

## Chapter 5

# On the Eschatological Elucidation of the ‘Ishmaelite’ Phenomenon

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates early apocalyptic responses to Islam in Eastern Christian sources. Themes like ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist’ or the ‘Abomination of Desolation’ were constantly articulated, which testifies to an attentive and elucidating attitude towards the *present moment* in ecumenical history. In particular, I examine the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* in terms of its significance and impact on eschatological sentiments in Eastern Christian sources of the late seventh and early eighth century, focusing on John of Damascus’ understanding of Islam. I argue that both authors – though in different manner – investigate the eschatological nature of the encroaching ‘Ishmaelites,’ a traditional term designating Arabs. While Pseudo-Methodius constructs a typological history which foretells the imminent political downfall of the Saracens, John of Damascus puts the ‘faith of the Ishmaelites’ in its theological place, which is a doctrinal prelude to the arrival of the Antichrist.

**Keywords:** Pseudo-Methodius, John of Damascus, De Haeresibus, Apocalypticism, Arianism, Christian views of Islam

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In the aftermath of the Muslim conquest of the Roman East in the first half of the seventh century CE, Eastern Christians were faced with the need to come to terms with the consequences of the Byzantine military debacle. Although there was no homogenous response from among the various Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian congregations, all Christians had to face the difficult task of

accounting for their losses.<sup>1</sup> The essential question was: why did divine providence grant victory to the Arabs over imperial territory? While their responses differ regarding the details, certain major themes can be identified. At first, conceptions of temporal chastisement and apocalyptic imagery were evoked, then, in time, doctrinal polemics were formulated identifying ‘the faith of the Ishmaelites’ with earlier theological errors. In addition, new hagiographical accounts were penned, such as the life of St Anthony Ruwah, supporting the religious legitimacy of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

In the following paper I focus on the specific type of early response to Islam that emphasizes the eschatological nature of the encroaching ‘Ishmaelites,’ a traditional term designating Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Themes like the ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist’ or the ‘Abomination of Desolation’ were constantly articulated, which testifies to an attentive and elucidating attitude towards the *present moment* in ecumenical history. In particular, I examine the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* in terms of its significance and impact on eschatological sentiments in Eastern Christian sources of the late seventh and early eighth century, focusing on John of Damascus’ understanding of Islam.

To begin with, it is important to appreciate that the Arab conquerors were by no means unknown to the Byzantines. Roman-Arab relations go back centuries before the rise of Islam. Arab mercenaries served in Emperor Julian’s (361–363) campaign against Sasanian Persia. During this war the Saracens earned themselves the stigma of being unreliable, even treacherous allies for having deserted the Roman army after the Emperor’s death.<sup>4</sup> Arab contingents also fought for the Roman Emperor Valens (364–378) at the Battle of Adrianople distinguishing themselves with their savage bravery.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Arabs were notoriously known for raiding Christian monasteries, particularly in the Sinai.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christian reactions to the Arab onslaught were manifold. For introductory literature on early Christian responses to Islam see Meyendorff 1964; Kaegi 1969; Brock 1982; Griffith 1992; Guenther 1999; Lamoreaux 2000; Tolan 2002, 40–67. See further Hoyland 1997, 53–335.

<sup>2</sup> See Dick 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary designations of Arabs included Saracens, Arabs, Ishmaelites, Hagarenes. (The term ‘Muslim’ was not used by seventh century Christian authors.) In the following I use the aforementioned terms synonymously.

<sup>4</sup> See Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* Book 25, Chapter 6 in Seyfarth 1978, 1.368.

<sup>5</sup> See Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* Book 31, Chapter 16(6) in Seyfarth 1978, 2.200.

<sup>6</sup> See Vasiliev 1956, 307–8.

Consequently, the Arab incursions into Syro-Palestine intensifying in the early 630s were initially understood as nothing more than another raiding activity by the 'robbers of Arabia.'<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Maximus the Confessor in a letter, penned somewhere between the years 634 and 640, attributes the Arab military successes to a temporary divine retribution for Christian sins.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 639), in his Christmas sermon of 634 sees nothing more than a passing divine chastisement for recent Christian wickedness in the Saracen occupation of the surrounding area of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> In later sermons, however, Sophronius starts using apocalyptic imagery calling the Arabs the 'Abomination of Desolation' as prophesied by Daniel 11:31.<sup>10</sup>

First references to apocalyptic sentiment can also be found in the *Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati*, which dates from the first years of the onset of the Muslim invasion. This work is primarily an anti-Jewish polemic, in which Jacob, a recently converted Jew, engages in a dialogue with his Jewish friend, Justus, discussing the verity of Christianity. In essence, Jacob argues that Jesus was the Messiah, since the fourth Empire of Daniel, Rome, has already fallen, the ten horns have come, and the little horn has just arisen in the person of a deceiving prophet among the Saracens.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, because the events following the arrival of the Messiah as predicted by Daniel have happened, the Christian claim that the Messiah has already appeared must be true. The importance of this source for our purposes is to notice the eschatological role attributed to the 'pseudo-prophet' – though not referred to by name – Muhammad. In a worldview that considered present events as converging to an apocalyptic focal point in the near future the preaching of Muhammad and the rise of Islam

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<sup>7</sup> A term coined by the Emperor Julian. See Julian, *First Oration: Panegyric in honor of Constantius* (21b) in Wright 1913, 52: 'ἐξ Ἀραβίας λησταί.' For a study of this expression see Shahid 1984, 83–6.

<sup>8</sup> See Maximus the Confessor, *Epistula* 14 (MPG 91, 541B–C). The passage in question has been translated by John C. Lamoreaux and reads as follows: 'We have all acted like wild beasts towards one another, ignorant of the grace of God's love for humans, and the mystery of the sufferings of the God who became flesh for your sakes.' See Lamoreaux 2000, 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> See Sophronius, *Oratio I. - In Christi Natalita* (MPG 87/3, 3205D). This passage has been translated by Walter E. Kaegi. It reads: 'Because of countless sins and very serious faults, we have become unworthy of the sight of these things [the sights of Bethlehem] and are prevented from entering Bethlehem by way of the roads. Unwillingly, indeed contrary to our wishes, we are required to stay at home, not bound closely by bodily bonds, but bound by fear of the Saracens, and we are prevented from experiencing such heavenly joy, and are engulfed by a grief suited to our wretchedness which is unworthy of blessings.' See Kaegi 1969, 139–40.

<sup>10</sup> See Lamoreaux 2000, 15.

<sup>11</sup> See Kaegi 1969, 141–2.

were understood as essential elements – the little horn of Daniel – in an eschatological scheme.

In short, the earliest Christian explanations given for the military success of the Arabs developed along two lines of reasoning: (1) understanding the Saracen attacks as a temporary divine punishment in so far as attributing the increase of Arab raids into the Byzantine Empire to God's retribution for Christian sinfulness and (2) referring to apocalyptic sentiment in order to assure that the present tribulations are nothing but just and charitable elements of divine providence. Over the course of the seventh century apocalyptic language gained more and more prominence, culminating in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*.<sup>12</sup>

The *Apocalypse* is first and foremost a Christian polemic work directed against Muslim pretensions to political and religious superiority, while at the same time cautioning fellow Christians to abstain from conversion to Islam. In order to portray this message the work is cast into the genre of revelation, which is attributed to Methodius, bishop of Olympus, who was martyred during the Diocletian Persecution. Probably both his martyrdom, which characterizes him as a victim of pagan tyranny, and the millennialism as portrayed in his work *De resurrectione (Aglaophon he peri tes anastaseos)* were both reasons for attributing the *Apocalypse* to Methodius of Olympus.<sup>13</sup>

The *Apocalypse* is structured in a chronological and a typological scheme. The chronological composition divides the work into a historical (I.1–X.6) and into a prophetic (XI.1–XIV.13-14) part. In the first part the timeline is organized into seven millennia following Methodius' account that the resurrection will take place in the seventh millennium.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the author employs the year-week counting of the Book of Daniel. Both are technical features which serve to support the authenticity.

Pseudo-Methodius' account starts with Adam in paradise and portrays world history up until the Ishmaelite invasion, paying close attention to the political perspective of the rise and fall of world empires. Within this theme the author emphasizes the continuity and inherent unity of Alexander the Great's

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<sup>12</sup> Gerrit J. Reinink has reconstructed the Syriac original of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and translated it into German (Reinink 1993), hereafter referred to as *Apocalypse*. For an alternative German translation see Suermann 1985, 34–85. English translations can be found in Martínez 1985, 122–201 and in Alexander 1985, 36–51.

<sup>13</sup> Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) vi-vii.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, vii.

Empire, which continued in the form of the Byzantine Empire; more specifically, Alexander's lineage survived genealogically in the Byzantine emperors, since both Alexander and all the Roman emperors, are descendants of the same Kushite (Ethiopian or Nubian) mother, Kushyat.<sup>15</sup>

Gerrit Reinink proposes that this fictitious genealogy is designed to convey the idea that the fourth kingdom of Daniel is the Byzantine Empire, which will not be superseded by any other realm, in particular, not by Muslim dominion.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the fictitious genealogy attributes an eschatological role to the Last Roman Emperor, who in accordance with an Urzeit-Endzeit scheme functions as a second Alexander, who will reconquer the East, annihilating the Arab realm, deal with the unclean peoples of the North, and found the eschatological Christian kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

It is noteworthy that already in the historical narrative the typology of Alexander and the Last Roman Emperor is invoked. To be exact three prophetic interludes are integrated into the historical account of the *Apocalypse*, which are: the prophecy of the seventy years [= ten weeks of years] of Ishmaelite rule (V.9); the prophecy concerning the future invasion of the peoples of the North (VIII.10); and the prophecy foretelling the abdication of the Last Roman Emperor, who in the final days will hand his kingdom over to God (IX.7).<sup>18</sup> These interludes allow Pseudo-Methodius in the second part of the *Apocalypse* to develop his major typological themes, which center on (I) the conviction that the Arab rule is nothing but an eschatological repetition of the temporary chastisement which Christians suffered from the proto-Arabs called Midianites in the fifth

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<sup>15</sup> See *Apocalypse* VIII.1–3 and IX.1–8. See Greisiger 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xxx, xxxviii; cf. Reinink 1992(b), 157–8, where Reinink observes Pseudo-Methodius' conscious resistance to the Sebeos' portrayal – in his *History of Heraclius XXXII* – of the Arab dominion as the fourth and final kingdom of Daniel. Regarding Sebeos' understanding of the Ishmaelites see Kaegi 1969, 146–7.

<sup>17</sup> See Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xxxiii–xxxiv. Concerning the sources for the typology of the Last Roman Emperor see *ibid.*, xxxiv–xxxviii; Reinink 1984; Reinink 1992(a); Reinink 1992(b). Reinink identifies Pseudo-Methodius' sources with the Syriac *Legend of Alexander*, the *Julian Romance* and the *Cave of Treasures*. Cf. Alexander 1978, who considers Pseudo-Methodius' sources to be notions taken from late Jewish messianism. Suermann presents a compromise solution between these two positions, see Suermann 1987.

<sup>18</sup> These prophetic interludes as well as the second, prophetic part of the *Apocalypse* are linguistically easily distinguishable, due to the fact that the Syriac narrative switches from a historical perfect tense to the tense of prophecy, that is, to the imperfect. See Alexander 1985, 17.

millennium<sup>19</sup> and on (II) the notion of the Last Roman Emperor as a second Alexander.<sup>20</sup>

In these two typological themes of the *Apocalypse* we can see a continuation and further elaboration of the two basic interpretive approaches mentioned above: understanding Saracen subjugation in terms of (1) temporary divine punishment and in terms of (2) apocalyptic expectations. In the *Apocalypse* both approaches are combined to be complementary: Christian sins justify the tribulations endured at the end of times, while the final salvation guarantees the just and benevolent purpose of divine chastisement. The author of the *Apocalypse* confronts the reader with an intricately constructed providential scheme, in which the present moment is a just and necessary ‘furnace of trial.’<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, the present sufferings are attributed to sinful Christians who committed themselves to sexually deviant behavior not seen since the time prior to the Great Flood.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the eschatological imagery of the Last Roman Emperor is worked out to portray the imminent end to this chastisement delivered by the Arabs.

Indeed, Pseudo-Methodius promotes the idea that the Arab subjugation will end very soon. If one considers the seventy years referred to in V.5 as being more than a symbolic number and starts counting in 622 – in accordance with the Hijri calendar and counting in lunar or solar years – we arrive at the year 690 or 692 CE. Textual allusions in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* seem to support the date of its composition to the beginning of the 690s.<sup>23</sup> Reinink dates the work to the end of the year 691.<sup>24</sup> That is to say, the author of the *Apocalypse*

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<sup>19</sup> See *Apocalypse* V. Here Pseudo-Methodius identifies the Midianites mentioned in Judges 6:1–8:35 with a proto-Arab people.

<sup>20</sup> See *Apocalypse* XIII.11–12.

<sup>21</sup> *Apocalypse* XI.8, XIII.4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Apocalypse* II.2–3 with X.5–8. If one considers the punishment, that is the Great Flood, for the sexual sins committed at the end of the second millennium, one gets the impression that Pseudo-Methodius downplays the present day chastisement, which is the Arab domination. As Tolan 2002, 47 puts it: ‘in comparison, seventh-century Christians suffering under the yoke of the Ishmaelites could feel that they were getting off with a light sentence.’

<sup>23</sup> The outbreak of the plague and the famine referred to in XIII.2 probably allude to cataclysmic events in northern Mesopotamia in the year 686/7 CE; the burdensome taxation (XIII.3–4) might allude to ‘Abd al-Malik’s (685–705) tax reforms in the year 691/2 CE. Cf. Brock 1982, 18–9. Furthermore, the rage and rave of the Midianites (V.5) might refer typologically to the second Arab civil war fought between 680–692 CE. Cf. Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xviii. Reinink agrees here with Brock 1982, 19, who puts the date of composition in the year 690 or 691.

anticipated the arrival of the Roman emperor at any time in the very near future. His message is clear: at most only a few years will pass until the Christians will be liberated.

The emphases on perseverance and on the just nature of the present tribulations are all strategies directed against the ubiquitous danger of apostasy. Considering the fact that Islam persisted despite a second civil war, considering the increase of the poll-tax, and in particular the construction of the Dome of the Rock,<sup>25</sup> Christians were faced with a politically dominant faction on the one hand, and with a realm that started to openly claim religious superiority on the other. It was in order to deny this religious legitimacy to Islam that Pseudo-Methodius constructed a fictional genealogy of the Byzantine emperor, who is portrayed as sharing the same maternal ancestor with his predecessors, that is with the Greeks, the Macedonians, and the Kushites. This common ancestor is Kushyat, daughter of Pil, king of Ethiopia. By means of this lineage, Pseudo-Methodius combines three eschatological notions: (1) Only Roman emperors have a legitimate claim to Alexander the Great's heritage, a fact that will enable the Last Roman Emperor to act as a restorer of Alexander's political-geographical realm.<sup>26</sup> (2) Furthermore, the fact that the Roman emperor is of Ethiopian kinship provides him with the unique eschatological function of turning over his worldly dominion to God during the final days, as alluded to in Psalm 68:31: 'Ethiopia (Kush) will hand over its power to God.' The author of the *Apocalypse* identifies the Kushite in this abdication scene with the Last Roman Emperor, who is, after all, a Kushite descendent.<sup>27</sup> Thus this identification claims that the Roman emperor is the sole legitimate representative of Christ on earth, since it is his duty to return the political authority to its divine source. (3) Finally, in the ultimate abdication scene, the last Roman ruler is portrayed as the Emperor Jovian (363–364), who restored Christianity after his predecessor, Julian (361–363), had tried to reinstate pagan cults. Just as Jovian had done centuries before, so will the Last Roman

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<sup>25</sup> In various articles Reinink has persuasively argued that the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was a reaction to the construction of the Dome of the Rock, which functioned as a Muslim claim to supersede both the Jewish and the Christian faiths. See Reinink 1992(a), 78–81; Reinink 1992(b), 181–6; Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xvi–xxiii.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding the theme of the invincibility of Byzantine Empire see Alexander 1985, 23.

<sup>27</sup> The fact that the author chose Ethiopia as the origin, from which the liberating emperor receives his legitimacy was probably motivated by the circumstance that Ethiopia was not conquered by the Arabs, and by the emphasis on trans-confessional Christian unity. After all, the future liberator will be an emperor, who descends from a kingdom that subsequently turned heretical upon adopting Monophysitism as the official belief. This emphasis on Monophysite Ethiopia has also been understood as an indication of the author's confessional background. See Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) x–xi. Cf. Alexander 1985, 29; see further Greisiger 2007, 195–201.

Emperor, too, restore Christian worship and practice to the faithful.<sup>28</sup> By means of this typological framework Pseudo-Methodius proves that the Arab subjugation is a divinely orchestrated temporary ‘furnace of trial.’

In fact, this ‘furnace of trial’ is only one part of a chain of divine trials. After the Last Roman Emperor has liberated the East from the Saracens, only a short period of peace will ensue, which will be shattered by the invasion of the peoples of the North.<sup>29</sup> Yet, even after their ultimate defeat the tribulations will not end, since the Antichrist is still to come. It seems as if the author downplays to some extent the significance of the Saracen presence by emphasizing the future afflictions to the Christian community. Essentially, the image the author creates is that the latest Ishmaelite invasion is not much more than a minor antecedent of the Antichrist and the subsequent Parousia. Moreover, by describing the Arab conquest in terms of temporary discipline for sexual misbehavior, Pseudo-Methodius seems to further minimize the religious significance of the Arabs in the eschatological scheme.<sup>30</sup> This fact fits well with the *Apocalypse*’s general intention to deny any enduring Arab legitimacy, be it religious or political.

In essence, the *Apocalypse* presents a polemic primarily directed against Arab political and religious aspirations. By constructing an intricate typological world history, Pseudo-Methodius promotes the idea of a liberating Last Roman Emperor, who, in the role of Christ’s deputy on earth, negates any Muslim claim to political or religious legitimacy.

The *Apocalypse* was rapidly disseminated and within years was revised into an Edessan adaptation.<sup>31</sup> While certain features were altered or rather interpreted in order to account for a different audience as well as for the fact that the Last Roman Emperor had yet failed to arrive, this work portrays the main themes of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, such as the Roman emperor who liberates the Christians from the Ishmaelites and the final abdication scene, in which the

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<sup>28</sup> Concerning Pseudo-Methodius’ source for this typological identification see Reinink 1992(a) and Reinink 1992(b), 170–4.

<sup>29</sup> See *Apocalypse* VIII.10 and XIII.19–21.

<sup>30</sup> The fact that Saracens are the divine penal instrument for sexual obscenities can be read – in turn – as an allusion to Saracen sexual deviancy, since it is by virtue of Arabs that Christian women ‘will be defiled’ (cf. XI.8.), an accusation that gained great popularity in later Christian polemic writings.

<sup>31</sup> The text has been translated by Harald Suermann into German (Suermann 1985, 87–97) and by Martínez into English (Martínez 1985, 232–46). For an introductory study of this fragment see Reinink 1990. See further Reinink 1992(a), 81–6; Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541) xli.

Last Roman Emperor, as a second Jovian, hands his dominion over to God.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the *Apocalypse* was promptly translated into Greek and by 727 was translated into Latin.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, central themes of the *Apocalypse* were reused in numerous later literary works such as the *Visions of Daniel*, the *Gospels of the Twelve Apostles*, or the *Bahira Legend*.<sup>34</sup>

In what follows, I will draw attention to John of Damascus' encyclopedic entry on Islam in his famous chapter 100 of *De Haeresibus*.<sup>35</sup> This text is rarely considered as an apocalyptic writing and rather understood as introducing a new type of reaction to Islam, that is, approaching 'the faith of the Ishmaelites' as a Christian heresy. It will become clear that this proposition is ultimately situated in an apocalyptic context.

John of Damascus' account of 'the faith of the Ishmaelites' can be found in the second part of his Opus magnum, the *Fons scientiae* (Πηγή γνώσεως), and functions as a preparative to the subsequent exposition of the orthodox faith. The account comprises an adaptation and continuation of a collection of eighty heresiological articles that are contained in the *Medicine Chest* (Πανάριον) attributed to Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, who lived at the end of the fourth century. The Damascene supplemented Epiphanius' list by twenty new articles of recent heresies, which culminate in the 100<sup>th</sup> heresy, i.e., the 'worship of the Ishmaelites.' By assigning the last heresiological place to Islam the Damascene suggests that this is the final heterodoxy, which is preceding and ultimately ushering in the eschatological drama of the End Time.<sup>36</sup>

The tendency to understand the Muslim domination within an eschatological framework can be seen as a continuation of apocalyptic sentiment

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<sup>32</sup> There are, however, essential differences between the two apocalypses. Most importantly, the dissociation of the present Roman Emperor, Justinian II (685–695), who will end the Arab subjugation, from the eschatological Emperor, who will hand over his worldly dominion to God. The *Edessan Apocalypse* refers to two distinct Emperors. Furthermore, after the end of the Arab domination the Greek kingdom will last for 208 years; a time span which opposes Pseudo-Methodius' emphasis on the invading peoples of the North, who abruptly end the unparalleled peace gained with the defeat of the Arabs. Therefore, the *Edessan Apocalypse* seems to omit any immediate apocalyptic expectation.

<sup>33</sup> For the oldest Greek and Latin recensions see Aerts and Kortekaas 1998.

<sup>34</sup> See Reinink 1993, (CSCO 541), xlii–xliii, xlv. For additional reference regarding Pseudo-Methodius' influence see Reinink 1992(b), 155–6 n.26. Furthermore, see Cross 1929, who draws attention to the first Slavic adaptation of the *Apocalypse* in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.

<sup>35</sup> Kotter 1981, 60–7. For an English translation of the text based on the *Patrologia Graeca* edition see Sahas 1972, 132–41.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Louth 2002, 59.

as articulated in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. As argued above, the Arab domination featured in the *Apocalypse* is one – arguably minor – event that precedes the arrival of the Antichrist; a popular theme alluded to already in Sophronius’ sermons and the *Doctrina Iacobi*. It is John of Damascus, though, who elaborates on the notion of the Antichrist.

The Damascene calls Islam ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist’<sup>37</sup> and describes Muhammad’s revelation as inspired by an Arian monk.<sup>38</sup> For John of Damascus anybody who denies that the Son of God is perfect God and became perfect man is antichrist.<sup>39</sup> Just as the Antichrist will deny the divine nature of Christ, and just as the Arians denied Christ’s divinity, so do the Saracens uphold the same Christological error. By virtue of this doctrinal token, John of Damascus identifies Arabs with ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist.’

This defaming term was occasionally used in the heat of Christological disputes. Alexander, Patriarch of Alexandria in the early fourth century, named Arius, a presbyter in the Alexandrian church, ‘Judas’, a ‘fighter against Christ’ and ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist’ in virtue of his denial of Christ’s consubstantial union with the Godhead and for referring to Christ as a ‘creature.’<sup>40</sup> John of Damascus uses the same term (*Prodromos tou Antichristou*) to describe Ishmaelite Christology. Due to the essential doctrinal congruence, the Damascene conjectures that Muhammad must have been inspired by an Arian.<sup>41</sup> In short, according to the Damascene Islam is a pseudo-Arian heresy, which anticipates the Antichrist’s ultimate Christological denial.

I prefer the term pseudo-Arian, because it appears that John of Damascus considered Ishmaelite Christology a rather maladroit blending of various heretical thoughts. The Damascene, throughout his heresiological article on Islam, emphasizes the ridiculous nature of Ishmaelite doctrine. After describing specific tenets he repeatedly uses the term ‘worthy of laughter’ (*gelotos axia*), which

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<sup>37</sup> ‘*Prodromos tou Antichristou*’ in *De Haeresibus* 100 (Kotter 1981, 60 (line 2) or MPG XCIV.764A).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Kotter 1981, 60 (lines 12–13) or MPG XCIV.765A.

<sup>39</sup> See *Expositio fidei* (chapter 99) in Kotter 1973.

<sup>40</sup> See *Letter of Alexander of Alexandria to all bishops (Henos Somatos)* in Opitz 1935, 7 (= Urk. 4b). For a treatment of this document see Gwynn 2007, 59–69. As a good introduction to Arius’ philosophical reasons for his Christological standpoint see Williams 1983, 56–81.

<sup>41</sup> Various authors have tried to identify the religious source that inspired Mohammad with certain Christian heretical groups. For instance, ‘Abd al-Māshiq ibn Ishāq al-Kindī claimed that a Nestorian called Sergius influenced Mohammed, while Euthymius Zygabenus claims that it was an Arian. See Sahas 1972, 74 n.1. The ninth century *Bahīrā Legend* identifies a Christian renegade monk named Sergius-Bahira as Muhammad’s primary theological source. Four text traditions of this legend have been edited by Roggema 2009.

presumably refers to serious theological and historical mistakes in the Ishmaelite creed. For instance, Ishmaelites identify the sister of Moses and Aaron with Mary, mother of Christ, therefore confusing Miriam with Mary.<sup>42</sup> Also, they advocate the createdness of Christ while, at the same time, claiming that only Christ's shadow was crucified. This teaching is christologically redundant. If Christ is a creature, then there is no need for a docetic interpretation of his crucifixion.<sup>43</sup> A theologically educated audience would have certainly realized that Ishmaelite doctrines lack the erudition and theological sophistication of, for example, an Arius. In addition, 'the faith of the Ishmaelites' appears to incorporate a mixture of various heretical tendencies. For instance, one finds allusions to Manichaeism such as the veneration of heavenly bodies<sup>44</sup> and the aforementioned docetism.<sup>45</sup>

By identifying Islam with a pseudo-Arian heresy, the Damascene denies that Islam has any religious significance of its own, just as Pseudo-Methodius did by means of typological reasoning. Both authors converge to the same conviction, namely that history, which is directed by divine providence, will repeat itself. Just as the Midianites were defeated millennia ago, so will the Saracens vanish in the near future. Similarly, just as Arianism was defeated at the Councils and later in the West by pious kings, so will the latest upheaval of Arianism – 'the faith of the Ishmaelites' – be ultimately surmounted. That is to say, both authors share in common the understanding of Islam as a repetition of a particular historical phenomenon, which ultimately preludes the eschatological drama of the arrival of the Antichrist.

It is worth noting that John of Damascus does not engage in any sophisticated refutation of Ishmaelite Christology, a fact that might be explained in part by the lack of Muslim polemical sources available, to which the Damascene could have replied.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, a sophisticated refutation would have been simply redundant due to the fact that Arianism was already sufficiently argued against. In-depth analysis of John of Damascus' *Contra Manicheos* and *Contra Jacobitas* will, in all likelihood, show that these anti-

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<sup>42</sup> *De Haeresibus* 100 (Kotter 1981, 61 (lines 18–20) or MPG XCIV.765A).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Kotter 1981, 61 (line 19 & 23) or MPG XCIV.765A–B.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Kotter 1981, 60 (lines 7–8) or MPG XCIV.764A–B. Cf. Roggema 2003, 6–11, who considers the account of the veneration of Aphrodite (i.e., the morning star) as a polemic argument designed to attributed idolatrous practices to Islam.

<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in his *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* John of Damascus deals with the issue of free will, an issue, on which he elaborates particularly in his *Contra Manichaeos*. For these texts see Kotter 1981, 334–98, 420–38. Cf. Louth 2002, 70–1, 81–2.

<sup>46</sup> See Abel 1961, 67. The *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani* is the only Christian-Muslim disputation that can be attributed to John of Damascus. However, his authorship can be disputed.

heresiological texts deal with topics related to Islam. That is so, because these heresies are considered the sources which inspired the ‘the faith of the Ishmaelites.’ By attacking the Manichean and Jacobite root-components of Ishmaelite Christology the Damascene hoped to cause the disintegration of this doctrinal conglomerate, which is ‘worthy of laughter.’

In summary, the first Christian reactions to the Arab subjugation centered on the following basic theological themes: understanding Islam in terms of (1) temporary divine punishment, in terms of (2) eschatological expectations and as (3) a continuation of heretical thought. All three approaches are directed against the ubiquitous danger of apostasy to Islam. Reacting to the persistency of the Muslim domination one explanatory pattern transformed into another. However, previous explicative accounts remained in use. What changed was a shift in emphasis. The notion of temporary divine chastisement continues to feature in apocalyptic writings, while eschatological expectations construct the framework for initial heresiological considerations. Therefore, one needs to be aware of the fact that using subdivisions in categorizing Christian reactions to Islam are artificial, conceptual constructs, which fall short of appreciating the integrated whole of the phenomenon. All early Christian responses to the ‘Ishmaelites’ converge on the same theological inaptitude to appreciate Islam as anything else but a temporary anomaly from the true, orthodox path of the Christian *oikoumene*.

It is within this context that the two primary texts dealt with above, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and John of Damascus’ portrayal of Islam in his *De Haeresibus*, approach the Ishmaelite presence. Both texts assign an eschatological meaning to Islam. While Pseudo-Methodius only alludes to the notion that the Arab subjugation is ‘the forerunner of the Antichrist,’ John of Damascus explicitly accounts for it by identifying ‘the faith of the Ishmaelites’ with a pseudo-Arian heresy, which – just like the future Antichrist – denies the divinity of Christ. By reducing the Ishmaelite phenomenon to a mere repetition or revival of a certain historical event – be it the Midianite domination or the Arian heresy – the Damascene, like Pseudo-Methodius, deprives Islam of having any religious significance in itself. They deny that Islam is a legitimate faith. Its persistence, though, called for a change in attitude concerning apocalyptic expectation. While Pseudo-Methodius propagated the imminent downfall of the Saracens, the *Edessan Apocalypse* recalculated this date and extended it by an additional three and a half years.<sup>47</sup> A few decades later, John of Damascus left

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<sup>47</sup> Reinink 1990, 37–8.

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this issue altogether open. It appears that at the time of the Damascene there was no hope for an immediate liberation. What mattered was not so much to await the political downfall of Islam, but to account for its theological meaning and purpose in a Christian world.

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