

A STUDY OF ST JOHN DAMASCUS' 'TREATISE OF ICONS': BIBLICAL AND LINGUISTIC APPROACH

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The Holy Scripture has always been the main source of the Christian doctrine and teaching. It is the essential canon resorted to by the Church Fathers to appraise the correctness of Faith. The patristic approach to the Bible was anything but superficial; they were drawing on it rather with deep, extensive, and objective study to understand the sense of its verses.

St John of Damascus (c. 676, died between 780–784 AD) was a prominent scholar, faithful to the Holy Tradition. He followed the method of the earlier Church Fathers in dealing with Scriptures, mixing his sermons and homilies with the biblical fragrance to such an extent that it became difficult for researchers to tell the biblical material apart from his contributions. The language and style of the Bible became genuinely intermingled with those of the saint.

The aim of this study is not merely to summarize the teaching St John on icons, nor to give the biblical citations used by him, but rather to try to examine some aspects of the exegetical approach he applied to the biblical data, which enabled him to develop the theological defense of honoring divine icons.

Moreover, this study will try to illuminate different issues of great interest. First of all, this study, as its title shows, deals with the most discussed problem in Christianity at the dawn of Islam, which is honoring the divine icons. Another issue is the question of whether Christians at this time regarded not only the context and the content of the Holy Bible as sacred, as it contains the Divine Revelation given to human beings, but also the letter of the Bible, showing awe and respect

to its literal wording. In addition, this study will cast light on the status of the Greek language in that era, especially among scholars like St John. Furthermore, the examination of biblical passages used by St John will provide insights into the transmission of the New Testament text in Syria at that time, and inform about the manuscripts of the Bible that were known there.

I would like to point out, at the outset, that the biblical passages that will be cited constitute as faithful as possible a translation of the Greek text as quoted by St John. And some of those passages will be considered in light of textual analysis to reveal his way of quoting the Bible.

The Old Testament (OT) verses forbidding images and statues (mainly Deuteronomy 5:8) provided an essential argument to iconoclasts at the beginning of their campaign against icons. Hence St John turned to the Bible, and especially to the New Testament (NT), to refute the iconoclasts' position. But the interdict of icons by the OT was not the real motivating force for the iconoclasts. That movement was born in the East, and was characterized with its Semitic mentality, which discloses a magic understanding of icons on the one hand, with a strong influence of the Hellenistic mentality on the other, as Fr G. Florovsky proved. Furthermore, with regard to the separation between matter and spirit, the same movement is an extension of the Origenic principles, condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 AD. It was problematic to that rationale to comprehend the fullness of the Christian revelation; namely, the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God. The same difficulty lies behind many heresies that defied the Church.

It was within this setting that St John's arguments against iconoclasts took place. As their main argument, iconoclasts quoted what God said through

Moses the Lawgiver:¹

You shall not make for yourself any likeness of anything that is in heaven, or that is in the earth. (Ex. 20:4, Deut 5:8)

All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols. (Ps 96:7 LXX)²

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, ([N]RSV), 1989.

² Cf. John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2:7/3:4.

These and many similar quotations from Scripture and the Church Fathers were used with this same intention.³ St John argues that the iconoclasts do not understand the rationale of Scripture. He advises them with Christ's words: *ἐρευνᾶτε*⁴ τὰς γραφάς ('search the Scriptures', John 5:39). Then, he stresses the fact that the one God of the OT and the NT, as a skillful doctor, does not prescribe the same for all alike but gives the necessary remedy to each according to his need:

In the same way the most excellent physician of souls prescribed correctly for those who were still children and susceptible to the sickness of idolatry, holding idols to be gods, and worshipping them as such, abandoning the worship of God... He commanded them not to do this.⁵ (*Orationes de imaginibus tres* 2:7/3:4)

St John found in St. Paul's epistle to the Hebrews a precious support for his premise:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His only Son' (Hebrews 1:1- 2).

Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν χρόνων ἐν τῷ μονογενεῖ αὐτοῦ υἱῷ

By citing that verse, he aimed to show that the ways that God used throughout history to communicate with human beings vary according to the circumstances. So, what was valid before because of specific circumstances at some point may cease to be so, due to a certain important historical event, namely the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Regarding the Greek text of that quoted verse, we notice the following: while the genitive plural reading *ἐσχάτων* (instead of the genitive singular *ἐσχάτου*) is supported by a few manuscripts (Ψ 629

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ St John freely uses the classical form *ἐρευνᾶω* instead of the NT form *ἐρᾶνᾶω*.

⁵ Translation by David Anderson, in St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images. Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).

1505 pc ab d t), the word *χρόνων* (instead of *ἡμερῶν τούτων*) is not supported by any witness. This can be regarded as a reminiscence of a similar combination in 1 Peter 1:20 (*ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν χρόνων*), in which one single manuscript (69 pc) reads *ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν* as in Hebrews.

St John also explains the reason for forbidding icons in the OT through a multi-sided argumentation, of which the main part pivots explicitly around Deuteronomy 4:12–19. In the OT the Divine Theophany was through voice and words; God had not revealed himself in a visible way, but remained invisible (*Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:5–7/ 2:9/3:7–8). Then, St John advises the iconoclasts to read the reason for forbidding, as given by Moses himself in Deuteronomy 4:12.15: ‘You heard the sound of words, but saw no form (*ὁμοίωμα*); there was only a voice’.

As another reason for forbidding icons in the OT, St John points to the worship of the calf by the people as depicted in Exodus 32:1ff, which happened while Moses was receiving the Law on Mount Sinai (*Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2:8/3:5). In this context, St John assures that ‘they were worshipping idols, adored creatures instead of the Creator’. He recalls then relevant accusations mentioned by St Paul: ‘And they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image (*ἐν ὁμοιώματι*) of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and reptiles...and served the creature rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1:23.25, cf. Ps 105:20 LXX). It is remarkable here that St John omits the word *εἰκών* in Rom 1:23, found in all extant textual witnesses. This can be explained as avoiding the existing Pleonasm (*ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνας*)⁶ in the sentence, but maybe also as bypassing an unfavorable use of the key word *εἰκών* in that verse.

His own way of reading biblical passages is not always intentional or a result of scholarly bias. There are many examples of variant readings resulting from goodwill. Again, in refuting the argument from the OT forbidding icons, St John comments on its thrust, namely *οὐ γὰρ εἶδος*

⁶ A similar Pleonasm *εἰς μορφῆς εἶδος* can be found in Maximus of Tyr, *Λόγοι Τεσσαράκοντα καὶ εἷς*, 27:3c, ed. by Νεόφυτος Δούκας, publ. Γεωργίου Βενδώτου (Vienna, 1810). For an English translation see: Maximus of Tyr, *The Philosophical Orations*, trans. Michael Trapp, (Oxford, 1997).

αὐτοῦ ἐωράκατε⁷ ('you haven't seen his form'). He underlines the view of St Paul that 'the Law was our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we may be justified by faith'⁸ and that 'we were held in bondage under the elemental things, while we were children',⁹ 'but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor'¹⁰ (*Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 3:8). Accordingly, he draws the conclusion that 'you haven't seen his form' and similar commandments:

were given to the Jews because of their proneness to idolatry. But to us it is given, as Gregory the Theologian says¹¹ to avoid superstitious error and to come to the one God in the knowledge of the truth; to adore God alone, to enjoy the fullness of divine knowledge, to attain mature manhood, that we may no longer be in childhood. We are no longer under tutor, but we know, after receiving from God the ability to discern; what can be drawn in icon and what can't be circumscribed in icon.¹²

Obviously, Gal 3:24 and 4:3 constituted the double pillars of the last argument. Let us now study the text of these two verses from Galatians as cited by St John, to discover what textual tradition was available to him. The letter D will stand for the text as stated by St John, while N.A. will represent the NT text as appears in Nestle - Aland 28th Critical Edition of the NT.

Gal 3:24:

N.A.: ὥστε ὁ νόμος παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν εἰς Χριστόν, ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν.

⁷ This phrase shows itself to be very different from the LXX text of Deut. 4:12.15 (καὶ ὁμοίωμα οὐκ εἶδετε). The wording of St John is influenced by a similar phrase in John 5:37 (οὐτε εἶδος αὐτοῦ ἐωράκατε). But when he quotes the whole paragraph forbidding icons in Deuteronomy (*Orat. Tres*, 1:5), he quotes the wording of Deut. 4:12 with a slight difference (using ὅτι instead of καὶ).

⁸ Galatians 3:24.

⁹ Galatians 4:3.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:25.

¹¹ This statement is formulated on the basis of Gregory the Theologian, *In sancta lumina* (*Oration 39*), ed. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 36, 341.

¹² *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:8. I took this quotation from the English translation of David Anderson and corrected it myself on the basis of the original Greek text.

D: ὁ μὲν γὰρ νόμος παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν
εἰς Χριστόν, ἵνα ἐκ πίστεως δικαιωθῶμεν.

Gal 4:3:

N.A.: ...ὅτε ἤμεν νήπιοι, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου ἤμεθα¹³
δεδουλωμένοι.

D: ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα ἤμεν¹⁴ δεδουλωμένοι, ὅτε ἤμεν νήπιοι.

A textual study of Gal 3:24 and Gal 4:3 cited by St John in his *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* shows no support either for his variant reading in Gal 3:24 nor for the syntax, together with the omission of τοῦ κόσμου ('of the world') in 4:3; however, several important manuscripts read the form ἤμεν of the first person plural imperfect of the verb εἶμι instead of its alternative form ἤμεθα. It is noteworthy that in his commentary on Galatians, St John cites both verses according to the reading in the manuscripts adopted by the Nestle Aland Critical Edition with the exception of ἤμεν instead of ἤμεθα in Gal. 4:3. In view of that, we can deduce that in his *Three Apologies* St John was writing these biblical citations by heart, without having any manuscript at hand, whereas in his Commentary on Galatians he was consulting a manuscript from a widely witnessed textual tradition.

As the commandment of the Law forbidding icons, which functioned as tutors before Christ, became invalid after the Divine Incarnation, 'we are not mistaken', states St John, 'if we make the image of the incarnate God, who was seen on earth in the flesh'.¹⁵ This is neither an attempt to portray the invisible God, nor a production of images of humans that we believe to be gods. This is making an image of human nature that the incarnate God assumed, with the thickness, form, and color of flesh.¹⁶ St John claims the right to share with the apostles their blessedness μακαρισμός as expressed by Christ:

¹³ The reading ἤμεθα is found in the following manuscripts: P46⁸ D* F G 0278 33 365 1175.

¹⁴ The reading ἤμεν is found in the following manuscripts: A B C D1 K L P Ψ 81 104 630 1241 1505 1739 1881 Majority text; Cl.

¹⁵ *Divine Images* 2:5 (English translation of David Anderson).

¹⁶ See *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2:5.

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Mat 13:16-17)

(ὁμῶν δὲ μακάριοι οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ὅτι βλέπουσιν καὶ τὰ ὦτα ὁμῶν ὅτι ἀκούουσιν. ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πολλοὶ προφῆται καὶ δίκαιοι ἐπεθύμησαν ἰδεῖν ἃ βλέπετε καὶ οὐκ εἶδον, καὶ ἀκοῦσαι ἃ ἀκούετε καὶ οὐκ ἤκουσαν.)

St John found another biblical support for his claim that all can share the blessedness of the apostles, when, inspired by the reasoning of St Paul in Romans 4:12 (notice that the word 'blessedness' appears in Romans 4:9) and Galatians 6:16, says that the Lord blessed with the disciples 'all those who walk according to their rule, following their steps'.¹⁷ Directly after that statement, St John adds an interesting point to his argumentation by saying:

For we yearn to see his form, as the divine apostle says, 'For now we see in a mirror, in a riddle'.¹⁸ Now the icon is also a mirror and a riddle which is suitable to the thickness of our physical nature.¹⁹

As regards the text of the above biblical passages used by St John, citing Matthew 13:16–17, he states word for word the text of the Byzantine text form, which differs in this passage only by using the Attic verb form *εἶδον* instead of the Hellenistic *εἶδαν*. As is well known, the Byzantine text form, especially in the Psalms and NT books, was widely popular in Syria at that time, where it was first prepared by Lucian (c. 250–c. 312 AD.), the great master of the Antiochian Theological School, and was later spread everywhere by the prominent Antiochian scholars. That St John cited the exact wording of Matt. 13:16–17 constitutes an exception in the *Three Apologies*. What accounts for this exception is his familiarity with these two verses, because he frequently referred to them in one of his most important arguments.

¹⁷ *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2:20. See Galatians 6:16, Romans 4:12.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁹ *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2:5.

In contrast, the text of 1 Corinthians 13:12, as written by St John, has no witness in any of the textual traditions. Whereas in his Commentary on the First Corinthians²⁰ he mentions the verse as it appears in the manuscript 33,²¹ in his *Three Apologies* he omits the adverb ἄρτι, which appears in all extant manuscripts, and adds the two conjunctions ὡς and καί, the first witnessed by few manuscripts,²² and the other by a few of these.²³ This may have been a citing from memory of that verse without him consulting any manuscript. However, his very unique use of the preposition ἐν (in) in the phrase ἐν εσόπτρῳ, instead of διὰ (through) for the phrase δι' ἐσόπτρου remains intriguing.

In my opinion, this is to be accounted for from the direct context of St John's statement, where he asserts, 'βλέπομεν γὰρ ὡς ἐν εσόπτρῳ καὶ ἐν αἰνίγματι', and adds immediately, 'καὶ ἐν τῇ εἰκόνῃ καὶ μακαριζόμεθα' (and in the icon, so we become blessed). This suggests that he preferred the preposition ἐν because he found it more suitable to give the meaning of seeing Christ in the icon, not through the icon. In that way, he applies St Paul's mirror metaphor to the icon ('the icon is... a mirror and a riddle which is suitable to the thickness of our physical nature'), yet, he favors seeing in the icon to seeing through it, as in 'thorough a mirror' of 1 Cor 13:12. By saying this, he remains absolutely consistent with his teaching at the beginning of the First Apology: 'An icon is an image producing the form of its prototype, with which it has a certain difference. The icon does not resemble the archetype in every way. The Son alone is the living, essential, and immutable "Icon of the invisible God"'.²⁴

After what has been said, there remains no doubt that the Incarnation of the Son of God constitutes the theological premise of honoring icons. It is around this historical reality that the argumentation in the Apologies pivots, highlighting the impossibility in former times of depicting the unseen, of drawing what is limitless and infinite, or of forming the One who is without form, appearance, or body. However,

²⁰ See St. John of Damascus, In epistulam i ad Corinthios", in: *Commentarii in epistulas Pauli*, Patrologia Graeca, 95, 680.

²¹ This is the most important manuscript among the minuscules; it represents the Alexandrian type of texts influenced by the Byzantine type.

²² The reading ὡς δι' ἐσόπτρου is found in the following textual witnesses: D 0243 81 630 1175 1739 1881 2464 *al* sy^{P-h*}; Cl^{pt} (δι' ἐσόπτρου ὡς 33).

²³ The reading δι' ἐσόπτρου καὶ is witnessed by the following textual witnesses: L P pc a; (Ir^{lat}) Or.

²⁴ *Orationes de imaginibus tres* 1:9. See Colossians 1:15.

when you see the bodiless became man (*γενόμενος ἄνθρωπος*)²⁵ for your sake, then you can shape his human form (*μορφή*)²⁶ on wood. When the invisible One becomes visible in flesh, you may then draw the icon of the likeness (*ὁμοίωμα*)²⁷ of He who was seen. When He who is bodiless and without form, also immeasurable and with indefinite height in the superiority of His own nature, the One who, 'being in the form of God ... took upon him the form of a servant'²⁸ and is found similar to it in quantity and stature and character of the body, then you may draw Him on a board and lift it up so that people can see Him who accepted to be seen.²⁹

Philippians 2:6–7 can be characterized as the point of that argumentation for two important reasons. First, it summarizes the theology of the Divine Incarnation, since it recalls the Divine nature of Christ as well as his adopted human one: for both natures together justify the invalidity of the tutor law forbidding icons. In addition, we find in these two verses three of the most important terms that would provide St John with a linguistic biblical support to render Christologically what the icon of Christ represents,³⁰ and these are respectively *μορφή*, *ὁμοίωμα*, and *σχῆμα* (elsewhere he also uses *εἶδος*). These terms are often used interchangeably by St John to point out the 'form or outward appearance' that an icon depicts.³¹ And sometimes they are used in literary parallelism with 'icon'.³² But while that meaning is universally accepted for both terms *ὁμοίωμα* and *σχῆμα* in Philippians 2:6–7, scholarly opinions diverge considerably concerning the meaning of *μορφή* in this passage.

More precisely, there is a conflict between a mere linguistic approach and a theological approach in interpreting *μορφή* in Philippians 2:6–7. Some scholars interpret it generally against the background of its usage

²⁵ Philippians 2:7.

²⁶ Philippians 2:7.

²⁷ Philippians 2:7.

²⁸ Philippians 2:6–7.

²⁹ *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:8; see also 1:51=2:47.

³⁰ See e.g. *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:8; see also 1:51=2:47 for *ὁμοίωμα* and 3:14 for *μορφή*.

³¹ See *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:33=2:29=3:45.

³² See St. John of Damascus, 'In epistolam ad Galatas', in: *Commentarii in epistulas Pauli*, *Patrologia Graeca*, 95, 805, "ἐφθείρατε, φησί, τὴν εἰκόνα, ἀπολέσατε τὴν μορφήν...".

in Greek literature, and specifically in religion. Others still refuse to do so because that might lead to dogmatic and contextual errors.

In fact, the variety of meanings of the Greek term *μορφή* is very wide, stemming from a long history.³³ The term has been used since Homer, with the meaning of 'form, outward form or appearance', etc. Pindar also used it with that meaning to talk of humans.³⁴ It also appears in Aeschylus, Plato, and other philosophers regarding any material form of men, animals, or plants. This term was used later in the Septuagint with the meaning 'form' (for example Job 4:16; Judges 8:18), 'likeness' (Isaiah 44:13), 'image, expression' (Daniel 3:19). There, the term always refers to the external appearance, to what may be seen in a human being. This is also the case with Wisdom 18:1; 4 Maccabees 15:4.³⁵ These meanings of that term survived with Jewish writers in the first and second centuries AD, such as Philo, Josephus, and writers of apocryphal literature, as well as with Church Fathers such as Justin, Tatian, and Athenagoras.³⁶

The position of J. Behm, who applied to Philippians 2:6 the meaning of *μορφή* in the Septuagint, although by identifying *μορφή Θεοῦ* with *δόξα Θεοῦ* to give it a meaning like 'dressed with the garment of the Divine Nature's Glory',³⁷ faced serious objections from E. Käsemann.³⁸ Käsemann underlined the change in meaning of that term from Hellenistic times to indicate the essence of something, not merely the external appearance of the described object.³⁹ Later, Otfried Hofius rejected the classical meaning of *μορφή*, but also made strong criticism of Käsemann's interpretation of Philippians 2:6–7 because it would affirm a change in the Substance after the Incarnation.⁴⁰ He asserts that

³³ About the history of the term see: J. Behm, Art. "μορφή", in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapid, 1993), vol. IV, 742–750.

³⁴ See e.g. Pindar, *Isthmia* 4:53, in: *Pindari carmina cum fragmentis*, part 1, post Brunonem Snell edidit and Hervicus Maehler, (Leipzig, 19715).

³⁵ J. Behm, 'μορφή', in: ThDNT IV, 750–751.

³⁶ Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literature*, 6: Völlig neu bearbeitete Auflage, hrsg. von Kurt Aland und Barbara Aland, (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1988), 1069.

³⁷ J. Behm, 'μορφή', in: ThDNT IV, 752.

³⁸ E. Käsemann, 'Kritische Analyse von Phil 2,5–11', in: *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen I*, (Göttingen, 1960), 65–68.

³⁹ Käsemann, 'Kritische Analyse von Phil 2, 5–11', 67. See below the opinion of St. John Chrysostom.

⁴⁰ O. Hofius, *Der Chrisiushymnus Philipper 2,6–11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms*, WUNT 17, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991²), 57 n.4.

the meaning of *μορφή Θεοῦ* and *μορφή δούλου* in Philippians 2:6–7 cannot be defined in general explanations against the background of the exceedingly varied historical and religious usage of the term *μορφή*, but is to be deduced rather from the declarations of the passage.⁴¹ After a detailed analysis of the development of thought and objective of the hymn, Hofius claims that there is a total agreement in the two Christological statements in Philippians 2:6, namely that Christ existed in '*μορφή Θεοῦ*', and that 'He is equal to God';⁴² both express the same truth that he had the Divine Power and Divine Glory.⁴³ And by saying that he assumed a 'form of slave', it is meant that he became man, weak as a slave.⁴⁴

But to evaluate the interpretation of St. John of Damascus' understanding of *μορφή*, let us survey some important positions among writers and Church Fathers before him, especially those who had a great influence on his writings.

Origen uses '*μορφή Θεοῦ*' in both the classical⁴⁵ and later Hellenistic sense.⁴⁶ St John Chrysostom, undoubtedly influential to St John of Damascus' commentaries, explains plainly that *μορφή*, in both expressions '*μορφή Θεοῦ*' and '*μορφή δούλου*', means the *οὐσία* (essence).⁴⁷ Thus, he sees that '*μορφή Θεοῦ*' connotes the Divine Nature.⁴⁸ Theodoritus⁴⁹

⁴¹ Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms*, 58.

⁴² Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms*, 56.

⁴³ Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms*, 59.

⁴⁴ Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms*, 61–63.

⁴⁵ See Origène, *Contre Celse*, vol. 4, ed. and translated by Marcel Borret, *Sources Chrétiennes* 150, (Paris, 1969), VII, 66, 21, p. 168.

⁴⁶ See Origène, *Contre Celse*, vol. 2, ed. by Marcel Borret, *Sources Chrétiennes* 136, (Paris, 1968), IV, 15–16.18, pp. 218–226; vol. 3, ed. by Marcel Borret, *Sources Chrétiennes* 147, (Paris, 1969), VI, 68.23, pp. 348–350; Here I disagree with the opinion given in: Bauer-Aland, WBN^T, 1988, I069, where *μορφή* is thought to have in these passages the meaning of 'form'. The writers were misled by the phrase 'καὶ τὴν λαμπρότητα τῶν ἐνδυμάτων αὐτοῦ' in VI, 68.23, ignoring the whole context speaking about the 'μεταμόρφωσις' of Christ, when he showed 'His Glory'.

⁴⁷ See St John Chrysostom, *In epistolam ad Philippenses (hamiliae 1–15)*, *Patrologia Graeca* 62, 223.

⁴⁸ John Chrysostom, *In epistolam ad Philippenses (hamiliae 1–15)*, *Patrologia Graeca* 62, 219; 62, 220–221; Cf. 62, 229.

⁴⁹ See Theodoretus, *Interpretatio in xiv epistulas sancti Pauli*, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 82, 352.

understands *μορφή* in a similar way to that of St John Chrysostom. However, in one passage he uses that term in both its senses.⁵⁰

These examples show that *μορφή* was widely used among Church Fathers and Christian writers with the meaning of ‘essence, nature’, according to its Hellenistic usage. Nonetheless, St John of Damascus obviously preferred its ancient classical meaning that we also meet in the Septuagint.⁵¹ He deliberately makes use of Philippians 2:6–7 by interpreting *μορφή* with that meaning, to sustain the possibility after the Incarnation to draw the icon of Christ God.⁵² How great his influence was on later usage of that term is clear from the wording of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD), where *εἰκών*, *ομοίωμα*, *σχῆμα*, and *μορφή* all appear as parallel terms.⁵³

Conclusion

Throughout this study we have noticed how St John of Damascus learned the Greek text of the Bible by heart. His wide knowledge of the Greek language and the history of its words and meanings was so extensive (most probably Greek was his mother tongue), that it allowed him at times to recall biblical passages easily, without having any manuscript at hand.

It is noteworthy how he was not worried about changing the wording of these passages, even in written theological treaties. Although we know that this was the case in earlier centuries, when Scribes used to correct the Greek language of some NT books, for instance, by replacing an unfamiliar word or expression with a more familiar synonym, or by adding pronouns, conjunctions, etc., to make a smoother text,⁵⁴ it is, however, interesting to know that this practice was still unquestionable about a century after the Muslim presence in Syria. Until that time, the wording itself was not considered sacred.

⁵⁰ See Theodoretus, *Interpretatio in xiv epistulas sancti Pauli*, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 82, 569.

⁵¹ *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:43=2:39; 3:114; 1:5=2:46.

⁵² *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 1:5=2:46.

⁵³ Joannes Dominicus Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, vol. 13, Hubert Welter (Paris, 1902), 117.

⁵⁴ See B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament*, (Stuttgart, 19942), 13*.