

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES OF SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS AND SAINT THEODORE OF STUDION TO THE ICONOCLASTIC HERESY

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## I. Introduction

In the latter part of the Eighth Century and during the Ninth Century, the Eastern Roman Empire was embroiled in what at first sight appears to be a question concerning Church discipline and theology<sup>1</sup> on the representation of the figure of Christ, the Theotokos, and the Saints, as well as other figures of Christian and Jewish Scripture and tradition. The figures were painted on the walls of Churches and other public and private buildings.

The affair known as the "Iconoclastic Controversy" historically took place at two different times briefly separated from each other.<sup>2</sup> In each of these, many theologians and politicians ranged themselves on either side attacking each other vehemently and viciously. On each of these occasions, a monk of the Eastern Church shone forth as the great defender of Orthodoxy. During the first period it, was St. John of Damascus<sup>3</sup>; during the second, it was St. Theodore of Studion.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine the approaches taken by these two theologians in defence of Orthodoxy, rejecting the iconoclastic

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<sup>1</sup> The Iconoclastic controversy also involved the foreign and internal policies of the Byzantine state as well as matters of Church and state relations.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the issues debated during the period we are examining here are in many ways still being debated within the Christian religion, and often by states which impose this or that religious solution as a political mandate.

<sup>3</sup> St. John was a monk of the Monastery of St. Sabas in Palestine, then under the rule of the Islamic Empire.

<sup>4</sup> The Studion was a monastery in the City of Constantinople.

positions taken by the Basileis and many statesmen, as well as Churchmen.

## II. John of Damascus

John of Damascus,<sup>5</sup> or Yannah ibn-Sargun, was born in Damascus in 676 into a family of nobility. His parents were religious people who conserved their Christian faith in a land under the domination of the followers of Islam. John's father, although a Christian, was one of the principal courtiers in the Palace of the Omayyads in the days of Caliph Abd el-Malik.<sup>6</sup> John himself, being well versed in both theology and government, held a high position in Court and is said to have been the governor of Damascus.<sup>7</sup>

John resigned his high position and became a monk at the Monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem in Palestine, then also under the rule of the Omayyads. There he lived as a companion of Cosmas, who later became Bishop of Maiouma.<sup>8</sup> John remained at the Monastery of St. Sabas until his death in 756.

On the matter of the veneration of icons, St. John wrote three "Apologetic Orations" against the Iconoclasts.<sup>9</sup> In the *First Oration*, St. John begins his apology on behalf of the veneration of images by establishing first the limitations of his own human intelligence and placing himself squarely within the teachings of the Church "which God founded on the Apostles and Prophets, her cornerstone being Christ His Son."<sup>10</sup> It is to the teaching of the Church that we must turn, both as foundation and pillar, as well as starting and finishing points in the examination of God's revelation. It is thus in the teachings of the Church—the teachings of the Word Incarnate, Who cannot deceive us—that we must seek the solution to the problems posed by those who would reject the veneration of icons.

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<sup>5</sup> See *XII The Great Book of Saints of the Orthodox Church*. 134ff. See also: John VIII, Patriarch of Jerusalem. *Life of Our Holy Father John the Damascene* in PG 94, 429-502.

<sup>6</sup> 685-705.

<sup>7</sup> *XII Enciclopedia Hispanoamericana* 212B. It was probably his father, also named "John" who, as vizier to the Caliph, was at times governor of Damascus.

<sup>8</sup> Ss. John and Cosmas composed a number of beautiful hymns and canons in honour of the Mother of God and of the saints, many of which are used in the liturgy to this day.

<sup>9</sup> *First Oration*, PG 94, 1231-1384; *Second Oration*, *ibid.* 1283-1318; *Third Oration*, *ibid.* 1317-1420.

English translation by David Anderson: St. John of Damascus *On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Eph 2:20. Cf. PG 94, 1232A.

The basis of the objection to icons is to be found in the Biblical injunction given to Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>11</sup> This and similar texts<sup>12</sup> have been understood to mean an absolute prohibition on the imaging of created living beings.<sup>13</sup> However, St. John points out that if they are so understood, then God would be contradicting Himself when He instructs Moses to construct an Ark of the Covenant and to set images of Cherubim upon it.<sup>14</sup> Later, Solomon would also lavish images in the decoration of the Temple.<sup>15</sup>

The true and proper interpretation of this injunction lies not so much in the prohibition of the images but in the creating of false gods and the worship bestowed upon them.<sup>16</sup> Thus what must really guide the orthodox in the matter of images is the verse immediately following the aforementioned injunction.

There can be no icon of God the Father, for no one has seen the Father. But God the Word took unto Himself in the flesh of His creature-man-and dwelt upon the earth with us, perfect God and perfect man. He thus had a human appearance, and this could well be the subject of imaging. The flesh assumed by the Word of God is made divine and endures after His Ascension. Thus, in drawing the image of the Word of God, we are not drawing the image of the immortal Godhead but the image of the God Who became visible in the flesh.<sup>17</sup>

The argument is clear, concise and definite. It is the Word Incarnate Who is being imaged. As such, it is not only the human aspect of the Word Incarnate which is being imaged but also His Divine aspects. Following Pseudo-Dionysius, the Damascene points out that visible things are corporeal models which provide a vague understanding of intangible things. The bodily senses prompt perceptions in the mind which then passes them on to the faculties of discernment, adding to the treasury of knowledge that was not there before.

It is this process of our understanding that permits us to perceive through images that which has gone before us, and that which is to come. It also allows us to form some conception of that which is above all understanding. It is the Word of God Himself Who has chosen the

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<sup>11</sup> Exod.20:4.

<sup>12</sup> Deut.6:4; 6:13; Ps.97:7; Jer.1:11.

<sup>13</sup> Such has been the traditional fundamentalist position in both Judaism and Islam.

<sup>14</sup> Exod.31:1-16. See also St. John's *First Oration* 16. PG 94, 1245.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Kgs.6:28-29. St. John of Damascus, *First Oration* 21. PG 94, 1252.

<sup>16</sup> John of Damascus, *First Oration* 4. PG 94, 1236.

<sup>17</sup> PG 94, 1236C.