

AN ANALYSIS OF AL-KINDĪ AND JOHN OF DAMASCUS'S ARGUMENT AND ALLEGATION OF THE INCONCISTENCIES IN THE QUR'AN

Muhammad Arif Musa, Ahmad Sanusi Azmi, Adnan Mohamed Yusoff*

Faculty of Quranic and Sunnah Studies. Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. 71800. Nilai. Negeri Sembilan. Malaysia.

Email: *arif@usim.edu.my

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.sp2020no2.5>

Abstract

The study aims to analyse 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī's (9th century) and John of Damascus's (7th century) argumentation on the alleged inconsistencies in the Qur'an. The study is a qualitative study employing textual analysis method. It analyses William Muir's translation of al-Kindī's apology to 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī which was written in the court of al-Ma'mūn and John of Damascus's writings on Islam in *The Heresy of Ishmaelites* which was compiled in the *The Fount of Knowledge*. The study investigates the alleged inconsistencies in the Qur'an which were addressed by the two scholars. The study concludes that alleged inconsistencies in the Qur'an stands as the one of the major arguments for early critics of the Qur'an among Christian apologetics. They cited the assumed contradictory verses in the Qur'an and present them in a polemical manner with the intention to vilify the foundation of Islam.

Keywords: 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī; John of Damascus; Qur'an; inconsistency.

Khulasah

Objektif kajian ini ialah untuk menganalisis hujah yang dikemukakan 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī (abad ke-9) dan John of Damascus (abad ke-7) mengenai dakwaan percanggahan dalam al-Qur'an. Kajian ini adalah kajian kualitatif yang menggunakan kaedah

analisis teks. Ia menganalisis versi terjemahan William Muir terhadap surat al-Kindī kepada 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī yana ditulis di mahkamah al-Ma'mūn dan juga karya penulisan John of Damascus mengenai Islam dalam *The Heresy of Ishmaelites* yang dimuatkan dalam karyanya *The Fount of Knowledge*. Kajian ini meneliti dakwaan percanggahan dalam al-Qur'an yang dibahaskan oleh dua sarjana tersebut. Kesimpulan kepada kajian ini ialah dakwaan percanggahan dalam al-Qur'an ialah salah satu hujah utama yang digunakan pengkritik al-Qur'an yang terawal dalam kalangan sarjana Kristian. Mereka memilih ayat al-Qur'an yang kelihatan bercanggah pada pandangan mereka dan membahaskannya secara polemik dengan tujuan untuk merobohkan asas agama Islam.

Kata kunci: Abd al-Masīh al-Kindī; John of Damascus; al-Qur'an; percanggahan.

Introduction

The notion of the Qur'an being inconsistent draws back to the earlier times of Islam, during the time of the Prophet PBUH where non-Muslims among the Meccan Quraysh claimed that the Qur'an was contradicting itself. The accusation prompted the revelation of the verse al-Nahl 16:106¹:

وَإِذَا بَدَّلْنَا آيَةً مَّكَانَ آيَةٍ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُنَزَّلُ

قَالُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُفْتَرٍ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

“And when We change (one) communication for (another) communication, and Allah knows best what He reveals, they say: You are only a forger. Nay, most of them do not know.”

After Muslim rule had been established throughout the largely Christian Middle East in the 640AD, the

¹ Al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Dammam: Dār al-Iṣlāh, 1992), 280.

Christian majority discovered that the Muslims had come with a religion that claimed to be the only true religion, abrogating all previous revealed scriptures. As time passed, the Qur'an were written down in beautifully crafted books in the Arabic language and became available for Christians to study.

The earliest recorded Christian reading of the Qur'an comes from the writing of John of Damascus (d. 750) that spent his career as a secretary to the Caliph of Damascus. John identified three issues in his understanding of the Qur'an that would set the parameters of Christian interpretation of the Scripture for subsequent generations. John proposed that the Qur'an was less than it claimed to be. He reasoned that the Qur'an contained materials that could hardly be worthy of divine revelation and this may include the assumed inconsistencies in the Qur'an.

Secondly, John also proposed that the Prophet Muhammad PBUH was not what he claimed to be since the Qur'an provided insufficient evidence to support his prophetic role². Thirdly, John asserted that when one reads

² On this matter, Muslim scholars have produced a number of literatures discussing evidences for Muhammad's prophethood. Azmi (2018) noted that early Muslim scholars were motivated by a deep spiritual need to acquire details about their beloved prophet. He also asserted that the external challenges from non-Muslims in their interreligious dialogue contribute significantly to the development of systematic arguments in the later work of *Dalā'il*. Scholars who have contributed in *Dalā'il* literature most commonly cited Quranic verses which shows that the Qur'an does substantially attest to Muhammad's prophethood, for instance the work of al-Bayhāqī (d. 1065) in *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah* and al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1024) in *Tathbīt Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah*. 'Itr (1973) study on the subject displays how the Qur'an attests to Muhammad's prophethood. In his study, he explained how Muhammad is described in the Qur'an, which includes the prophet's upbringing as an orphan, his attributes and his miracles. See, Ahmad Sanusi Azmi, "The Development of *Dala'il Nubuwwa* Literature: An Emblem of Interreligious Dialogue in Early Islam," *The Social Sciences* 13 (2018), 1072-1078; Ḥasan

the Qur'an, he may find that some statements in the Scripture affirmed Christian beliefs³. These are the three main issues which John believed to challenge the status of the Qur'an as a revealed Scripture; however it must be noted that all three of John's propositions were strongly argued by Muslim scholars.

Background of al-Kindī

The discourse among scholars concerning al-Kindī's background is somewhat peculiar in the sense that scholars could not confirm substantially on the existence of him. Current scholars who believe al-Kindī is an actual person who lived through the 9th century rely on al-Bīrūnī's mention of him in his treatise *Vestiges of Ancient Nations* which was written in the 10th century. While describing the customs of the Sabeans, al-Bīrūnī cited the authority of Ibn Ishâc al Kindy, the Christian⁴:

“Likewise Abd al Masîh ibn Ishâc al Kindy the Christian, in his reply to the Epistle of Abdallah ibn Ismaîl the Hâshimite, relates of

Diya 'Itr, *Nubuwwah Muḥammad fī al-Qur'ān* (Halab: Dār al-Naṣr, 1973).

³ Mark Ivor Beaumont, "Early Christian Interpretation of the Quran," *Transformation* vol. 22 no. 4 (October 2004), 195. On this subject, Muslim scholars have outlined the Quranic stance on the people of the book. The Qur'an displays one of Allah's attributes which is *al-'adl* (The Most Utterly Just), and it is only fair that Allah SWT reward those who embrace Islam among them and punish those who refuse. The Qur'an explicitly rejects the trinity of God in a number of verses and ridicule those who believe in it. However among the people of the book, there are those who have embraced Islam in the likes of al-Najāshi, the ruler of Habsyah and 'Abd Allāh bin Salām and it is only proper that the Qur'an singles them out for praise. *Mawsū'ah Bayān al-Islām fī al-Radd 'āla al-Ifṭirāt wa al-Shubahāt*, (Egypt: Dār Naḥdah Miṣr, 2012), 148 -153.

⁴ W. Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy, Written at the Court of Al Mâmûn (Circa A.H. 215; A.D. 830), In Defence of Christianity Against Islam. With an Essay on Its Age and Authorship Read Before the Royal Asiatic Society* (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887), 13.

them (the Sabeans) that they are notorious for human sacrifice, but that at present they are not able to practise openly the same".

Despite the mention by al-Bīrūnī, however, the fact that there were no biographical data available on the two men to which the dispute in the apology is ascribed, viz. ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ismā‘īl al-Hāshimī and ‘Abd al-Masīh al-Kindī, is a major concern as suggested by al-Alūsī in his response to al-Kindī. This is later echoed by Koningsveld where he noted that there is also a controversy among scholars about the nature of the text: whether it is the product of fiction by a single (anonymous) author, or two authentic texts written by two historical unknown personalities which were brought together at some unknown date by an unknown editor. Koningsveld however later proposed that the apology was indeed written in the 9th century, and this proposition concurred with an earlier suggestion by Muir.⁵

The Apology of al-Kindī

The different opinions among scholars on the existence of the two important figures in the dispute namely al-Kindī and ‘Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī have led to another dispute on the authenticity of the apology itself. Koningsveld noted that none of the Arabic manuscripts on the apology is older than the 17th century. He further said that by far majority of the manuscripts date back to the late 19th or even the early 20th century⁶. However, as had been stated earlier, Koningsveld still believes that the text was written in the 9th century based on other considerations.

On the other hand, al-Alūsī argued against the authenticity of the text and further asserted that the apology most probably was made by certain Protestants or

⁵ P. V. Koningsveld, *The Apology of al-Kindi: Religious Polemics in Context* (Leiden: Royal Van Gorcum. 2000), 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*

similar people. Al-Alūsī reasoned that there is no copies of the text in the Islamic library of any Muslim or indeed in any library at all. Had it been a genuine text, at least several copies would have been available in monasteries of the Arab world.⁷

The manner the apology was written is also different from any other similar text written in the Muslim world at that time. The author of the apology employed a very hostile approach towards denigration and vilification of Islam as had never been observed in any other. For that matter, al-Alūsī viewed that the author of the apology had to be a late Protestant pseudepigraph.⁸

Al-Alūsī's scepticism on the text was later supported by Muhammad Hamdi Bakri and Ahmad Hijazi Saqa⁹. Beaumont's description on al-Kindī's writing is also interesting and should be considered thoroughly. In his praise on al-Kindī's deep knowledge on Islam, Beaumont noted that al-Kindī's attack on the authenticity of the Qur'an was more sustained than any other in the 8th and 9th centuries. Beaumont also asserted that no other

⁷ Maḥmūd bin 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥusaynī al-Alūsī, *al-Jawāb al-Fasīh li Mā Laffaqah 'Abd al-Masīh* (Cairo: Dār al-Bayān al-'Arabi, 1987), 38-39.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ On the authenticity of the apology, Ahmad Hijazi Saqa gave several arguments to refute the notion that the apology was written earlier as suggested by Muir and Koningsveld. Saqa's argument can be summarized in the following points:

- The opening remark of 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī's letter does not conform to the practice of the Prophet PBUH although it claimed to be so.
- The letter claimed that at the end of the debate, al-Ma'mūn confessed to the truth of Christianity as the religion of the hereafter and such claim is absurd, because it contradicts with the foundation of Islam.
- The biblical references implied in the letter use similar numbering as the Protestant version of the Bible.

See, al-Alūsī, *al-Jawāb al-Fasīh*, 3-5.

Christian writing from this period showed the same breadth and depth of knowledge of the text of the Qur'an.

Al-Kindī's familiarity with traditions concerning the early history of Islam, according to Beaumont, was unusual for a Christian writing before the hadiths were collected and recorded in the second half of the 9th century. While Beaumont's description of al-Kindī displayed his admiration of the scholar, it may also fuel doubts on the authenticity of the text.

The Apology of al-Kindī is a response by 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī to 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī's initial letter inviting him to embrace Islam. The apology consists of criticisms on Islam from different aspects. It deals with the notion of Muhammad PBUH as the messenger of God, the Islamic teachings and rituals as well as the Qur'an. In his writing, al-Kindī concluded that the Qur'an is a flawed scripture, and he stated his opinion in very harsh terms¹⁰. In justifying his stand, al-Kindī adduced the alleged inconsistencies in the Qur'an.

Al-Kindī raised the assumed contradiction between the command to relay the Islamic message in a peaceful manner and the command to engage in battle with the non-believers. Al-Kindī wrote¹¹:

"And then, thou callest on me 'to enter on The way of the Lord,' that is to wage war against other religions, to smite with sword, and make slaves of mankind, until they confess 'that there is no God but the Lord, and that Mahomet is his Servant and Apostle;' or, if they refuse, until they pay tribute with their hands and are humbled... Now tell me how thou wilt reconcile the two sets of passages

¹⁰ H. Griffith Sydney, "The Quran in Arab Christian Text, The Development of an Apologetical Argument. Abu Qurrah in the Maglis of al-Ma'mun," *Journal Parole de L' Orient*, 24 (1999), 211.

¹¹ Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy*, 95.

that follow (for they are confessedly discordant) out of the Book thou holdest to be divine?"

He then proceeded to list a set of verses concerning *da'wah* which include the following¹²:

"The direction of them appertaineth not unto thee; but, rather, the Lord directeth whom he pleaseth." (al-Baqarah 2:272);

"Say, O men, the truth hath verily now come unto you from your Lord; he, therefore, that is rightly directed, is directed for the benefit of his own soul; and he that erreth, erreth only against the same; I am no Guardian over you. Do thou (O Mahomet) follow that which is revealed unto thee. Be patient until the Lord decide; for he is the best of all Deciders." (Yūnus 10:108).

Al-Kindī then noted¹³:

"Thou stirrest up thy people to attack mankind with the sword, to plunder them and lead them away captive, that they may be forced to embrace the faith by violence and against their will".

Al-Kindī's argument on the subject is that the Qur'an in all of the verses listed promotes peace and freedom in religion, yet the Muslims' endeavours in expanding the Islamic world which required engaging in battle with opposing parties seemed to contradict with the teachings of the Qur'an. Although in his words, al-Kindī did not

¹² Other verses quoted by al-Kindī are; Al-Imrān 3:104, Yūnus 10:98-99, Hūd 11: 118-119, al-Anbiyā 21:107, al-Baqarah 2:256, Al-Imrān 3: 20, al-Baqarah 2: 253, al-Ankabūt 29:46 and al-Kāfirūn 109: 6.

¹³ Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy*, 98.

directly quote any verse on jihad, however his saying clearly shows he was referring to al-Tawbah 9:29:

“Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture - [fight] until they give the jizya willingly while they are humbled.” (al-Tawbah 9:29).

Furthermore, al-Kindī added to his argument his presumption on the uncertainty surrounding the concept of abrogation (*naskh*) since some Muslim scholars have resorted to this method upon reconciliation of the above verses. Al-Kindi stated¹⁴:

“Thou wilt say, then, that one of the two sets of text is cancelled by the other. But which cancelleth, and which is cancelled that thou canst not show. Thou hast confessedly neither proof nor certain knowledge in this matter; and it may be that thou mistakest the one for the other. How are we to discriminate the true from the false, for the two passages both being in thy Book, are directly opposed the one to the other; and there is this risk that the one which thou regardest as true, and on which thou art bound to act, may be the one that is false and therefore to be abandoned...”

Here, al-Kindī questioned the practice of choosing the abrogator verses from the abrogated ones. He expressed concern on the possibility of Muslims choosing the wrong verses to be abrogated.

In response to al-Kindī's argument, al-Alūsī explained that verses which command the Muslims to

¹⁴ Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy*, 99.

fight the non-believers abrogate al-Baqarah 2:256; "*There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion*" and other similar verses such as al-Kafirūn. Al-Alūsī further mentioned that that the former was revealed, succeeding the latter. Al-Alūsī reasoned his argument using the *sunnah* of the Prophet PBUH. The Prophet PBUH ordered the Muslims to participate in *jihād* until the end of time and even the Prophet PBUH himself did not abandon *jihād* until the end of his life.

Al-Alūsī argued that, if the Qur'an, as proposed by al-Kindī, forbids *jihād*, surely the Companions would have questioned the command, since they had been fighting the non-believers, while it is also illogical for the Prophet PBUH to go against the Qur'an by ordering the Muslims to perform *jihād* if it is forbidden in it¹⁵.

Another view on the matter is that every verse which command the Muslims to engage in battle with non-Muslims must be understood according to its designated context. For example, verse al-Tawbah 9:5 which orders Muslims to slay the polytheist in every encounter actually refers to a specific group among the Quraysh non-believers and they are those who have violated the peace treaty made with the Muslims. Therefore, it does not in any way contradict with verses which promote peace and freedom.

Muṣṭafā Zayd stressed that this interpretation is obvious when one considers the context where the verse is placed in the Quran.¹⁶ It succeeded verses which mention those who had violated the treaty made between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. Furthermore, subsequent to the Sword Verse¹⁷, Allah SWT commanded the Muslims to provide protection for those who seek for it

¹⁵ Al-Alūsī, *al-Jawab al-Fasih*, 410-411

¹⁶ Muṣṭafā Zayd, *al-Naskh fī al-Qur'ān*. (Cairo: Dār al-Wafā, 1987), 505.

¹⁷ Al-Tawbah 9:5.

among the non-believers and deliver them to safety despite their unwillingness to embrace Islam.

Concerning al-Tawbah 9:29, there is no element of compulsion in the verse, rather it only explains on *jizyah*; a certain taxation or compensation levied on non-Muslims in exchange for security and assistance provided to them. Islamic law permits non-Muslim to live in a Muslim-ruling country with certain conditions, none of which compels them to embrace Islam.

Al-Kindī also accused the Qur'an to contain foreign words, despite its claim to be pure Arabic. Al-Kindī noted¹⁸:

“If the claim be that (apart from all other tongues) the Coran is an unparalleled and miraculous model of Arabic (according to the text, Verily, We have sent down the Coran in the Arabic tongue, if perchance ye may comprehend¹⁹); then, why do we find in it foreign words, as *namāric* from the Persian, and *mishkāt* from the Abyssinian, vocabulary? Here is a defect either in the messenger or the message. If there be in the Arabic language no words to express the ideas, then the medium of communication, and therefore the message itself, is imperfect; if otherwise, the messenger.”

Beaumont commented²⁰:

“Another dent in the theory of the inspiration of the Quran, according to al-Kindi, was the presence of non-Arabic words in the text.

¹⁸ Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy*, 79.

¹⁹ This refers to al-Syu'arā 29:192-195 :“ *And indeed, the Qur'an is the revelation of the Lord of the worlds. Upon your heart, [O Muhammad] - that you may be of the warners -, In a clear Arabic language.*”

²⁰ Beaumont, *Early Christian Interpretation of the Quran*, 196.

Though the Quran claimed to be sent down from God in Arabic, it contained Persian and Ethiopian expression that had Arabic equivalents but were adopted anyway. Either Gabriel passed on these non-Arabic words to Muhammad or Muhammad's Arabic was not as rich as it could be."

On this matter, Muslim scholars explain that the Qur'an consists of words that were used by the Arabs at the time it was revealed. The notion that some of the words originated from other languages does not discard the fact that they are Arabic in nature²¹. Saqqār added that the Qur'an was revealed in the presence of the most knowledgeable people in Arabic language, yet this matter had never been raised during their time. On the contrary, the Arabs were astounded by the eloquence of the Qur'an²².

Another assumed inconsistency of the Qur'an pointed out by al-Kindī, is the treatment received by Christians from Muslims. Al-Kindī noted²³:

"If thou art in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who read the Book (revealed) from before thee,—that verily the truth hath come unto thee from thy Lord, and be not thou among them that doubt."²⁴ And still more explicitly:—"They to whom we have given the Book read it according to its true reading. These are they that believe therein;

²¹ *Mawsū'ah Bayān al-Islām*, 166

²² Munqiz bin Maḥmūd Saqqār, *Tanzīh al-Qurān 'an Da'āwa al-Mubtālīn* (Riyadh: Muslim World League, 2012), 255 – 253.

²³ Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy*, 115.

²⁴ This refers to Yūnus 10:94. Al-Alūsī refuted al-Kindī's comprehension to the text. He quoted al-Baghāwī's interpretation of "those who read the Book" as those who have embraced Islam among the people of the book. Al-Alūsī, *al-Jawāb al-Fasīh*, 671.

and whosoever believeth not therein, they shall be lost."²⁵ "Our 'reading' is here asserted to be the right one, and thy Master directeth that we (that is we Christians) are to be asked concerning the same, and that what we declare in respect of it must be accepted. How then canst thou accuse us of corruption, or of 'changing the text from its place?' That would be to contradict thy self and go back from the rule of fair interpretation which we agreed upon for the conduct of this argument."

Here al-Kindī questioned the Muslim's belief on the corruption of the two scriptures; Torah and Injīl, and this is based on a number of Quranic verses including 'Āl-Imrān 3:78²⁶:

"Most surely there is a party amongst those who distort the Book with their tongue that you may consider it to be (a part) of the Book, and they say, It is from Allah, while it is not from Allah, and they tell a lie against Allah whilst they know." and al-Nisā' 4:46: "Of those who are Jews (there are those who) alter words from their places and say: We have heard and we disobey and: Hear, may you not

²⁵ Al-Baqarah 2:121. Al-Baghāwī explained that "they that believe therein" refers to believe in the Scripture excluding the corrupted parts of the text. See, Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyibah, 1997). Al-Alūsī further explained that 'true reading' of the Scripture is for those who believe in the Prophet PBUH. Al-Alūsī, *al-Jawāb al-Fasīh*, 373.

²⁶ Muir, *The Apology Of Al Kindy*, 114-115.

In response to al-Kindī's confusion, al-Alūsī quoted Rahmatullah al-Hindī's writing in *Izhār al-Haqq*. Al-Hindī had listed three types of corruptions in the Bible. Corruptions which concern text replacement (*tabdīl*), corruption on texts addition (*ziyādah*), and corruptions on text reduction (*nuqṣān*). Al-Alūsī even mentioned quotations by biblical scholars attesting corruption in the Bible text. Al-Alūsī, *al-Jawāb al-Fasīh*, 645-650.

be made to hear! and: Raina, distorting (the word) with their tongues and taunting about religion".

Al-Kindī's argument regarding this matter is that the notion of corruption in the previous scriptures is argued by the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an contains verses that praise the People of the Book, as well as verses that support the authenticity of the previous scriptures. On the other hand, the Qur'an also accuses the People of the Book of corrupting their scriptures, hence the contradiction. Beaumont added, "Surely Muslims were contradicting their own scriptures in making allegations about the corruption of the Bible."²⁷

Muslim scholars explain that the Qur'an varies in the way it describes the people of the book. Occasionally the Qur'an praises them, such as in al-Baqarah 2:6 and al-Māidah 5:69. However, in most cases, the Qur'an condemns the People of the Book, for instance in al-Mā'idah 5:72-73 and al-Tawbah 9:30. These two sets of verses have different contexts. The former refers to those who adhered to the true teachings of Prophet Isa AS and Prophet Musa AS prior to the time of Prophet Muhammad PBUH and upon the revelation of the Qur'an, they accepted it as the word of Allah and embraced Islam; whereas the latter refers to those who refuse to accept the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.²⁸

Background of John of Damascus

Saint John of Damascus is a Christian monk in the 7th-8th century in Damascus. Most scholars place his birth at 675, while others prefer a range between 652 and 660 based on the presupposition that John of Damascus was acquainted with Caliph Yazid I. John of Damascus was known for his advocacy for the veneration of sacred images which had

²⁷ Beaumont, *Early Christian Interpretation of the Quran*, 200.

²⁸ *Mawsū'ah Bayān al-Islām*, 148-153.

placed him in the forefront of the 8th century Iconoclastic Controversy.

Prior to becoming a monk, John was one of a Muslim caliph's tax officials succeeding his father. While still a government minister, John wrote three discourses on sacred images, defending their veneration against the Byzantine emperor Leo III and the Iconoclasts. The Iconoclasts obtained a condemnation of John at the Council of Hieria in 754 that was reversed at the second Council of Nicaea in 787. It is assumed that John even memorized the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth* literature as well as Arabian poetry.

Among his approximately 150 written works, the most significant is *Pēgē gnōseōs*, (The Source of Knowledge), a synthesis of Christian philosophy and doctrine that was influential in directing the course of Medieval Latin thought and that became the principal textbook of Greek Orthodox theology²⁹. John was the first major theologian to engage in a written apology with Islam through two works specifically crafted to defend Christianity against what he referred to as the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

The Heresy of the Ishmaelites

The term 'Ishmaelites' refers to Muslims in general. John asserted that there are three names used in reference to the Muslims; 'Ishmaelites', 'Hagarenes' and 'Saracenes'³⁰. He reasoned that the name 'Ishmaelites' and 'Hagarenes' are used based on the notion that Muhammad PBUH is a descendent from Prophet Ismā'īl AS who was born to Ibrāhīm AS and Hājar whereas the name 'Saracenes' is derived from the destituteness of Sara, because of what

²⁹ "Saint John of Damascus," Encyclopedia of Britannica Inc., accessed Dec 30, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-of-Damascus>.

³⁰ Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Canada: Leiden E.J Brill 1972), 70.

Hājar said to the angel: "Sara hath sent me away 'destitute'"³¹.

The Fount of Knowledge is composed of three chapters. The first is an introduction of Philosophical Categories (*Dialectica*), followed by an exposition of heresies contemporary to John's day (*De Haeresibus*), and finally a third chapter divided up into four sections explaining the particulars of Christian orthodoxy (*De Orthodoxa Fide*).

Our focus in this study is the second chapter of the treatise, the *De Haeresibus* (The Heresies). The *De Haeresibus* is an explanation of over one hundred different heresies, mostly focusing on their origins, their errors, and their influence on Christendom at the time of John's writing. The Ishmaelite heresy under *De Haeresibus* portrays John's refutation of Islam and it is the longest chapter in the *De Haeresibus*. John's refutation of Islam in the treatise constitutes the earliest explicit discussions of Islam by a Christian theologian along with John's other work the Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen³².

In the heresy of Ishmaelites, John deals with questions of theology, revelation and authority. The themes of the work can be summarized in three categories; the Ishmaelite Doctrine of God and Christ, the authenticity of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet, and the inspiration of the Qur'an. It is important to point out that John considered Islam as a heresy from Christianity which explains his inclusion of Islam in the *De Haeresibus*.

³¹ John of Damascus, *The Fount of Knowledge: An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. G. N. Warwick, 40, https://www.academia.edu/7842905/The_Fount_of_Knowledge_by_Saint_John_Damascene.

³² D. J. Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims. The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*. (Oregon: Pickwick Publication, 2016), 93.

Furthermore, John's emphasis on the monk's Arianism gives further evidence that John of Damascus spoke of the heresy of Islam in the same context as he would the heresy of Arianism. John sees the story of Bahira as a kind of indictment, associating the Ishmaelite beliefs with the familiar heresies of his day.³³

In John's refutation of Islam, he addressed the Muslim's belief on 'Isa AS as not being divine which contrasts starkly with the Christians' belief. He stressed on the assumed contradiction in the Islamic faith concerning 'Isa AS. John found it to be conflicting to describe 'Isa AS as the 'Word' of God whilst simultaneously strip him of his divinity. For that, John accused the Muslims as 'mutilators' for tearing apart the trinity. John wrote³⁴:

".... And again, we say to them: 'As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit³⁵, why do you accuse us of being Hetaerists? For the word, and the 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".

Janosik explained John's argument that if God's Word and Spirit are taken away from him, then he is less

³³ D. Bryan Rhodes, *John Damascene in Context: An Examination of "The Heresy of the Ishmaelites" with Special Consideration Given to the Religious, Political, and Social Contexts During the Seventh and Eighth Century Arab Conquests* (Virginia: Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 56 -57.

³⁴ Damascene, *The Fount of Knowledge*, 41.

³⁵ This is in reference to 'Ali-Imran 4:171. Rhodes, *John Damascene in Context*, 61.

than God. Indeed, if there were a time when God did not have his Word or his Spirit, John argues, then God would have been incomplete. If God then attached himself to the Word and the Spirit, something would have been added to him and therefore he would have been changed. However, change is something that only a creature can experience, not the creator. Thus, in order for God to have always been the creator rather than a created being, he must have always had his Word and his Spirit, which necessitates the eternal nature of his Word.³⁶

Non-Muslim scholars have expressed their admiration towards John's argument on the subject. Sahas wrote: "John of Damascus has a correct knowledge of this Quranic notion, and he is well aware of the meaning that the Muslims ascribe to this issue." Rhodes added: "His response is to call the Ishmaelites 'mutilators' because they have, in a sense, torn from God the doctrine of trinity." Rhodes further claimed that on this subject, John had used his knowledge of the Qur'an to expose a contradiction and even teach Christian doctrine.³⁷ John's argument later became popular after his death and as Griffith pointed out, "Almost every Christian apologist in the world of Islam from John of Damascus onwards quote or allude to this Quranic verse."³⁸

In John's word, he did not quote the Quranic verses directly; however he was clearly addressing the assumed contradiction between verses that mention 'Isa AS not being the son of Allah, rather he is the 'Word' and 'Spirit' of Allah; they are al-Nisa' 4:171:

"O followers of the Book! do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not speak (lies) against Allah, but (speak) the truth; the Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only a

³⁶ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 104.

³⁷ Rhodes, *John Damascene in Context*, 61.

³⁸ Griffith, *The Quran in Arab Christian Text*, 216.

messenger of Allah and His Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His messengers, and say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only one Allah; far be It from His glory that He should have a son, whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His, and Allah is sufficient for a Protector."

And al-Tawbah 9:30;

"And the Jews say: Uzair is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away!"

On this matter, John and those who support him have chosen an interpretation which differs vastly from the Muslims understanding of the subject. The *mufasssirūn* explain that the notion of 'Isa AS as the 'Word of Allah' refers to the fact that 'Isa AS was created from the word of Allah '*Kun*' (Be!). This statement is stated explicitly in Ali-Imrān 3:59: "Indeed, the example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created Him from dust; then He said to him, "Be," and he was".

Al-Alūsī added that the description of 'Isa AS as the word of Allah is because he was created through unnatural means; without a father³⁹. Another interpretation by al-Ṭabarī is that the word '*kalimah*' refers to the news revealed by Allah SWT through his angels on the

³⁹ Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd bin 'Abd Allāh al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-Ma'āni fī Taḥsīn al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm wa al-Sab'u al-Mathānī* 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1993), 142.

forthcoming of 'Isa AS⁴⁰. Both interpretations by Muslim Quranic exegetes do not imply to the connotation asserted by John.

Conclusion

The study shows that past critics among Christian apologists had addressed the assumed contradictions in the Qur'an. In their discourse on the subject, they had selected what they claimed to be contradictory verses and presented them in a polemical manner and in the case of al-Kindī, even using harsh and hostile words. Al-Kindī's discourse on the subject surpasses other scholars in his time where he even addressed the law of abrogation in the Qur'an. His major concern was the inability to determine the abrogator from the abrogated verse. This is clear from his words: "But which cancelleth, and which is cancelled that thou canst not show."

While al-Kindī addressed several assumed inconsistencies in the Qur'an, John of Damascus had only addressed one and it is related to the Christians' belief on 'Isa AS which is the major difference between Islam and Christianity. It must be noted that all the above criticisms have caught the attention of Muslim scholars who then produced numerous counter arguments. In the case of al-Kindī's letter, al-Alūsī had written a literature entitled *al-Jawāb al-Faṣīḥ li mā Laffaqahu 'Abd al-Masīḥ* detailing all of al-Kindī's criticism which he then rebutted.

Muslim scholars assert that the confusion in regard of the assumed contradictory verses lies in the inability of a reader to place each verse in its designated context. In regard of *jihād*, Islam permits battle with non-Muslims to achieve the following objectives; 1- to eradicate any form of injustice and transgression from Muslims' land, 2- to

⁴⁰ Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* 6 (Damascus: al-Risalah Foundation, 2000), 412.

uphold treaties made with any party, and 3- to abolish any obstacles towards dissemination of the message of Islam⁴¹.

Islam does not permit any type of aggression in forcing people to embrace Islam. The freedom of religion is strongly upheld in Islamic teachings and it is based on al-Baqarah 2:256; "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion". Muslims scholars also pointed out the fact that there are existing Islamic countries which have never engaged in any sort of battle with Arab Muslims⁴². On John's argumentation regarding Prophet Isa AS as the 'Word of Allah', his interpretation on the subject is different from the understanding of Quranic exegetes.

References

- Al-Alūsī, Maḥmūd bin 'Abd Allāh al-Husaynī. *Al-Jawāb al-Fasīh li Mā Laffaḡah 'Abd al-Masīh*. Cairo: Dār al-Bayān al-'Arabī, 1987.
- Al-Alūsī, Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd bin 'Abd Allāh. *Rūh al-Ma'āni fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm wa al-Sab'u al-Mathānī* edited by 'Ali Abd al-Bārī 'Atiyyah. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1414H.
- Azmi, Ahmad Sanusi, "The Development of Dalail Nubuwwa Literature: An Emblem of Interreligious Dialogue in Early Islam," *The Social Sciences* 13 (2018): 1072-1078.
- Al-Baghāwī, Muḥammad al-Husayn. *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl fī Tafsīr al-Quran*. Riyadh: Dār Tayyibah, 1997.
- Al-Bayhaqī, Aḥmad bin al-Ḥusayn. *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1984.
- Beaumont, Mark Ivor, "Early Christian Interpretation of the Quran," *Transformation* 22(4) (2005): 195-203.
- Al-Wāhidī, 'Alī bin Aḥmad. *Asbāb Nuzūl*. Dammam: Dār al-Iṣlāḡ, 1992.

⁴¹ 'Abd Allāh Nāsīḡ 'Ulwān, *Ḥurriyyah al-I'tiqād fī al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah* (Egypt: Dār al-Salām, 2004), 24-27.

⁴² *Mawsū'ah Bayān al-Islām*, 56-60.

- John of Damascus, *The Fount of Knowledge: An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans, G. N. Warwick, 40, https://www.academia.edu/7842905/The_Fount_of_Knowledge_by_Saint_John_Damascene.
- Griffith, Sydney H., "The Quran in Arab Christian Text, The Development of an Apologetical Argument. Abu Qurrah in the Maglis of al-Ma'mun," *Journal Parole de L' Orient* 24 (1999): 203-233.
- ‘Itr, Ḥasan Ḍīyā al-Dīn. *Nubuwwah Muḥammad fī al-Qur’ān*. Halab, Syria: Dār al-Naṣr, 1973.
- Janosik, Daniel J. *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims. The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*. Oregon: Pickwick Publication, 2016.
- Koningsveld, P. S Van. "The Apology of al-Kindi." In *Religious Polemics in Context*. Leiden: Royal Van Gorcum. 2000: 69-92.
- Mawsū‘āh Bayān al-Islām fī al-Radd ‘āla al-Iftirāt wa al-Shubahāt*. Egypt: Dār al-Nahḍah, 2012.
- Muir, William. *The Apology of Al Kindy, Written at the Court of Al Mâmûn (Circa A.H. 215; A.D. 830), in Defence of Christianity Against Islam. With an Essay on its Age and Authorship Read Before the Royal Asiatic Society*. London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887.
- Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Ahmad bin Abd al-Jabbār. *Tathbūt Dalāil al-Nubuwwah*. Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā, n.d.
- Rhodes, D. Bryan. *John Damascene In Context: An Examination of "The Heresy of The Ishmaelites" With Special Consideration Given to The Religious, Political, and Social Contexts During The Seventh and Eight Century Arab Conquests*. Virginia: Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005.

- Sahas, Daniel J. *John of Damascus on Islam*. Canada: Leiden E. J Brill, 1972.
- Al-Saqqār, Munqiz bin Maḥmūd. *Tanzīh al-Qur'ān 'an Da'āwa al-Mubtilīn*. Riyadh: Muslim World League, 2012.
- Al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad bin Jarīr. *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*. Damascus: al-Risalah Foundation, 2000.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica ed. Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 2 May, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-of-Damascus>.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica ed. "Saint John of Damascus," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed Dec 3, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-of-Damascus>.
- ‘Ulwān, ‘Abd Allāh Nāsiḥ. *Hurriyyah al-I'tiqād fī al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah*. Egypt: Dar al-Salam, 2004.
- Zayd, Muṣṭafā. *Al-Naskh fī al-Qur'ān*. Cairo: Dār al-Wafā, 1987.

Muhammad Arif, Ahmad Sanusi & Adnan, "An Analysis of al-Kindī and John of Damascus's Argument," *Afkār* Special Issue 2 (2020): 133-156