

John of Damascus & the Perichoresis

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The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (5)

John of Damascus (c.675-c.750), though little known today, is probably the most famous theologian in the last 1500 years of the Eastern church. He was born into a prominent family and educated under Cosmas, a learned Sicilian monk. Like his grandfather and father before him, John served as an high official in the court of the Muslim Umayyad caliph of Damascus. Later John retired to Saint Sabas, a monastery near the shore of the Dead Sea about ten miles south-east of Jerusalem. Hughes Oliphant Old tries to capture the significance of John's move: "For the caliph's minister of finance to retire to Saint Sabas might be roughly analogous to the American secretary of the treasury leaving Washington to become a theology student at Princeton."¹

John of Damascus is an interesting and important figure for several reasons. First, he is the last of the Greek fathers and their capable summariser. Second, his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* is one of the earliest "systematic theologies" and was used for many centuries as a textbook in the Eastern church.² Third, John not only exerted great sway in the East but he also influenced the Western church especially through the twelfth and thirteenth century Latin translations of his works. In his famous *Sentences* (1150), Peter Lombard (c.1095-1169) appealed some twenty-seven times to the Damascene. In the middle of the thirteenth century, western scholarship produced a concordance to John's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. John was the West's prime source for Eastern theology and, since John utilised Aristotelian philosophy in his theological writings, he is certainly one factor in the rise of Western scholastic theology—a synthesis of Latin theology and Aristotelian methods and interests. In 1890, Pope Leo XIII even declared John a "Doctor of the Church." Fourth, John is of interest not only in his influence on the church, both in the East and in the West, but in his

¹Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 21.

²John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1989). Hereafter this work shall be abbreviated OF followed by book and chapter, e.g., OF 2.11.

relations with Islam. Mohammed died in 632, and John is one of the earliest, learned critics of Islam. However, in his responses to Muslim criticisms of the Eastern church's practice and theology, John failed to see any need for reform but instead he justified many of the church's departures in worship and doctrine.

This last point serves to explain in part some of John of Damascus' errors. Not only did John develop some of the false teachings in the church's tradition, but he also did so in part in reaction to the Muslims. For example, the Muslims opposed Christ's eternal sonship. John, in effect, said that God not only has a Son but He has a mother as well! John's statements about the blessed virgin Mary—for so she is called in Luke 1:28, 42, 45, 48—depart from the sobriety of Scripture and run into mariolatry (e.g., OF 3.12; 4.14). John taught that Mary's birth was miraculous, and he made statements later used in support of Mary's immaculate conception, her being born without sin.³ In his sermons on the burial of Mary, John provides “a particularly early statement of the assumption of the Virgin. No one had put the story quite so poetically or elegantly before.”⁴

The Muslims mocked the use of pictures by professing Christians and John rose in defence of images, especially in his famous three *Orations*. Old states that the Damascene, leaning heavily on the Neoplatonic ideas of Dionysius the Areopagite, was “the first to develop” a “theology of icons.”⁵ Philip Schaff adds, “[N]o one has put the case better.”⁶ Thus it comes as no surprise to see John advocating the veneration of the saints, their relics and the cross (OF 4.11, 15-16).

John's view of the Lord's Supper approaches transubstantiation: “the bread itself and the wine are *changed* into God's body and blood.” He explicitly and emphatically denied that the elements are “merely *figures* of the body and blood of Christ (God forbid!)” (OF 4.13). John did not seem to understand that Christ is present *spiritually* in the Lord's Supper.

John's false view of the grace of God is not only a development of the wrong ideas embedded in the church's tradition, but it also flows from his Aristotelianism (OF 2.12, 25). John is a staunch advocate of the baldest form of free will. God is not sovereign over man's choices nor over death (OF 2.28). The things “that are in our power,” he claims, “are outside of the sphere of Provi-

³Old, *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 4 (USA: Hendrickson, repr. 1996), p. 627.

dence and within that of our Free-will” (OF 2.29). John’s free-will theology leads him into free-offer theology: “God’s *antecedent* will and pleasure” is “that all should be saved and come to His Kingdom” (OF 2.29; cf. 4.19). God does not *determine* the future; He merely knows the future through His “*foreknowledge*” (understood in the Arminian sense of a bare foresight of what man will do). This is where John brings in “God’s *consequent* will and permission” which “has its origin in us.” If we believe, God will save us; if we do not believe He will punish us (OF 2.29). John even accepts the consequences of his free-will and free-offer theology: Christ is “*grateful* to those who receive” His salvation (OF 4.4)! This logically follows for if Christ *wants* to save everybody and man is “united to God of [his] own free-will” (OF 4.15), then the Lord must be thankful to those who allow Him to save them.⁷

John’s position on the procession of the Holy Spirit is also a development in the wrong direction in that he—more clearly than any earlier Greek writer—opposed the *filioque*, the doctrine that the Holy Spirit is breathed forth by the Father *and the Son*. Herman Bavinck notes that John “*definitely rejects* the idea that the Spirit is from (out of) the Son and has his existence from (out of) the Son, and he refers the Son and the Spirit ‘to one originating cause.’ This has remained the doctrine of the Greek church.”⁸

Clearly John of Damascus’s positions on Mary, icons, relics, the Lord’s Supper, grace and free-will, and the *filioque* all stand in the development of false doctrine. So the question arises, Why study John of Damascus in a series on the development of *true* doctrine and, more particularly, why treat John in our consideration of the development of the doctrine of the *covenant* when he did not treat it as a theological subject?

The answer lies in John’s development of the doctrine of the *perichoresis* (Greek) or *circumincession* (Latin), the doctrine of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit within the blessed Trinity. John was not the first to state this truth. For example, the fourth century Eastern fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Didymus the Blind, taught the *perichoresis*,⁹ and Reinhold Seeberg writes that Augustine (354-430) in the West wrote of the

⁷John, writing in a more Scriptural vein, later unwittingly contradicts free-will: “[W]e are bound in the fetters of sin” (OF 4.18).

⁸Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Great Britain: BOT, repr. 1991), p. 315; italics mine.

⁹J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (USA: HarperSanFrancisco, rev. 1978), p. 264.

“mutual interpenetration and interdwelling” of the three Persons in the Trinity.¹⁰ John, however, is clearer and fuller than all his predecessors.

John’s *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, as one would expect, is most rich and orthodox in his treatment of the Holy Trinity (book 1) and the Incarnation of the Son (book 3), for these subjects received extensive study in the early church and drew forth creedal statements from the ecumenical councils.

God, John writes, is

Uncreate, without beginning, immortal, infinite, eternal, immaterial, good, creative, just, enlightening, immutable, passionless, uncircumscribed, immeasurable, unlimited, undefined, unseen, unthinkable, wanting in nothing, being His own rule and authority, all-ruling, life-giving, omnipotent, of infinite power, containing and maintaining the universe and making provision for all (OF 1.14).

For John, this true God is always the *Triune* God: “And when I say God, it is evident that I mean the Father and His Only begotten Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His all-holy Spirit, our one God” (OF 2.1). John was a Trinitarian thinker rooted in and seeking to develop the faith set forth in the writings of the church fathers and the ecumenical creeds.

The creed drafted at Nicea (325) declared that the Son was *homoousios* (of the same essence or nature or being) with the Father. Later, the Holy Spirit was also confessed as of the same essence or nature or being with the Father and the Son. Since all three divine Persons possess the one infinite being of God, they must mutually penetrate and indwell each other wholly. Thus the *homoousios* leads to the *perichoresis*.

To restate the argument: (1) God is one in His being; (2) all the three Persons possess all of the divine Being; (3) therefore all three Persons indwell each other fully. The Father (as Father with His personal properties as not begotten nor proceeding) abides in the Son and in the Spirit. The Son (as Son with His personal properties as begotten and not proceeding) abides in the Father and in the Spirit. The Spirit (as Spirit with His personal properties as not begotten but proceeding) abides in the Father and in the Son. Thus the *perichoresis* is a logical implication of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and necessarily flows from it.

¹⁰Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), vol. 1, p. 239.

John of Damascus understood this. He speaks often of the relationship between the first and second Persons. The Son “ever abide[s] in the Father” (OF 1.8) and is “ever essentially present with” Him (OF 1.13). The Son is “in the bosom” of the Father (OF 3.1) and He became incarnate “without leaving the Father’s bosom” (OF 3.7). John describes the relationship between the second and third Persons as one of companionship. Those who have “learnt about the Spirit of God” “contemplate” Him as “the *companion* of the Word” (OF 1.7). The third Person is the bond between the first and second Persons: “The holy Spirit is God, being *between* the unbegotten and the begotten, and *united* to the Father through the Son” (OF 1.13). Later he describes the relationship between the three Persons from the perspective of the second Person: the Word is “*with* the Father and the Spirit without beginning and through eternity” (OF 3.12).

John uses certain verbs to describe the *perichoresis* of the divine persons: cleaving (OF 1.8, 14), abiding (OF 1.8), dwelling (OF 1.8) and indwelling (OF 4.18). He is insistent that there is no confusing, compounding, coalescing or mixing of the Persons in this most intimate union (OF 1.8, 14). The preposition of the *perichoresis* is not merely “with” but “in.”¹¹ This “unity and community” in the Holy Trinity means that the three Persons “being identical in authority and power and goodness” have perfect “concord of mind” (OF 1.8).

John summarises his position at the end of his treatment of the Trinity in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*:

The subsistences [i.e., the three Persons] dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature (OF 1.14).

One striking feature of John’s theology which is closely related to his doctrine of the *perichoresis* is his thinking about space. In his description of angels,

¹¹Cf. “[A]ways [the Son] was *with* the Father and *in* Him” (OF 1.8; cf. 4:18).

John tells us that they are “circumscribed” (OF 2.3). In his chapter on the heaven (taken as including the atmospheric heaven, the astronomic heaven and the celestial heaven) he avers, that it is “the circumference of things created, both visible and invisible” (OF 2.6). When he comes to the air and the winds, he states that the wind’s “place is in the air,” before explaining that “place is the circumference of a body” and that it is “air” which “surrounds bodies” (OF 2.8). Christ’s human nature is “circumscribed” (OF 3.3) and God’s right hand is not an “actual place” (OF 4.2). “God permeates and fills the universe” (OF 1.4), and “He is His own place” (OF 1.13). Now if God is “His own place,” and the Father, Son and Spirit are each truly God, then the place of each is in each other. Hence we have the *perichoresis*.

But John of Damascus does not only arrive at the *perichoresis* by logical deductions from the church’s doctrine of the Holy Trinity and by reflection upon the idea of place. John sees the *perichoresis* as a *Scriptural* doctrine: “For the subsistences [i.e., the three Persons] dwell in one another ... according to the word of the Lord, I am in the Father, and the Father in Me [John 14:11]” (OF 1.8). Later he writes, that the Scriptures “declare the indwelling of the subsistences in one another, as, I am in the Father, and the Father in Me [John 14:10]” (OF 4.18).¹²

John sees an analogy between the *perichoresis* of the three divine persons and the relationship between Christ’s human and divine natures (OF 3.5). He proceeds to describe Christ’s incarnation in terms of *union* and *indwelling*:

[I]n the Incarnation of ... the Word of the Holy Trinity, we hold that in one of its subsistences the nature of the Godhead is wholly and perfectly united with the whole nature of the humanity, and not part united to part. The divine Apostle in truth says that in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily [Col. 2:9] (OF 3.6).

John speaks of the “mutual interchange” (OF 3.19), “intercourse” (OF 3.3), “community” (OF 4.18) and “communion” (OF 3.19) between Christ’s two natures and the “close communion” between His two wills and between His two energies (OF 3.14).

In Paradise, the Almighty made man “after the image of God” in “commun-

¹²Importantly, Christ here teaches us that the *perichoresis* is an object of faith: “Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me” (John 14:11).

ion with Himself” (OF 2.30). Through the Fall, we became “evil” and “were stripped of our communion with God (for what communion hath light with darkness [II Cor. 6:14])” (OF 4.4). In the incarnation, “the new Adam” assumed a true and complete human nature in order to save us through His death on the cross (OF 3.20) by recreating us in His image (OF 4.13) and giving us “the knowledge of God” (OF 4.4). In this regard, John repeats a famous axiom of the early church: “[t]hat which is not assumed is not remedied” (OF 3.18; cf. 3.6, 20).

Believers are the “friends of Christ,” “the friends of God” and the “sons and heirs of God” (OF 4.15).¹³ Through Jesus Christ “the Godhead as a whole ha[s] fellowship with us in one of its own subsistences.” John declares that this is “so deep a knowledge of things divine” (OF 3.6). Clearly fellowship with the Holy Trinity is the apex of salvation for John of Damascus! “What belongs to us ... who walk by the spirit,” writes John, is “spiritual service and communion with God” (OF 4.23).

In only one chapter in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* does John mention the word “covenant” and that is in his quotation of Christ’s words regarding the new covenant in His blood at the Lord’s Supper (OF 4.13). However, he speaks of the *reality* of the covenant in his description of the church as God’s dwelling place: “The Church ... is spoken of as the place of God: for we have set this apart for the glorifying of God as a sort of consecrated place wherein we also hold converse with him” (OF 1.13). Yet John here mistakes the church as a *place* where the people of God meet, rather than the people of God itself. Later John clearly identifies *people* as the “habitations of God.” He quotes the famous covenant formula, “For I will dwell in them, said God, and walk in them, and I will be their God” (OF 4.15). John writes that “the *souls* of the just are in God’s hand” and adds that “God dwelt even in their *bodies* in spiritual wise.” For proof he quotes Paul, “Know ye not that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you?” (II Cor. 3:17) and “If anyone destroy the temple of God, him will God destroy” (I Cor. 3:17). Believers, John concludes, are “the living *temples* of God” and “the living *tabernacles* of God” (OF 4.15). But John is

¹³Sadly, John of Damascus is talking in this section (OF 4.15) of the “saints” in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox sense. He is not referring to all true believers in Christ (the biblical view of saints), but to the dead whom the church deems particularly pious Christians. These “saints” are to be prayed to and venerated, and their relics are to be looked to for healing. Here we see that John held to the notion that there are two tiers of Christians.

not speaking of believers but the “saints” who are now in heaven where they (allegedly) “make intercession to God for us” (OF 4.15). Thus John’s development of the *perichoresis* in the Trinity and the indwelling of the Son in the flesh (Col. 2:9) does not issue in a clear and consistent doctrine of rich fellowship with God—the covenant!—for *all* believers but only for some, the “saints.”

One wonders if there is not something in Old’s hypothesis—if indeed John’s background of polemic with the Muslims did not also turn his mind to the riches of the Trinity, of the *perichoresis* and of living fellowship and communion with God through the incarnate Son. Old writes, “The monolithic approach to the divine unity that Islam advocated left little room for ... communion with God,” the personal God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁴ The doctrine of the Trinity (including the *perichoresis*) issuing in covenant friendship between God and man in Christ is the deathblow to all Unitarianism (Muslim, Jewish and “Christian”) both doctrinally and experientially.

Clearly John of Damascus’s role in the development of doctrine of the covenant is mixed. In John’s treatment of the *perichoresis*, there is a positive development of the foundational doctrine of the Trinity laid by the church fathers. However, John also developed false doctrine contrary to another doctrine foundational to the covenant—sovereign, particular grace as developed by Augustine. Moreover, John not only mixes his free-will with the truth of the *perichoresis*, he also mingles with it a further development of some of the dross of the early church—Mariolatry, iconolatry, relics, the notion of two tiers of Christians, etc.

One more point needs to be made about the *perichoresis* and the development of the doctrine of the covenant. The *perichoresis* establishes the *nature* of the covenant. Reformed and Presbyterian theologians were not content to speak of the covenant as something merely in time. They said that God eternally decreed His covenant with man and they spoke of the Covenant of Redemption within the Trinity between the first and second Persons. This instinct is undoubtedly correct. The covenant *is* rooted in eternity and even in the very Godhead itself. The *perichoresis* describes the life of God as one of perfect indwelling and fellowship. The *perichoresis* (and not a bargain or contract) is the model for our covenant fellowship. The Father and the Son and the Spirit dwell in one another in covenant fellowship (*perichoresis*) and thus God’s promise of covenant fellowship with us is that He will “dwell” in us (II Cor. 6:16; OF 4. 15). This is the essence of the covenant.

¹⁴Old, *Op. cit.*, p. 24.