

the historical record. In general revisionists agree that a careful study of the sources contemporaneous with the development of Islam suggests that there was no clear normative set of practices and beliefs; rather there were many practices and beliefs. All of this makes it possible to demonstrate that we cannot say John fails to give a reasonably accurate accounting of the Palestinian/Syrian Islam with which he was familiar.

John of Damascus, the Black Stone, and the Ka'ba

John was clearly informed about at least some traditions surrounding the Ka'ba in Mecca, as he mentions it specifically by name, and makes reference to the Black Stone inside. He claims that the stone was originally worshipped as the goddess Aphrodite, a claim repeated in later Byzantine commentators but possibly originating with Epiphanius of Salamis.⁴⁰ He writes, "Πῶς οὖν ὑμεῖς λίθῳ προστρίβεσθε κατὰ τὸν Χαβαθὰν ὑμῶν καὶ φιλεῖτε τὸν λίθον ἀσπαζόμενοι;" "How, therefore, is it that you rub yourselves against a stone at your Ka'ba, and you worship the stone by kissing it?"⁴¹ He also appears to be aware of the nature of the environment surrounding the Ka'ba, calling attention a few lines later to the fact that there are no woods in the area.⁴²

However, questions have remained about the nature of John's knowledge of the Ka'ba and its traditions. One criticism against John of Damascus was made in 1992 by Raymond Le Coz. In John's chapter on Islam, a few lines after those quoted above, John notes that some of the members of the faith of the Ishmaelites say that the stone to which he refers is the stone on which Abraham had intercourse with Hagar, and others say that it is the stone on which Abraham tied his camel when he sacrificed Isaac. To quote, "Καὶ τινες αὐτῶν φασιν, ἐπ' αὐτοῦ τὸν Ἀβραάμ συνουσιάσαι τῇ Ἁγάρ, ἄλλοι δέ, ὅτι ἐπ' αὐτὸν προσέδησε τὴν κάμηλον μέλλων θύειν τὸν Ἰσαάκ." "And some of them respond that Abraham had intercourse with Hagar on it, but others say that he tied the camel on it when he was about to sacrifice Isaac."⁴³ Le Coz argues John has confused the stone called *Maqām Ibrāhīm* (literally 'station of Abraham'), a stone closely

40 This may first have been suggested in his *Panarion*, and expanded on by later writers. See Khoury, *Polemique Byzantine*, pp. 60–62, 162 f., 240–42, 75–79 for the later Byzantine theologians who identified the stone with the cult of Aphrodite. For John's reference, see Kotter, *Die Schriften* vol. iv, p. 64, ln. 92–94.

41 Kotter, *Die Schriften* vol. iv, p. 64, ln. 79–80.

42 Ibid., ln. 86.

43 Kotter, *Die Schriften* vol. iv, p. 64, ln. 82.

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associated with Abraham in the Islamic tradition, with the famous Black Stone now fixed into the northeastern corner of the Ka'ba. Citing the Qur'an at 2:121 and 22:27 (passages which deal with Abraham and the construction of the Ka'ba), Le Coz argues that as there is no mention of sacrifice taking place at the Ka'ba itself, John must be confusing some other sacrifice incorporated into the pilgrimage to Mecca with the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. On that basis, he suggests that the ritual sacrifice of sheep at Mina on the 10th day of the month of *Dhū l-Hijjah* (or the month of pilgrimage) was probably associated in John's mind with the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, and that this is perhaps why John has mistakenly associated the Black Stone with Abraham, instead of the *Maqām Ibrāhīm*.⁴⁴ Andrew Louth's conclusions about John are based on Le Coz's assumptions, while Montgomery Watt, who does not mention this issue specifically, may be the most dismissive of John's understanding of traditions at the Ka'ba.⁴⁵

In order to consider John's understanding of traditions at the Ka'ba, we must first understand what the various traditions are, including their origins. Many of them, as the reader may already assume, are claimed to originate with material in the Qur'an, although the elaboration of such traditions was often the work of future generations. Having understood the traditional explanation for these traditions, we can then see if it is possible to explain John's conception given more recent developments in the understanding of these traditions.

The Ka'ba, the Black Stone, and the Maqām Ibrāhīm in the Islamic Tradition

The Ka'ba is a large cubical building located in the center of Mecca around which a present-day Mosque has been built.⁴⁶ It has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, both prior to Muhammad's arrival and during the Prophet's

44 Le Coz (ed.), *Ecrits Sur Islam*, pp. 117–19.

45 Louth, *St. John Damascene*, pp. 80–81. Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, pp. 70–71. Of these three, to take but three of many, the most charitable to John is Louth, who says, "John has a fairly accurate picture of Islam ... though John's replies seem to reveal some misunderstanding of Muslim practice."

46 For the history of how the Ka'ba grew to importance in the Islamic tradition, as well as Muhammad's relation to it, see G. R. Hawting, 'Ka'ba', in McAuliffe (ed.), *BQ* vol. 3, pp. 75–79. For information on Muhammad and his rise to power, see M. A. Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford University Press, 1996). For sources on Muhammad's life, scholars such as Cook and Kennedy, cited here, have generally drawn on the Qur'an and the earliest written biographies of the Prophet, the most significant of which is Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrah Rasūl Allah*.

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