

THE HERESY OF ISHMAELITES

by John Of Damascus St

John of Damascus's eighth-century analysis of early Islam from a Christian theological perspective, written with intimate cultural knowledge of the Islamic world and addressing points of theological divergence.

3 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. ! Title
2. 1. Introduction
3. 2. The Heresy of the Ishmaelites

! Title

The Fountain of Knowledge by Saint John of Damascus The Heresy of the Ishmaelites Translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb biblicalia <http://www.bombaxo.com/blog>

July 2006

1. Introduction

The Fountain of Knowledge by Saint John of Damascus translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb
Introduction - The Heresy of the Ishmaelites

St John of Damascus is a very important witness to early Islam. He was born into a very privileged family in Damascus (his grandfather had been the administrator of the city at the time the Muslims took it) and he grew up and served in the court of the caliph. He was entirely familiar with Islam (a name it did not yet possess, apparently), and thus what he has to say about it, and the context in which he places it, is of great historical importance. For one thing, this is a single chapter in his work *On Heresies*, part of his larger work, *The Fountain of Knowledge*.

St John's *Fountain of Knowledge* is a vast work in three parts: *The Philosophical Chapters*, in which he presents various aspects of the height of secular learning of his day; *On Heresies*, the first 80 chapters of which are taken verbatim from summaries of the heresies in the *Panarion* of St Epiphanius, and the last 23 by St John; and *The Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, which is essentially a catechetical manual, and is more than twice the length of the above two sections combined. The entire *Fountain of Knowledge* is available in a handy English translation in the *Fathers of the Church* series, fortunately much more affordable than the above-mentioned volume.

Thus, during his lifetime, St John did not consider Islam to yet be a separate religion, but rather a Christian heresy. In any case, he mentions several suras of the Qur'an by name, and refers most interestingly to one which is no longer extant. St John, in this work, as characteristically, pulls no punches. For further information on St John of Damascus, particularly regarding background to his chapter from his *Fountain of Knowledge* on Islam as a heresy, see especially Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Brill, 1972). Sahas provides a great deal, pretty much everything we can piece together actually, about the life of St John of Damascus, his family (his grandfather was responsible for turning over Damascus to the Muslims, for which he was hated, and his father was a high-ranking minister as well), his profession before he left Damascus to become a monk at St Sabbas near Jerusalem (he was protosymbullus to the Caliph, the highest ranking position in the Muslim empire after the Caliph himself), the reaction of the iconoclasts to his writing, and so on. He includes the Greek text from Migne's *Patrologia Graecae* for the chapter on the Ishmaelites (I used this text after having corrected it according to the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* text taken from P. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 4. *Patristische Texte und Studien* 22, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981) and that of the *Disputation of the Saracen and the Christian*, traditionally attributed to St John, both with translations.

Enjoy.

Kevin P. Edgecomb [biblicalia http://www.bombaxo.com/blog](http://www.bombaxo.com/blog)

2. The Heresy of the Ishmaelites

The Fountain of Knowledge by Saint John of Damascus translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb The Heresy of the Ishmaelites And there is also the up until now strong and people-deceiving superstition of the Ishmaelites, being the forerunner of Antichrist. And it is born from Ishmael, who was born from Hagar to Abraham, from which they are called Hagarenes and Ishmaelites. And they call them Saracens, as from Sarras Kenoi (those empty of Sarah), because of what was said by Hagar to the angel: "Sarah has sent me away empty." So then, these were idolaters and revered the morning star and Aphrodite, who they indeed named Khabar in their own language, which means great. Therefore, until the time of Heraclius, they were plainly idolaters. From that time and until now came up among them a false prophet called Mamed, who, having encountered the Old and New Testament, as it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, he put together his own heresy. And under the pretext of seeming pious, attracting (?) people, he reported that a book was sent down to him from heaven by God. Therefore some of the compositions written by him in a book, worthy of laughter, which he handed down to them as an object of reverence.

He says there is one God, the Maker of all things, neither having been begotten nor having begotten. He says Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, only a creation and servant, and that he was born without seed from Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For he says the Word of God and the Spirit went into Mary and she bore Jesus who was a prophet and servant of God. And that the Jews, acting against the law, wanted to crucify him and having seized (him), they crucified his shadow. For Christ himself, they say, was not crucified nor did he die, for God took him to himself into heaven because he loved him. And he says this, that when Christ went up into the heavens, God questioned him, saying, "O Jesus, did you say that 'I am the Son of God and God'?" And Jesus, they say, answered, "Have mercy on me, O Lord; you know that I did not say (that), nor am I too proud to be your servant, but men who have turned aside wrote that I said this word and lied about me, and are wandering." And God, they say, answered him, "I know that you did not say this word." And many other astonishing sayings in this same writing, worthy of laughter, he boasts God sent down to him. But we say, "And who is the witness that God gave the writing to him, or which of the prophets foretold that such a prophet would arise?" And they are at a loss, as Moses received on Mount Sinai, in the sight of all the people, the Law of God who appeared in cloud and fire and darkness and storm. And that all the prophets, from Moses and onward, foretold the coming of Christ, and that Christ is God, and the Son of God, being flesh, will come, and will be crucified, and will die, and will rise again, and he will be the judge of the living and the dead. And we say, "Why did your prophet not come in this way, with others witnessing about him, nor coming among you as God gave the Law to Moses on a smoking mountain with all the people watching, and, as you claim, provide this book, so you also might have certainty?" They answer that God does as he wills. We know this too, we say. But, we ask, how did the writing come down to your prophet? And they answer that while he was asleep the writing came upon him. And we jokingly say to them that since he received the writing while sleeping, and did not sense the activity, in him

is fulfilled the popular proverb ("You are spinning me dreams").

Again we ask, "Why, when he commanded us in your writing not to do or to receive anything without witnesses, did you not ask him that 'First you show through witnesses whether you are a prophet, and that you came from God, and which Scripture witnesses about you?'" They are silent, ashamed. To whom we say, "For good reason! Since it is not allowed for you to marry a woman without witnesses, nor to buy, nor acquire property (?), nor do you allow yourselves to have a donkey or an animal unwitnessed. For you indeed also have wives, and properties, and donkeys, and all the rest through witnesses, and you have only a faith and a writing unwitnessed. For he who handed this down to you has in no way an assurance, nor is any previous witness of him known, but he received this also while sleeping." And they call us Associators, because, they say, we introduce an associate to God by saying Christ is the Son of God and God. To whom we say that this is what the Prophets and Scripture have handed down. And you, as you insist, accept the Prophets. If, therefore, we are wrong saying Christ is the Son of God, they also are who taught and handed it down to us. And some of them indeed say that we have allegorized the Prophets, imputing (sayings) to them. Others say that the Hebrews, hating (us), have deceived us, having written as from the Prophets, so that we might be destroyed. And again we say to them, "You say that Christ is the Word of God and the Spirit. How then do you rebuke us as 'Associators'? For the Word and the Spirit are each of them unseparated from Him in Whom they have been born. If, therefore, in God is His Word, it is obvious he is also God. But if he is outside of God, as according to you, God is irrational (aloyos) and lifeless (apnous). Therefore, in avoiding to associate with God, you have mutilated him. But it would be better for you to say that he has an associate than to mutilate him, and represent him like a stone, or wood, or any of those insensible things. Thus, indeed, falsely accusing us, you call us 'Associators.' But we call you 'Mutilators of God.'"

They also accuse us as idolaters for reverencing the Cross, which they despise. And we say to them, "Why, therefore, do you rub yourselves against the stone by your Khabathan, and love kissing the stone?" And some of them say Abraham had relations with Hagar upon it, and others that he tied up the camel around it when about to sacrifice Isaac. And we respond to them, "The Scripture says that there was a mountain like a grove, and wood from which also Abraham cut for the whole burnt offering on which he laid Isaac, and that he left the donkeys with the servants. Therefore, from what source is your foolish saying? For there is no wood of a forest lying in that place, nor travelling by donkeys." They are indeed ashamed. Nevertheless, they say the stone is of Abraham. Then we say, "If it is of Abraham, as you foolishly say, therefore are you not ashamed, kissing this thing only because Abraham had relations with a woman upon it, or that he tied up a camel? But you censure us because we show reverence to the Cross of Christ through which the strength of the demons and the deceit of the Accuser is destroyed?" And this thing which they say is a stone is the head of Aphrodite which they revered, who they also called Khabar, upon which also even up to now the shadow of an inscription appears to careful observers. As we have said, this Mamed composed many foolish sayings, and he laid upon each of them a title, like the writing "The Women," in which also he plainly legislates (for a man) to take four wives and one thousand concubines if he is able, however many he might put under his hand, aside from the four wives. And he legislated to divorce whichever one he wishes, or if he wishes, also to take care of another, for this very reason: Mamed had a companion named Zeïd. This one had a beautiful wife, whom Mamed loved. Therefore, when they were sitting together, Mamed

said, "Oh, by the way, God has ordered me to take your wife." And he answered, "You are the Apostle; do as God has said to you. Take my wife." Or rather, so we might tell it from the beginning, he said to him, "God has ordered me, that you divorce your wife" And he divorced. And after several days, he says, "But God has ordered that I will also take her." Then he took (her) and committed adultery with her (and) made this law: "He who wills may divorce his wife, but if after divorcing, he would return to her, another must marry her; for it is not allowed to take (her back) if she has not been married by another. And even if a brother divorces, let his brother marry her, if he is willing." And in the same writing, he transmits this message: "Plough the land which God has given to you, and beautify it" and do this, and in this way—so I might not say all the obscene things as he did.

Again, there is the writing of the Camel of God, about which he says that there was a camel from God, and she drank a whole river, and she could not pass between two mountains through which she could not fit. Therefore, he says, a people was in that place, and indeed on one day they would drink the water and the camel on the next. And while drinking the water, she maintained (?) them by providing milk instead of water. Therefore those men, being wicked, rose up, he says, and killed the camel. But there was a small camel of her offspring which, he says, when the mother had been done away with, cried out to God, and He took her to Himself. To them we say, "From where was that camel?" And they say that it was from God. And we say, "Did any other couple with this camel?" And they say, "No." We say, "Therefore how did she give birth? For we see you camel is without father, without mother, without genealogy. And having given birth, she suffered evil. But neither does the coupler appear, and the little camel was taken up. Therefore, why did not your prophet, to whom, as you say, God has spoken, learn about the camel: where she pastures, and if any drank milk (?) by milking this one? Or was she not at some time, like her mother having met evil men, destroyed? Or did she enter into Paradise, your forerunner, from whom is your river which you foolishly say is of milk? For you say three rivers are to flow for you in Paradise: of water, wine, and milk. If your forerunner camel is outside of Paradise, it is obvious that she has dried up from hunger and thirst, or that others are enjoying her milk. And your prophet is boasting foolishly as having spoken with God, for the mystery of the camel was not revealed to him. And if she is in Paradise, she again drinks the water, and waterless, you will dry up in the midst of the delights of Paradise. But if you desire wine from the river flowing by, since there is no flowing water, for the camel drank it all, you will be inflamed (?) drinking unmixed wine, and collapse (?) in drunkenness, and fall asleep. And also, being heavy-headed after sleep, and having a headache from the wine, you will forget the pleasures of Paradise. Therefore, why did your prophet not think of these things that might happen to you in the Paradise of delights? Nor did he consider about the camel, where she now lives. But neither did you ask him, as the dream-teller was telling you about the three rivers. But we tell you definitely, your wonderful camel has run ahead of you into the souls of donkeys, where you are soon to live like animals. And in that place is the outer darkness, and endless punishment, the roaring fire, the unsleeping worm, and demons of Tartarus.

Mamed speaks again (in) the writing of The Table. And he says that Christ asked God for a table, and he gave it to him. For God, he says, said to him that "I have given to you and to yours an incorruptible table."

Again, the writing of The Cow, and some other foolish sayings worthy of laughter, I think I should skip because of their number. He legislated that they be circumcised, including the women, and

also commanded not to keep the Sabbath, nor to be baptized, and to eat some of the things forbidden in the Law, and to avoid (some of) those it permitted. And he entirely forbade the drinking of wine.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
 - 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net