed towards a generally Christian audience, Byzantine and Palestinian, and that they address both Byzantine and local Muslim and Jewish issues of idoloclasm.

An updated life of John of Damascus

John of Damascus was born Cyrene ibn Manūr.[7] His birthdate is unknown, but he was probably born in Damascus around 655 and died sometime before 745. His father, Manūr ibn Sarjūn al-Rūmī, was a secretary (*kātib*) to the Umayyad caliphs and was an official in the caliphal court as well as *mawlā'* of Mu'āwiya I (661–80), Yazīd (680–3), Mu'āwiya II (683) and 'Abd al-Malik (686–705). He worked for the Umayyads until the end of 'Abd al-Malik's reign (685–705).[8] John likely grew up at the Umayyad court and followed his father's profession until Manūr left the service of the Umayyads in 705.[9]

In 705 John followed his associate, also named John, to Jerusalem where he became a priest at the Anastasis while the other John became John V, patriarch of Jerusalem. John of Damascus' social influence and wealth likely aided the re-establishment of the patriarchate of Jerusalem after its

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[6] John was, of course, writing other works to perform this same identity consolidating and constructing mission in other theological contexts. For a general introduction to John as a creator of Melkite norms see Griffith, 'John of Damascus and the Church in Syria', esp. pp. 219–20, 223–4, 233–7.

[7] Sean Anthony has convincingly argued for a re-evaluation of John's original name, claiming that previous academics had conflated John with his father and even occasionally grandfather: 'Fixing John Damascene's biography: historical notes on his family background', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* xxiii/4 (2015), 625–6. I am grateful to Christian Sahner for this reference.

[8] Sidney Griffith, 'The Manṣūr family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad times', in Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (eds), *Christians and others in the Umayyad state*, Chicago 2016, 30; Vassa Kontouma, *John of Damascus: new studies on his life and works*, Farnham 2015, 2; Anthony, 'Fixing John Damascene's biography', 618. A *mawlā'* was a client of an Arab family, a position which allowed non-Muslims to either rise into or remain in the social class of their client family. The position was one theoretically of mutual benefit, where the Arab family supplied social status and protection while the *mawlā'* shared the benefits of his skills.

[9] Kontouma, *John of Damascus*, 28–9. There are other versions of John of Damascus' life from hagiographical literature, but Kontouma has made a strong case for the version given here. Attestations to John's life as a secretary or scribe to the Umayyads can be found in Anthony, 'Fixing John Damascene's biography', 624.

sixty-seven-year hiatus.[10] It was between 705 and 742 that most of John's works were likely written. After the death of John V in 735, John of Damascus held a post in the patriarchate until the early 740s, but due to his hostility towards both Constantine V and Walīd II, as well as possibly his iconophile treatises, he was slowly isolated and lost his good standing and reputation in Jerusalem. He himself said that he had been silenced.[11] Sometime between 735 and 742 John was slandered by people from his community. Vassa Kontouma posits that these events, and his awareness of the decline of his reputation and position in the community, prompted him to leave Jerusalem and exile himself in a monastery or simple hermitage in the desert. During the final years of his life John began to revise his life's works, although he did not complete this task before his death, and some, especially the third of his *Three treatises on the divine images*, were edited by others.[12]

John's *Treatises* represent the life-long reworking of a treatise originating between 726–30, after Leo III destroyed the icon at the Chalke gate (726) and when Germanus, the patriarch of Constantinople (r. 715–30), abdicated.[13] The year 730 marked an increased imperial intolerance of

[10] After the death in 638 CE of Patriarch Sophronius, who was present for the Arab conquest of Jerusalem, the patriarchal throne in Jerusalem remained unfilled for 67 years. For Sophronius' writings at the time of the conquest see Philip Booth, *Crisis of empire: doctrine and dissent at the end of late antiquity*, Berkeley 2014, 267–82. For context on the Chalcedonian Church in the seventh century under Muslim rule see also Marek Jankowiak, 'Travelling across borders: a church historian's perspective on contacts between Byzantium and Syria in the second half of the seventh century', in *Arab-Byzantine coins and history*, London 2011, 13–25.

[11] 'I should keep quiet at all times. Indeed, I have been amputated in speech for not having paid attention': John of Damascus, *Letter to Cometas* (Greek = *PG* xcv.65B–68A; English = Kontouma, *John of Damascus*, 25).

[12] Kontouma, *John of Damascus,* 26–7, 29–30; Bernard Flusin, 'I "Discorsi contro i etrattori delle immagini" di Giovanni di Damasco e l'esordio del primo iconoclasmo', in S. Chialà and L. Cremaschi (eds), *Giovanni di Damasco, un padre al sorgere dell'Islam: atti del XIII convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa, sezione bizantina, Bose, 11–13 settembre 2005*, Bose 2006, 55–6.

[13] Speck posits that, in the second *Treatise*, John is poorly informed about Patriarch Germanus' fate: John of Damascus, *Three treatises on the divine images*, trans. Andrew Louth, Crestwood, NY 2003, 69. John thinks that Germanus was punished and beaten. The later, but Byzantine, Theophanes and Nikephoros share an earlier common source and claim that Germanus abdicated of his own volition. However, Theophanes actually states both that Germanus was 'expelled from his throne' and that he 'gave up his surplice': Theophanes the Confessor, *The chronicle of Theophanes: anni mundi, 6095–6305 (A.D. 602–813)*, ed. and trans. Harry Turtledove, Philadelphia, PA 2006, 408–9. Nikephoros is more convinced that Germanus abdicated willingly: 'ὁ δὲ παρῃτεῖτο καὶ τὴν ἱερωσύνην ἀπέβαλεν': Nikephoros Patriarches, Ἱστορία σύντομος, ed. C. de Boor, in *Nicephori Archiepescopi Constantinopolitani opuscula historica*, Leipzig 1880, 58.17–25. Both references originally found *via* Paul Speck, *Artabasdos, der rechtgläubige vorkämpfer der göttlichen lehren*, Ποικιλα Βυζαντινα ii, Bonn 1981, 179.

iconophiles in Byzantine Christianity.[14] The second treatise was both a simplification of the first for the sake of his congregation, which John explicitly states,[15] and a response to Leo III's iconophile actions, particularly the pressure which induced Germanus' abdication between 730 and the beginning of Constantine V's reign in 741.[16]

We can glean an understanding of to whom he was writing through letters relating to his fall from grace in the 740s, as well as through his claims from other works. John's surviving correspondence is to high-ranking clergy and lay dignitaries such as Cosmas of Maiuma in the prologue of the *Dialectica*. His treatise *Against the Jacobites* was written in the name of Peter, bishop of Damascus, and he claims in his *Treatises* that he is representing the patriarchate of Jerusalem.[17]

However, the reason that he felt a need to bolster his religious community in its historical veneration of icons and the cross may not necessarily have been entirely an internal matter. John was writing at a time when images were being debated by all the Abrahamic faiths, a time when those faith groups themselves were experiencing instability following the changes brought by the Arab conquests and the early development of Islam as a religious tradition and ruling community. An example of this tension can be seen in the correspondence of the Patriarch Germanus, whose abdication in 730 inspired the first of John's *Treatises*. Germanus wrote to the bishops Constantine of Nakoleia in Phrygia and Thomas of Claudiopolis sometime before 726. His letters berated Constantine and Thomas for being iconoclastic and indirectly communicated the extent of the debates on images, saying that not only had Jews and Arabs accused Christians of idolatry because they venerated 'hand-made' things, but that 'now whole towns and multitudes of people are in considerable agitation concerning this matter'.[18] Clearly this debate did not exist exclusively within Christian circles, and Germanus seems to have been aware that people in all walks of life were discussing religious art and

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[14] Vasiliev, 'The iconoclastic edict of the Caliph Yazid II', 27.

[15] Louth, *Three treatises*, II.1, p. 59. For further discussion see Alexander Alexakis/ Ioannina, 'The modesty *topos* and John of Damascus as a not-so-modest author', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* xcvii/2 (2004), 523–9.

[16] Bernard Flusin posits that the first treatise must have been written before 730, as it does not mention Germanus, and the second must have been afterwards, as it mentions his abdication: 'I "Discorsi contro i etrattori delle immagini" di Giovanni di Damasco', 59–61. Andrew Louth makes a similar argument: *St John Damascene: tradition and originality in Byzantine theology*, Oxford 2002, 208. Kontouma suspects that the first two *Treatises* were written between 730 and 741 because of a communication delay between events in Byzantium and the Umayyad Caliphate: *John of Damascus*, 16, 28–30.

[17] Kontouma, *John of Damascus*, 26.

[18] Cyril Mango, 'Historical introduction', in Anthony Bryar and Judith Herrin (eds), *Iconoclasm: papers given at the ninth spring symposium of Byzantine studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, Birmingham 1977, 1. For the Greek see *PG* xcviii.164 ff.

how it should fit into monotheistic faith traditions. Daniel Reynolds has suggested that eighth-century iconoclastic destruction in Palestine might be understood as a type of local 'idoloclasm', that is Jewish, Christian and Muslim issues with all figural images and fear of performing idolatrous actions based on where these images are placed in sacred space (i.e. the wall or floor). Rather than having specific problems only with icons or the cross, these communities feared idolatrous behaviour more generally.[19]

John's Treatises, *their background and context*

Christian Adversus Judaeos *literature: a new context*

John of Damascus uses the *Adversus Judaeos* form for most of his arguments in the *Treatises*. The concept of arguing against the Jews in defence of images dates to the seventh century CE; after the Persian conquest of a significant portion of Byzantine territory in 614.[20] Christians blamed Jewish communities for Persian successes and were bitter about their temporary rise in social status during the brief period of Persian rule.[21] Jewish communities retaliated by accusing Christians of being idolatrous through cross and icon veneration – worshipping the created over the creator.[22]

Some have argued that in his *Treatises* John of Damascus could only be writing about Christians for Christians because of his adherence to the *Adversus Judaeos* form. However, the form itself, without a doubt directed towards Christians, was created with a larger Abrahamic debate in mind during a tumultuous time. John uses Leontius of Neapolis (present day Limasol, Cyprus) (d. *c.* 66os) as a model helpful for the consolidation of Melkite Christian identity in early eighth-century Jerusalem.[23] Leontius'

[19] Reynolds, 'Rethinking Palestinian iconoclasm', 4.
[20] Averil Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews: some recent work on early Byzantium', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* xx (1996), 252–7.
[21] Averil Cameron makes this point ibid. 252–4, 255–7; 'Blaming the Jews', 60–1; and 'Cyprus at the time of the Arab conquests', in her *Changing cultures in early Byzantium*, Aldershot 1996, 37–9.
[22] Idem, 'Cyprus at the time of the Arab conquests', 37–9. Sidney Griffith suggests that the accusations by some Jewish communities of Christian cross veneration may have been appropriated by early Muslim communities: 'Images, Islam and Christian icons', 137.
[23] Melkite Christians were Christians under Muslim rule who, before the Arab conquest, followed the Council of Chalcedon as opposed to the Coptic Church, Syriac Orthodox and Church of the East communities. For the development of Melkite Christianity under Muslim rule see Sidney Griffith, 'The church of Jerusalem and the "Melkites": the making of an "Arab Orthodox" Christian identity in the world of Islam (750–1050)', in Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds), *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: from the origins to the Latin kingdoms*, Turnhout 2006, 175–204, and *The Church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of*

works are similarly a product of a multi-faith *milieu* which included Judaism and very early Islam. As Averil Cameron states about *Adversus Judaeos* texts generally, John's work is both polemical and apologetic, as is Leontius'.[24]

Common issues of idoloclastic debate in Judaism and early Islam

Palestinian Jewish and early Muslim communities experienced some overlap in their debates in the eighth century. John addresses some of these shared points of issue in his *Treatises*: (1.) Are forbidden images two or three dimensional? Are images on cloth safe while sculpture is not? (2.) Are only human images a risk of idolatry, or do animals and/or plants fall under this category as well? (3.) Do images on the floor risk causing idolatry, or only images at eye level?[25]

These overlapping issues are physically evidenced in the Jewish tradition in the destruction of floor mosaics, marble screens and sculptural decorations in Palestinian synagogues, particularly in the area of Galilee near Tiberius – the centre of Jewish authority in Palestine. The evidence suggesting parallel developments in the early Islamic community is more text-based.[26] Aaron Hughes has argued for viewing similar late antique and early medieval apocalyptic material in Jewish and early Muslim communities of the Near East as indicating shared hopes and anxieties. These

Islam, Oxford 2008, 129–55. For an in-depth discussion of these overlapping issues and their relation to John's *Treatises* see Anna Chrysostomides, 'John of Damascus' theology of icons in the context of eighth-century Abrahamic iconoclasm', forthcoming.

[24] Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews', 258.

[25] For an in depth discussion of these overlapping issues and their relation to John's *Treatises* see Chrysostomides, 'John of Damascus' theology of icons'.

[26] For debated issues in Jewish iconoclasm and idoloclasm see Alan Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria: an archaeological assessment*, London 2007, 123; Yaffa Englard, 'Mosaics as Midrash: the zodiacs of the ancient synagogues and the conflict between Judaism and Christianity', *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* vi/2–3 (2003), 192; Robert Schick, *The Christian communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic rule*, Princeton 1995, 202; and Steven Fine, 'Iconoclasm and the art of late-antique Palestinian synagogues', in Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss (eds), *From Dura to Sepphoris: studies in Jewish art and society in late antiquity* (*Journal of Roman Archaeology* supplementary series xl, 2000), 183–94. For debated issues in Muslim idoloclasm and iconoclasm see Dan Vaan Reenen, 'The Bilderverbot, a new survey', *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kulture des Islamischen Orients* lxvii (1990), 27–77. For specific examples see Al-Azraqī, *Kitāb akhbār Makah*, i, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (1858), 110–12; Abī Bakr 'Abd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣ annaf*, ed. Qāsimī, Ḥabīb al–Rahḥmān, Beirut 1970–2, x. 400–1; Muslim ibn al-Ḥājjaj, *English translation of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab, ed. Huda al-Khattab, Riyadh 2007, v, bk xxxvii. 36, nos 85, 86; Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, ed. and trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Riyadh 1997, vii, bk lxxvii. 91, no. 5954; 92, no. 5957; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *English translation of Musnad Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab, ed. Huda al-Khattab, Riyadh 2012, iii. 46, no. 2932.

resulted in subsequent attempts at world-making using materials – the same, or similar – with which both traditions were already familiar.[27] A similar argument may be used to describe the larger idoloclastic issues debated amongst the Abrahamic faiths in eighth-century Palestine.

John and Jewish communities

John's argument concerning the tabernacle and mercy seat appears to be directed against a Jewish iconoclastic argument. It is an argument not directed against the narrower, Christian definition of icons, but against the larger human/animal figurative tradition that some Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities held in common – that of non-venerated mosaic and stone decoration of sacred space. When John writes about the decorations within the tabernacle, he is discussing decorative arrangements, not things which were specifically venerated in their own right. Thus, in his treatises, he is giving his Melkite Christian community an argument to use not only against iconoclasts who reject the idea of venerating images of saints or Jesus, but against those who were aniconic entirely and rejected the pictorial decorative tradition of Palestinian churches, mosques and synagogues.

He mentions Moses's directions for the tabernacle curtain and mercy seat early in the second treatise, directly after discussing God's command through Moses about not making 'any carved image of any likeness'.[28] He seems to be attempting to argue within Jewish tradition by claiming that Jews are being inconsistent in their interpretation of their Scripture, from which he proceeds to quote passages allowing for decoration containing images of cherubs (Exodus xxxiv.17; xxxvii.6–7; Deuteronomy iv.15 NRSV). He says, 'What are you doing Moses? You say, "You shall not make for yourself a carved [image] or any likeness," and you fashion the veil, "a woven work of cherubim" and "two cherubim out of pure gold?"'[29] He then proceeds to elaborate on these two seemingly conflicting orders. Speaking for Moses he uses two verses from Deuteronomy to explain that there is a difference between 'acting lawlessly' and making idols – which one should not do – and making images of cherubim beside the mercy seat. Towards the end of this section he seems to be speaking for both Moses and either himself or the Christian community when he says

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[27] Aaron Hughes, *Shared identities: medieval and modern imaginings of Judeo-Islam*, New York 2017, 10–1, 69–71.

[28] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 65. John uses passages from Exodus xxxiv.17; xxxvii.6–7, and supplements them with passages from Deut. iv.15 NRSV, throughout his discussion of these instructions for building the tabernacle and mercy seat.

[29] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 66.

I did not say, you shall not make an image of the cherubim that stand as slaves beside the mercy seat, but 'you shall not make for yourself gods of cast metal', and 'you shall not make any likeness' as of God, nor shall you worship 'the creation instead of the Creator'. Therefore I did not make a likeness of God, nor of anything else as God, nor 'did I worship the creation instead of the Creator'. But you behave like that.[30]

The messages of Moses and John himself merge in these last few sentences. He discusses people accusing Moses of promoting idol worship and defends him. It sounds as if he is also defending himself in the final two lines. This could be speaking indirectly to outside opinions that he felt were a threat to the iconophile Melkite Christian community. His defence of cherubs woven into curtains applied to a more general sense of sacred space decoration than it does to specifically venerating or worshipping a sacred object. This points to a knowledge of Palestinian Jewish objection to figurative images and also to the early Muslim debate about whether or not images were allowed on cloth, as discussed in the traditions about brocades and curtains in people's homes.[31]

John used these same excerpts from Exodus to address the worshipping of sacred objects later in the second *Treatise*. However, in this section he uses the Tabernacle story in a Christian context. John directs this passage towards ideas of Christian iconoclasm, accusing proponents of them of being like Manicheans in their rejection of matter – a sacred creation of God endowed with holiness. There is a possibility that there were still Manichaeans in Palestine during John's lifetime, so this was not a simplistic slur, but one attached to a living community that his readers would have been aware of.[32] He focused on the materials within the tabernacle, eventually stating that some of these objects were venerated and asking, 'What were the cherubim? Were they not right in front of the people? And the ark and the lampstand and the table and the golden jar and the rod, looking towards which the people bowed down in veneration?'[33] This new argument seems to be directed towards an audience having issues with the veneration of icons rather than images used as decoration. John stresses the fact that these objects were venerated as an act of worship directed towards God. The implication here is that the veneration of these objects, condoned, if not directly ordered by God in the Old Testament,

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[30] Ibid.

[31] This is discussed in detail in Chrysostomides, 'John of Damascus' theology of icons'. For examples in English and Arabic see Muslim ibn al-Ḥājjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v, bk xxxvii.36, nos 85, 86.

[32] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 69. For more on Manichaeans in late antique and early medieval Palestine see Guy Stroumsa, 'Gnostics and Manichaeans in Byzantine Palestine', *Studia Patristica XVIII* i (1983), 273–8, and Griffith, 'John of Damascus and the Church in Syria', 227.   [33] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 70.

closely resembles the tradition of venerating icons within Christian tradition. He then lists objects that more moderate iconoclastic Christians thought could be venerated, such as the cross, the place of the skull, the holy tomb and the bread of life.[34] John then moves on to accuse these Christians of being 'Judaisers', demanding that they either become full Christians accepting icon veneration, or that they become full Jews following the law. He says:

Either do away with reverence and veneration for all these or submit to the tradition of the Church and allow the veneration of images of God and friends of God, sanctified by name and therefore overshadowed by the grace of the divine Spirit. If because of the law you prohibit images, watch that you keep the sabbath and are circumcised – for the law commands all these unyieldingly – and keep the whole law.[35]

He creates a strong association here between true Christianity and icon veneration, and Judaising Christianity with a discomfort with regard to icon veneration. This use of the Exodus passages tends more towards accusing Christians, probably both local and Byzantine iconoclasts, of being Judaisers.

John's use of these same excerpts from Exodus both to argue for the figural decoration of sacred space and as a defence of icon veneration fits with the archaeological evidence. He recognises that some Jews, Christians and Muslims not only had an issue with the veneration of figurative images but also disapproved of figural images within sacred space in general. Simultaneously, he also acknowledges that some Christians were affected by non-religious (Byzantine imperial policy) or other-religious (Jewish, iconoclastic Christian and Muslim) pressure. He uses these passages to create a strong dichotomy between Judaising Christians, who, he claimed, should become Jews due to their lack of correct Christian practice, and true Christians, who accept figurative decoration of sacred space and venerate icons. John does this in order to maintain or perhaps create a clear Melkite, iconophile stance for his Palestinian Christian readers.

John would have had experiences with actual Jewish communities in Damascus before his life in Jerusalem. Damascus had at least two synagogues, signalling the existence of two Jewish communities. The larger of the two synagogues answered to Palestinian authority in Tiberias, and later Jerusalem, and the smaller of the two answered to Babylonian authority. We know this from a reference in a notebook found in the genizah of the small synagogue which referred to itself as belonging to 'the small synagogue of the Babylonians'.[36] In addition to having two distinctly separate Jewish communities, Damascus was a frequent stopping place for visitors

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[34] Ibid. 71.   [35] Ibid.
[36] Moshe Gil, *A history of Palestine, 634–1099,* trans. Ethel Broido, New York 1992, 546.

going from Babylonia to Jerusalem; presumably many of these would have been Jews on their way to the holy city.[37] John, growing up and working in such an environment, would certainly have had some idea of the larger inter-Jewish debates as well as their opinions on Christianity and Christian practices.

Either John or his parents would have witnessed a significant event in Damascus when some members of the Jewish community physically attacked crosses, a symbol that John seemed to associate with icons. The date is not certain; however, at some point between the Arab conquest of Damascus (635/6) and 705 CE, 'Amr b. Sa'd, the governor of the city, ordered that there should be no crosses on public display. Apparently, some of the Jews living in the city decided to act on behalf of the governor. They destroyed all the crosses, including those that were attached to buildings, notably in the church complex of St John the Baptist, where Muslims were also worshipping at the time.[38] This event speaks to the size and outspokenness of the Jewish communities living in Damascus; one can imagine how the Christians in the city would have dwelled on this case of mob violence affecting previously uncontested sacred space. It would take several generations for Christians in Damascus to forget such an event, and even if John were not alive when it happened, it is likely that he heard of it from his elders.

Within the *Treatises* John often associates accusations of idolatry with the golden calf story, which he views as a punishable mistake that Jews made separate from Christian history. He implies that it is because of this historic action that Jews are not allowed to have images – they cannot be trusted with them. In 'On Ishmaelites', in the Heresies section of *The font of knowledge,* there is a similar pattern to his discussion of Muslim iconoclasm. When read together it is as if he thought that Jews and Muslims had a history separate from Christians. Both groups made mistakes involving 'graven images' and idolatry in their past, and as a result both have laws against images.

The story of the golden calf had most certainly made its way into oral Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition at this point and would have been known to any member of the three Abrahamic religions regardless of literacy.[39] John probably knew this story well from multiple sources; however, his use of it in the *Treatises* may be a response to either or both iconoclastic

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[37] Ibid.

[38] G. R. D. King, 'Islam, iconoclasm, and the declaration of doctrine', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* xlviii/2 (1985), 271.

[39] James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it was,* Cambridge 1997, pp. xiv–xiv. For the golden calf story within Islam see Michael E. Pregill, '"A calf, a body that lows": the golden calf from late antiquity to classical Islam', in Eric F. Mason and Edmondo F. Lupieri (eds), *Golden calf traditions in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* Leiden 2018, 49–58.

Christian and local Jewish familiarity with the text. This is, of course, in addition to its somewhat obvious function of calling Christian iconoclasts 'Judaisers'. John's conclusion to the argument that he puts forward in association with this tale, that the Abrahamic god prohibited images because they will inevitably be used for idolatrous purposes, is that this idea applies to Jews but not Christians.

The second *Treatise*, more firmly directed at Leo III although also intended to be read by local Palestinian Christians, has more mentions of Jews than the first. Once again, not all of these are supercessionist. John refers to local Jews while making them fit into the trope of 'evil' Judaism. It sounds as if he is talking about an immediate threat, contemporary Jews, and not about a people who began to fade away long ago. John says

But the enemy of truth, who *fights* against the salvation of human kind, who once led astray not only the nations to make images of demons and wicked human beings and birds and wild beasts and reptiles and venerate them as God, but also many times the sons of Israel themselves, now that the Church of Christ has peace, *is* eager to trouble it by mixing evil with divine words through unjust lips and a crafty tongue,[40] and trying to cover up its dark and shapeless form and shake the hearts of the unstable from the true customs handed down from the Fathers. For [some of them][41] have risen up, saying that it is forbidden to make images of the saving miracles and sufferings of Christ and the brave deeds of the saints against the devil, and set them up to be gazed at, so that we might glorify God and be filled with wonder and zeal. Does anyone, who has divine knowledge and spiritual understanding, not recognise that this is a ruse of the devil?[42]

Not only does John acknowledge, through his use of the present tense, that Jews are around and affecting Christianity, but he also mentions local current events. Were it not for the mention of the peace of the 'Church of Christ' which seems to be a recent phenomenon, and the mention of Christian oral tradition being undermined and used to 'shake the hearts of the unstable', this passage could be taken as part of the common Christian analogy of Jews with the devil. However, current events are mentioned, and should be examined.

The 'Church of Christ' was in a period of relative peace under the Umayyad empire at the time that John was writing. This second *Treatise* was written after 730 CE, not even a decade after the iconoclastic and

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[40] 'Ἀλλ᾽ ὁ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐχθρὸς καὶ τῆς σωτηρίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων πολέμιος ,… συνταράξαι σπουδάζει διὰ χειλέων ἀδίκων καὶ γλώσσης δολίας λόγοις θείοις τὴν κακίαν παραρτύων': John of Damascus, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos: contra imaginum calumniatores oriationes tres*, iii, ed. P. Bonifatius Kotter OSB, Berlin 1975, 71.

[41] My addition in brackets. The Greek reads, 'ἀνέστησαν γάρ τινες λέγοντες': *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 71. Louth only has the word 'certain' here.

[42] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 61.

anti-cross policies of Yazid II.[43] Umayyad citizens were still being ruled by his successor, the Caliph Hisham (r. 724–43), who was known to Christian historians as being benevolent towards People of the Book. During this period iconophile Christians would have remembered Yazid II's iconoclastic policies as something that the Church had survived. It is certainly understandable that John would have seen the decade in which he was writing as a newfound era of peace for Christians under Umayyad rule. The Byzantine empire, on the other hand, was currently dealing with a mix of natural disasters and military defeats, cataclysmic events that cause many scholars to claim that Byzantine iconoclasm was a decision based on the idea that the empire was being divinely punished. Byzantium was not experiencing any kind of peace.[44]

John's reference to the destruction of a Christian oral tradition condoning icons, 'true customs, handed down from the fathers', is an important theme of the *Treatises*. Here he is implying that Jews and Judaising Christians were corrupting Orthodox Christian tradition. However, John's other mentions of Christian oral tradition appear to be directed mostly at Christians themselves, as if pointing out an intra-Christian debate on the issue, albeit a debate heavily affected by both Muslim and Jewish opinion. Its inclusion in an anti-Jewish section of the *Treatises* is certainly interesting, and hints that this statement about Jews is addressing a real, rather than an imaginary concern. Of course, it also functions in a way that makes iconoclastic Christians sound like Judaisers.

The next instance of John discussing Judaism is his explanation of how the Old and New Testaments of the Bible should be read. He claimed that God directs different parts of the Bible to different groups who are in different stages of religious maturity. Thus

See that God spoke in many and various ways. For just as the physician knows not always to give the same remedy to all, but supplies to each one what is suitable, determining a medicine appropriate to place and disease and time, that is, season and condition and time of life, and therefore offers one thing to a baby, another to someone full grown, according to the time of life, one thing to the sickly, another to the healthy, and to each of those who are sickly not the same, but something in accordance with their condition and disease, and one thing in summer, another in winter, or autumn or spring, and in each place and in accordance with what is suitable to the place. So the best physician of souls prohibits from making images those *who are still* infants (τοῖς ἔτι νηπίοις) and ill with a diseased

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[43] For a detailed explanation of Yazid II's edict and its consequences see Christian Sahner, 'The first iconoclasm in Islam'.

[44] Alexander Grishin, 'Iconoclasm' in 'Eastern Christian iconographic and architectural traditions: Eastern Orthodox', in Ken Parry (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, Oxford 2007, 368–87.

inclination to idolatry, apt to regard idols as gods and venerate them as gods and reject the veneration of God and offer his glory to the creation.[45]

Considering his frequent mention of Jews as being in a child-like stage of religious maturity, a stage which he often associates with idolatry, the children mentioned at the end of this passage are likely Jews, though he could easily be referring to Muslims as well. Here he admits that Jews are an extant group, albeit somewhat immature, hence his claim that they 'are still infants'. The Jews in this passage are a living, breathing people who simply tend towards idolatry, and thus need the laws of the Old Testament against images. However, he thought that their 'disease' was still a danger to Christians. These Jews are real and contemporary to John, and the prohibitions against images in the Bible remain useful to them; however, he argued that these prohibitions are no longer useful to Christians. This is why he continually advised people to read the Scriptures very carefully, lest they begin to follow rules not created for them.

Later in the second *Treatise* there are moments where John quite obviously uses the trope of Judaism to call iconoclastic Christians 'Judaisers'. He also falls back into the language of traditional supercessionism. However, his supercessionist arguments are not very effective when considered in the light of his obvious knowledge of a contemporary Judaism which he himself portrayed as a powerful threat to local Christianity. When calling iconoclastic Christians 'Judaisers', he claims that iconoclasts should follow Jewish law, which he proceeds to mock, twisting Jewish traditions to sound ridiculous despite his knowledge of contemporary practice.[46]

In his final attempt at supercessionism within the second *Treatise*, John tries to prove scripturally that Christianity was the new covenant with God. The implication is that Christianity replaces Judaism, but again this does not quite work. His simultaneous acceptance of a threatening contemporary Judaism makes his argument groundless. The reader already knows that John views Judaism and Christianity as two separate religious communities with distinct histories and specific places in the Bible allotted to their particular needs. However, he still makes an effort to cling to supercessionist tradition, saying

But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second.[47]

[45] English: John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 63. Greek: John of Damascus, *Die schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 74.   [46] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 71.
[47] Ibid. 77.

After this he goes on to quote from Hebrews concerning the new covenant. At this point in the text, with his concentration on creating a Christian identity that is very distinct from what he describes as a Jewish threat, it becomes apparent that traditional supercessionism does not work within the Umayyad empire. Yet, he still clings to the *Adversus Judaeos* form. In John's world of Umayyad Palestine Christians were coping with the fact that they were no longer the ruling authority in the area – they found themselves being called People of the Book and equated with Jews. John seems to be struggling with identity in these *Treatises*, wanting to be able to participate in traditional supercessionism, something that he could have done were he a Christian living in the Byzantine Empire. Being a Melkite Christian in Palestine he had other responsibilities. He both had to live within what he knew of the practices of Byzantine Christianity and maintain this specific Christian identity within a culturally diverse area. Thus, he was not quite able to be supercessionist due to the necessity, in his eyes, of separating Christian traditions from harmful contemporary Jewish practices.

Potential responses to Muslim societal pressure in the Treatises

While John never explicitly mentions Islam within the *Treatises*, he does address concerns which indicate knowledge of Muslim opinion and societal pressure. In the first of the *Treatises*, for example, he emphasises the unity of the Trinity, almost as if he had to identify himself as a monotheist:

I believe in one God, the one beginning of all things, himself without beginning, uncreated, imperishable and immortal, eternal and everlasting, incomprehensible, bodiless, invisible, uncircumscribed, without form, one being beyond being, divinity beyond divinity, in three persons, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and I worship this one alone, and to this one alone I offer the veneration of my worship. I venerate one God, one divinity, but I also worship a trinity of persons, God the Father and God the Son incarnate and God the Holy Spirit, one God.[48]

This clarification of the Trinity was probably not meant to be seen by Muslims or Jews, but could have been intended to aid Melkite Christians in creating a statement to resist accusations that venerating an icon of Jesus was akin to polytheistic idolatry. In the following passages he addresses the issue of veneration of icons as worship of creation over the creator, an issue for Jewish, Christian and Muslim iconoclasts.

John also defended Christian oral tradition concerning icons, another aspect of his attempt to stabilise local Melkite belief in what he saw as traditional church doctrine regarding icons. This argument appears in all three *Treatises*, though in a slightly different form each time. In the first he says

[48] Ibid. 21–2.

For whence do we know the holy place of the skulls, the memorial of life? Have not children learnt it from their fathers without anything being written down? For it is written that the Lord was crucified in the place of the skull and buried in a tomb, that Joseph had hewn in a rock; but that these are the places now venerated we know from unwritten tradition, and there are many other examples like this. What is the origin of the threefold [immersion in] baptism? Whence praying facing the East? Whence the tradition of the mysteries? … Since many such things have been handed down in unwritten form in the Church and preserved up to now, why do you split hairs over the images?[49]

When he asks why people are splitting hairs, it seems likely that he is discussing a local dispute, especially considering the lack of potency exhibited by Leo III's iconoclastic policies at this point. We cannot be sure how much John has heard about Leo III's 726 edict, as this *Treatise* was likely inspired by Patriarch Germanus' ousting.[50] Under the early Abbasids, Muslims were known to exert pressure on Christians regarding their lack of a religious concept of law. Muslims and some Jewish communities had orthopraxic religious laws governing daily life, but Christians did not share this concept. Later this prompted the developing Church of the East and Syriac Christian community leaders to write canon laws governing issues pertaining to a core sense of identity, such as marriage and family life, which both solidified intra-Christian communal boundaries and rose to the legal challenge of the Muslim and Jewish communities.[51] John's emphasis on the reliability of oral tradition as a type of precedent for icon veneration may be a defence against the very earliest stages of this pressure. Hence, this particular argument and the concept of splitting hairs would appear to point to local priests and lay people having arguments over this possibly either with Muslims, Jews or each other in the context of both a local debate about what constituted idolatry and a debate over whether or not Christians had a legitimate, religiously legal, defence for their veneration of icons and the cross within the context of the larger Abrahamic debate.

John mentioned this argument again in the second *Treatise*, which had much more to do with Byzantine imperial iconoclasm and presumably the effect that its escalation had had on the local situation. While claiming that he did not 'accept' Leo III, John asserted that oral tradition had equal authority to the Gospels, and much more authority than any earthly ruler.[52] Once again, it sounds as if he was attempting to consolidate the beliefs of those around him – Melkite Christians who were probably putting up with an-iconic arguments from people quoting iconoclastic scripture when they had none to quote in their own defence.

[49] Ibid. 37–8.   [50] Kontouma, *John of Damascus*, 16.
[51] Lev Weitz, *Between Christ and caliph: law, marriage, and Christian community in early Islam*, Philadelphia, PA 2018.   [52] John of Damascus, *Three treatises*, 73–4.

John argues through Moses that images of cherubim were commanded to be placed on the tabernacle cloth in the second *Treatise*, when he paraphrases Exodus xxxvii.3, 6–7 and Deut. iv.15–16:

But these are the things that God commanded 'they should make', it says: 'the veil of the tabernacle of witness from aquamarine and porphyry and spun scarlet and twisted flax, woven work of the cherubim' and 'they made the mercy seat above the ark and the two cherubim out of pure gold'. What are you doing Moses? You say, 'You shall not make for yourself a carved [image] or any likeness', and you fashion the veil, 'a woven work of cherubim' and 'two cherubim out of pure gold'?[53]

Although responding to the Islamic tradition is not John's main focus here, one cannot discount the possibility that he is aware of debates in the early Muslim and Jewish communities. His mention of the cloth immediately brings to mind the traditions about Muhammad prohibiting curtains with images.

When we keep firmly in mind the diversity in which John lived, and the debates current to his day amongst Jews, Christians and Muslims at a time when all three communities were (re)defining themselves, we can see the moments within John's *Treatises* where he referenced these larger Abrahamic debates. John likely began this work in an attempt to consolidate what he saw as the traditional Christian view of the decoration of sacred spaces and veneration of the icons and cross in opposition to the local idoloclastic trends surrounding him.

The *Treatises* discuss events within the Byzantine Empire, which would have been unavoidable for John, as a Melkite Christian who looked towards the Byzantine Church for guidance. However, as Sidney Griffith has argued, Melkite Christians under Umayyad rule existed in their own right, largely independent from Byzantine policies despite their respect for the Byzantine Church.[54] They lived in a *milieu* in which People of the Book were a category of citizens, as opposed to Christians and Jews being routinely considered separate. Within this ongoing social re-categorisation John and John v were in the business of re-establishing what they considered to be an orthodox Christian community under Muslim rule. In a world before Rabbinic Judaism became the norm, and the many Christian communities of the Muslim world had yet to firmly establish their boundaries despite years of Christological bickering, strong statements of faith were required to combat what John considered risks of heresy amongst the local populations who would have mingled with Muslims and Jews in a manner that Byzantine Christians did not.

[53] Ibid. 65–6.
[54] Sidney Griffith, '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the Christological controversies in Arabic in third/ninth-century Syria', in David Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam: the first thousand years*, Boston, MA 2001, 14–16.