

Theology, Culture, and Ministry in John of Damascus: *Yanah ibn Mansur ibn Sarjun* (c. 650-749)

Introduction

This theological essay was written for the *Ministry Formation Department* in light of my work among Muslims in Dallas, TX for the fulfillment of my “Cultural Engagement Goal”. All quoted portions below will be underlined (though I know this is not traditional Turabian formatting; it is simply for ease of tracking information and sources):

This is little more than a brief theological essay, which surveys the broad landscape of church history, tradition, and apologetics—while considering the task of modern evangelism among Islamic communities. In this broad “schema”, the purpose of this specific paper is really narrower: to study the *polemical* value of the writings of *Yanah ibn Mansur ibn Sarjun* (c. 650-749), as they pertain to the doctrine of the Trinity.

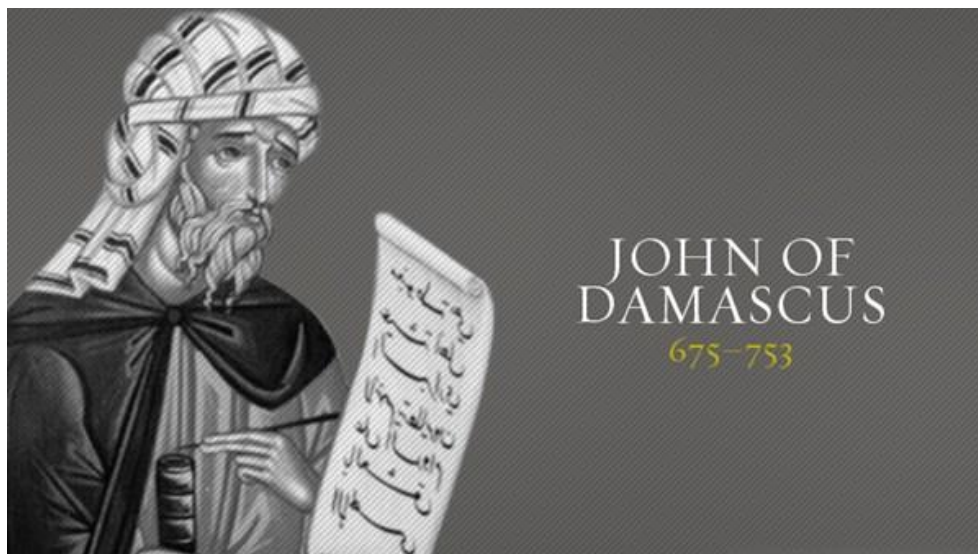


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Yanah ibn Mansur ibn Sarjun (c. 650-749)—more commonly known as John of Damascus—was man born into a great age of change. As an Arab Christian who grew up under the Umayyad Dynasty, John of Damascus experienced the rise of Islam, even serving in the court of the caliph, as a type of accountant.

Circa 726 AD, John retreated from sprawling reign of the Umayyad Dynasty and sought a quieter life at the Mar Saba monastery close to Jerusalem. As he began to study and write, John penned a significant work titled *Fount of Knowledge*. Of this writing church historian Edward Smither writes:

“John criticizes Muhammad for teaching that God has no son, while also castigating the movement for its practice of polygamy. In defense of historic, Nicene Christianity, John argues that Jesus was the inseparable Word and Spirit of God and that the Godhead should be understood as the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹

Too often John’s insights are belittled; scholars overlook their unique insights claiming redundancy with the early Church fathers (a restatement or synthesis of their content rather than something unique).² However, the impact of writings like *Fount of Knowledge* is grossly understated. John’s synthesis of material, as well as his apologetic and theological persuasion—paved the way for future apologists such as Timothy of Baghdad (727-823) and Theodore Abu Qurrah (C. 750-C. 823).

So then, as we scour the pages of church history, we should not mark figures such as these insignificant, but rather carefully survey their writings, gleaning the unique wisdom which rises like an aroma from their pages. Moreover, the location of these writings is historically unique—as they can inform what we know about Islam in this period, which may very well differ from the religion’s present state.

Debates and dialogue concerning the Trinity are not ‘tempest in a teapot’, but rather a cyclone in a sea ablaze with fire. Serving in Dallas, TX, among Afghan Refugees I’ve often noticed this point arise when discussing the identity of Jesus, Messiah. The questions appear... ‘But what about the Trinity? The math doesn’t add up...does it?’

Questions like this are very common—and it seems that these are the first objections raised. Interestingly enough, John of Damascus seems to trace similar themes in his work *On Heresies* as he analyzes the earliest days of Islam—which he refers to as the Heresy of the *Ishmaelites*.

Apologetics, Polemics and John of Damascus

¹ Edward L. Smither, *Christian Mission: A Concise Global History* (Faithlife Corporation, 2019), 34–35.

² Considering John of Damascus’s influence, Peter G. Riddell writes, “He is considered by the Roman Catholic Church as the last of the church fathers and, as such, his name is uttered in the same breath as the greatest names in early Christian history, including Tertullian, Augustine, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Together these men and the other church fathers succeeded in articulating Christian doctrine in all its complexity.” Janosik, Daniel J.. John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period (Kindle Locations 54-57). Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

First in this work John writes of the origins of Islam that, “a false prophet named Mohammed has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk,³ devised his own heresy.”⁴

Quickly narrowing the debate to the nature of God (and the nature of Jesus as the *Word* of God)—even briefly introducing the *Spirit*⁵ of God—John of Damascus narrows the debate, writing, “Moreover, they call us *Hetaerists*, or *Associators*, because, they say, we introduce an associate with God by declaring Christ to the Son of God and God.”⁶ It is at this point that John of Damascus addresses some of the logic of the Islamic faith, to make a point about his own belief in the nature of God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁷

The Quran states, that Jesus is Allah’s “word which he cast into Mary, and a ‘spirit’ from him” (Sura 4:171). Elsewhere Jesus is called a word from Allah (Cf. Sura 3:39, 45). John writes,

“As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being *Hetaerists*? For the word, and the

³ Elsewhere Frederic clarifies, “This may be the Nestorian monk Bahira (George or Sergius) who met the boy Mohammed at Bostra in Syria and claimed to recognize in him the sign of a prophet. John Damascene, *Writings*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958).”

⁴ John Damascene, *Writings*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 153.

⁵ Explaining the role, functions and person of the Spirit can be extremely beneficial to our Muslim neighbors. Madrigal writes, “The Arabic word for “spirit” (ruh: روح) comes from the Hebrew ruach (רוח). The Hebrew and the Greek (pneuma: πνεῦμα) expressions have the same meanings: wind, blow, breath, air current, and emanation.” Carlos Madrigal, *Explaining the Trinity to Muslims: A Personal Reflection on the Biblical Teaching in Light of the Theological Criteria of Islam* (William Carey Library, 2011).

⁶ John Damascene, *Writings*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 155.

⁷ John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1; The word, *Paraclete*, as introduced in the gospel of John provides key insights into the characteristics that the Spirit possesses. This term may be rendered as, “Helper (NASB, ESV), Advocate (NIV), Comforter (KJV), or Counselor (HCSB)” or even Pleader. So too does Jesus utilize the word *Paraclete* as well in his dialogue during the upper-room discourse in John 13–16 shortly before His crucifixion. Jeffrey E. Miller, “Paraclete,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Believers should be aware and prepared in a Muslim context to defend the identity and authority of the *Paraclete* as, “...in some circles, Muslim scholars try to demonstrate that the New Testament predicts the coming of the Islamic Prophet. For this purpose, they reinterpret the term “paraclete” to say that the Injil announces the coming of Muhammad.” They argue that paraclete should be translated as “the praised one”. Consequently, “praise” in Arabic is *hamd* (حمد), which happens to share the same root as the Muhammad. In this way some circles will argue using myopic word fallacies for the presence and prediction of their prophet in the Christian Scriptures. We must be prepared in our defense of this false view. As Madrigal explains the phrase “the one who is praised” would not be *paraclete*, but rather has its own translation: *perikletos*. Madrigal, *Explaining the Trinity to Muslims*, 53–54.

spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that He is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him. It would be far better for you to say that He has an associate than to mutilate Him, as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object. Thus, you speak untruly when you call us *Hetaeriasts*; we retort by calling you Mutilators of God.”⁸

The logic in this passage is weighty, but also has its limitations—as one Scholar, Mark Durie, has suggested, “There are Christian missionaries who have made much of these terms [i.e., *Word*, *Spirit*], claiming they point to the uniqueness of the Qur’anic Christ and using them as a springboard for evangelism.”⁹ Knowingly or unknowingly, we seem to witness the influence of John of Damascus in one Pastor, Carlos Madrigal. Madrigal explains that God is the Father because, “He is the source from which the *Kalam* (Arabic)—the *Logos* emanates; in a spiritual sense he is the ‘progenitor’.” Using terminology like *Kalam* not foreign to Islamic studies, Madrigal (who worked in Turkey) creates a bridge that potential Muslim seekers can cross as they consider whether or not the Trinity is absurd.¹⁰

Despite the fact that we should be weary of importing New Testament terminology into Quranic material and theology, John of Damascus’s approach of holistically addressing Islamic beliefs helps us glean key insights for today.

⁸ John Damascene, *Writings*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 156.

⁹ Later Durie correctly writes, “It is ironic that some well-meaning missionaries take these terms, designed to deny the deity of Christ by pointing to Jesus’ ordinariness as a creature, and mistakenly find in them some kind of special honor afforded to Christ by the Qur’an. Nothing could be further from the truth. These are not marks of distinction, but marks of being common, everyday and ordinary. This is anti-Christian rhetoric. For missionaries tempted to read New Testament categories into the Qur’anic text where they don’t belong, my advice is: don’t take the bait. There is a hostile hook in both these terms, and the direction it pulls in points away from the true nature of the Son of God.” Mark Durie, “Jesus in the Qur’an: ‘Word’ and ‘Spirit’?,” *Biblical Missiology* (blog), October 13, 2020, <https://biblicalmissiology.org/blog/2020/10/13/jesus-in-the-quran-word-and-spirit/>.

¹⁰ Ps 2:7; Prov 8:22-24; John 1:14,18; 5:17-26; 8:54; 10:28-30; 14:12,13; Rom 8:29,32; Heb 1:1; God is transcendent and absolute, but did not exist prior to the other persons of the Godhead—therefore, when we use the terms progenitor or source, we do so in a spiritual sense, but not the sense of time. From an exegetical and personal angle which addresses Islamic suspicions of the Trinity, Carlos Madrigal paints an excellent picture of the Trinity. Madrigal explains that God is the Father because, “He is the source from which the *Kalam* (Arabic)—the *Logos* emanates; in a spiritual sense he is the ‘progenitor’.” Madrigal, *Explaining the Trinity to Muslims*, 50–51.

In our evangelism to Muslims this lofty question: *Trinity* or *Tawhid*? is still alive and well today! 1297 years, 0 months and 17 days (approximately), we seem to be facing the same debate—in reality, we need only look back Dr. Shabir Ally and Dr. Nabeel Qureshi’s 2015 debate which distinguished key differences in the Islamic doctrine of *Tawhid* and the biblical doctrine of the *Trinity*.

Similarly to John of Damascus, Nabeel Qureshi’s tactical defense included addressing God’s nature! Necessarily to make sense of the Israel’s *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH is one"; Cf. Deuteronomy 6:4) in distinction with Islam’s *Shahadah* ("I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God"), Qureshi addressed the compound unity¹¹ that is reflected in the plurality¹² of the Trinity.

Discussing the *Shema*, Qureshi wisely suggests that the God’s oneness can be addressed through the lens of His complexity. Qureshi even suggests translating the Hebrew word for 'One' (*echadh* - אחד) in Deut. 6:4 as, “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh **is** Our **God**, Yahweh **Alone**” (as some Jewish translations do today; Cf. JPS, LSV, REV).

Compound unity can be evidenced throughout the Scriptures in: Gen. 1:5, 2:24; Num. 13:23; Ezek. 37:17.¹³ In this constant debate concerning God’s unity, Imad Shehadeh also raises helpful questions about the absolutism of the concept of *Tawhid*. Imad Shehadeh, a Jordanian evangelical theologian, holds up the plurality of the Trinity hoping to engage with Muslims. If the phrase “God is love” holds true, then absolute-oneness as advocated by the doctrine of *Tawhid* in Islam presents serious *metaphysical problems* for the nature of God. Consubstantiality is therefore required if it is eternally true that God is both one and all loving. As

¹¹ Deut. 6:4; 1st Cor. 8:6; Matt. 11:25-27; Two-fold (as in Matt. 11:25-27) and threefold (Matt. 28:19) of the persons of the Trinity are foundational texts for exploring the mystery of God’s “threeness” in “oneness”. What is often called the “trinitarian formula” appears in Matthew 28:19—which expresses the “oneness” and “threeness” of the Christian God by evidencing the unity of these three persons. Scott R. Swain surveys this unity in plurality writing that, “the Bible identifies the persons with characteristics each person holds in common with the other persons (‘common properties’).” Likewise, there are certain distinctions in the Godhead that serve as “personal properties” and ways of distinguishing each person. Each agent of the Godhead works in the divine acts of creation, providence, redemption, and sustaining the universe. Uniquely, the common properties remind us that in Swain’s words, “common properties reveal that the multiplication of persons in the Trinity does not amount to the multiplication of Gods.” Also Cf. Eph. 4:4-6. Brandon D. Crowe and Carl R. Trueman, *The Essential Trinity: New Testament Foundations and Practical Relevance* (P & R Publishing, 2017), 213–21.

¹² Phil. 2:6-11; Jn. 10:30

¹³ *What Is God Really Like: Tawhid or Trinity? Dr. Shabir Ally and Dr. Nabeel Qureshi Debate*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWpqqqZn7Kg>.

Shehadeh advocates, “...God cannot have love as an essential attribute without an essence that is relational.”¹⁴

Perichoresis (περιχώρησις) and Trinity in John of Damascus

Finally, a brief word on John’s use of the term *Perichoresis* as it pertains to the Trinity should be noted, with need for application in our Dialogue with Muslims. Nearing the end of book one in his work, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* John of Damascus writes:

“The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling [*en allais perichoresin*] is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion. And there is one surge and one movement of the three Persons. It is impossible for this to be found in any created nature.”¹⁵

I believe that it is (at least in part) clear apologetics that will help engage unengaged Muslim communities—and that it is the framework of clear apologetics that John of Damascus provides. Therefore, clearly presenting the doctrine of the *Trinity* will pay huge dividends. Necessarily we must frequently engage in dialogues with scholars who respond to the objections raised by Muslim scholars, academics and religious leaders (*Imams*).

However, while education and intellectual dialogue has its purposes...it also has its limits. One Lebanese Pastor comes to mind, whom I’ve often quoted who said, “We have to love Muslims into the kingdom.” As I consider the scriptural,

¹⁴ Jn. 5:22, 27; That both the Father and the Son can operate as judge reflects overlap in the roles of the Father and Son, but also evidences plurality in the Godhead. Imad Shehadeh, a Jordanian evangelical theologian has increasingly discussed the aspect of the plurality of the Trinity in his work aiming itself at dialogue with Muslims. If the phrase “God is love” holds true, then absolute-oneness as advocated by the doctrine of *tawhid* in Islam presents serious metaphysical problems for the nature of God. Consubstantiality is therefore required if it is eternally true that God is both one and all loving. As Shehadeh advocates, “...God cannot have love as an essential attribute without an essence that is relational.” D. Glenn Butner Jr, *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Baker Books, 2022), 40–43.

¹⁵ John Damascene, *Writings*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 202.

philosophical, spiritual, and metaphysical truths and nuances of the Trinity, I'm also reminded that this Triune God exists as an eternally loving community, which the persons of the Church local, global, and universal are meant to imitate and reflect as closely as possible!

In John of Damascus's work, *The Orthodox Faith*, chapter 8 is dedicated to a discussion concerning doctrine of the Trinity. It is in this chapter that John masterfully employs the term: "perichoresis" ("coinherence"), which describes well the inter-relational dynamic of the persons of the Trinity. I think that in engaging Muslims with John's conception and description of περιχώρησις—which is deemed the "circle dance" of God's triune nature—can center our dialogue and bring about something ultimately fruitful. For in the end this περιχώρησις is a dynamic built on LOVE.¹⁶

In this mutual exchange of the persons of the Trinity, God's love is perfectly display through his eternal fellowship. If this love is not eternal, then it makes God dependent, and needful of creatures other than Himself (for if God is eternally loving in nature, then He should not dependent on creatures to make this quality true). Recognizing this idea in similar sentiments, Moltmann writes, "In the perichoresis the very thing that divides them becomes that which binds them together. The 'circulation' of the eternal divine life becomes perfect through the fellowship and unity of the three different Persons in the eternal love."¹⁷

In briefly closing out this short essay, I end with the words of John of Damascus himself, who loves the Trinity, marvels at its majesty, and so too seeks ways of communicating it with others (like our Muslim neighbors), who need so desperately to grasp the nature and beauty of God more deeply:

"NO MAN HATH SEEN GOD at any time: the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.' The God-head, then, is ineffable and incomprehensible. For 'no one knoweth the Father, but the Son: neither doth any one know the Son, but the Father.' Furthermore, the Holy Spirit knows the things of God, just as the spirit of man knows what is in man...Since, therefore, He knows all things and provides for each in accordance with his needs, He has revealed to us what it was expedient for us to know, whereas that which we were unable to bear He has withheld.

¹⁶ Janosik, Daniel J. John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period (p. 262-264, 288). Pickwick Publications, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 174–75.

With these things let us be content and in them let us abide and let us not step over the ancient bounds or pass beyond the divine tradition.”¹⁸

¹⁸ John Damascene, [Writings](#), ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., vol. 37, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 165–166.