

Module 202: John of Damascus

Defense Against Those Who Oppose Holy Images by St John of Damascus. Trans. Mary H. Allies. Abridged, modernized and introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“The invisible things of God have been made visible”

Module Introduction

The eastern half of the Christian Roman Empire survived for centuries after the west fell to barbarian tribes. But from the seventh century it had a deadly new threat to deal with: Islam. Within a decade of Mohammed’s death Muslims had conquered vast tracts of the empire, and they kept at it until they finally took Constantinople in 1453.

Islam forbids all pictures, while images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints were a central part of Christian worship in the Middle Ages. So maybe it was because his conscience was pricked by Islam that in 726 the Christian Emperor of the East, Leo III, banned all images, and started a smashing campaign, which we call “iconoclasm.” He argued that the Old Testament forbids graven images, and especially worship of them. There was passionate opposition to iconoclasm throughout the Eastern church, and the greatest defender of icons was St John of Damascus who argued that Christ coming in the flesh as the image of the invisible God changed everything. In the old days, the Emperor would have found pretty effective ways to silence him, but Damascus was living in one of the many places now under Muslim rule, so he had free rein. After Leo’s death, the icon-loving Empress Irene called the 787 Council of Nicea, which restored images to all the churches. The controversy blew up again in the following century, but the end result was the same, a result still celebrated annually in the East as “the Triumph of Orthodoxy”.

Always aware of my own unworthiness, I would have kept silent and merely confessed my shortcomings to God, but all things are good at the right time. I see the Church which

God founded on the Apostles and Prophets with the cornerstone of Christ his Son, tossed on an angry sea, beaten by rushing waves, and shaken by the assaults of evil spirits. I see rips in the seamless robe of Christ which wicked men have tried to pull apart, and His body cut into pieces (i.e. the word of God and the ancient tradition of the Church). Because of this I have decided it is wrong to hold my tongue, remembering the warning in the Bible: "If you see the sword coming and do not warn your brother, I will hold you guilty of his blood." [Ez. 33.8] Fear compelled me to speak. The truth was stronger than the majesty of kings.

Now, our opponents say, "God commanded Moses the law-giver, "You will worship the Lord your God, and only him, and not make an image for yourself of anything in heaven above, or on the earth below." [Ex. 20:3-4] But they are wrong, and do not know the Scriptures. The letter kills while the spirit gives life, [2 Cor. 3:6] and they fail to find the spiritual meaning hidden in the letter. I say to these people, the Lord who taught you this would teach you more. Listen to the law-giver's interpretation of this law in Deuteronomy: "This is to stop you looking up to the heavens and, seeing the sun, moon and stars, being deceived by error and worshipping and serving them." [Deut. 4.19] The whole point of this is that we should not adore a created thing more than the Creator, nor give true worship to anything but him. But worship of false gods is not the same as venerating holy images.

Again, God says, "You shall not have any gods other than me. You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness. You shall not adore them or serve them, for I am the Lord thy God." [Deut. 5.7-9] You see that he forbids image-making to avoid idolatry, and because it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, invisible God. As St Paul said at the Areopagus, "As we are the offspring of God, we must not imagine God to be like gold, silver, stone, or anything created by humans." [Acts 17.29] But these

instructions were given to the Jews because they were prone to idolatry. We, on the other hand, are no longer tied to apron strings. We have outgrown superstitious error, and know God in truth, worshipping him alone, enjoying the fullness of his knowledge. We are no longer children but adults. We receive our habit of mind from God, and know what may be depicted and what may not. The Scripture says, "You have not seen his face." [Ex. 33.20] How wise the Law is! How could one depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How could one express to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give infinity a shape? How paint immortality? How put mystery in one place?

But when you think of God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, then you can clothe him in a human form. When the invisible becomes visible to the eye, you may then draw his form. When he who is a pure spirit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of his own nature, existing as God, takes on the form of a servant and a body of flesh, then you may draw his likeness, and show it to anyone who is willing to contemplate it. Depict his coming down, his virgin birth, his baptism in the Jordan, his transfiguration on Mt Tabor, his all-powerful sufferings, his death and miracles, the proofs of his deity, the deeds he performed in the flesh through divine power, his saving Cross, his grave, his resurrection and his ascent into heaven. Give to it all the endurance of engraving and color. Have no fear or anxiety; not all veneration is the same. Abraham venerated the sons of Emmor, impious men who were ignorant of God, when he bought the double cave for a tomb. [Gen. 23.7] Jacob venerated his brother Esau and the Egyptian Pharaoh. [Gen 33.3] He venerated, but he did not worship in the full sense. Joshua and Daniel venerated an angel of God [Jos. 5.14, Dan. 8:16-17] they did not worship in the full sense.

Worship is one thing, veneration another. The invisible things of God have been made visible through images since

the creation of the world. We see images in creation which remind us faintly of God, e.g. in order to talk about the holy and worshipful Trinity, we use the images of the sun and rays of light, a spring and a full river, the mind and speech and the spirit within us, or a rose tree, a sprouting flower, and a sweet fragrance. Also events in the future can be foreshadowed mystically by images. For instance, the ark represents the image of Our Lady, the Mother of God. So does the staff and the earthen jar. The bronze serpent shows us the one who defeated the bite of the original serpent on the Cross; [Jn 3:14-15] the sea, water and the cloud depict the grace of baptism. [I Cor. 10.1] ...

You must understand that there are different degrees of worship. First of all the full worship which we show to God, who alone is by nature worthy of worship. But, for the sake of God who is worshipful by nature, we honor and venerate his saints and servants. It is in this sense that Joshua and Daniel worshipped an angel, [Jos. 5.14, Dan. 8:16-17] and David worshipped the Lord's holy places, when he said, "Let us go to the place where his feet have stood." [Ps. 132.7] Similarly, his dwelling place is worshipped, as when all the people of Israel adored in the tabernacle, and they stood round the temple in Jerusalem gazing at it from all sides worshipping, as they still do. Similarly, we honor the rulers established by God, as when Jacob gave homage to Esau, his elder brother, [Gen. 33.3] and to Pharaoh, the divinely established ruler. [Gen. 47.7] And Joseph was worshipped by his brothers. [Gen. 50.18] That kind of veneration is based on honour, as in the case of Abraham and the sons of Emmor. [Gen. 23.7] So then, either do away with all worship, or accept it in all its different kinds. Answer me this question: "Is there only one God?"

"Yes," you answer, "there is only one Law-giver."

So why would his commands contradict each other? The cherubim, for example, are mere creatures. Why, then, does

he allow cherubim, carved by human hand, to overshadow the mercy-seat in the temple? Obviously it is impossible to make an image of God because is infinite and changeless, or of someone like God because creation should not be worshipped as God. But he allowed the people to make an image of the cherubim who are finite and who lie in adoration before his throne, overshadowing the mercy-seat. It was fitting that the image of the heavenly choirs should overshadow the divine mysteries. Would you say that the ark of the covenant and staff and mercy-seat were not made by human hands? Do they not consist of what you call contemptible matter? What was the tabernacle itself? Was it not an image? Did it not depict a reality beyond itself? This is why the holy Apostle says that the rituals of the law, "serve as an example and shadow of heavenly things." [Heb. 8.5] Moses, when he came to finish the tabernacle, was told "make sure that you make everything according to the pattern that you were shown on the Mountain." [Ex. 25.40] The law was not an image itself, but it shrouded the image. In the words of the same Apostle, "the law contains the shadow of the goods to come, not the image of those things." [Heb. 10.1]

So, since the law is a forerunner of images, how can we say that it forbids images? Should the law ban us from making images, when the tabernacle itself was a depiction, a foreshadowing? No. There is a time for everything. [Eccl. 3.1] In the old days, the incorporeal and infinite God was never depicted. Now, however, when God has been seen clothed in flesh, and talking with mortals, [Baruch 3.37] I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out of lifeless things? And if God's body is God by its union with him, it is changeless. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh

created in time is brought to life by a logical and reasoning soul.

I honor all matter, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me. Was the three-times happy and blessed wood of the Cross not matter? Was the sacred and holy mountain of Calvary not matter? What of the life-giving rock, the Holy Tomb, the source of our resurrection - was it not matter? Is the holy book of the Gospels not matter? Is the blessed table which gives us the Bread of Life not matter? Are the gold and silver, out of which crosses and altar-plate and chalices are made not matter? And before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either stop venerating all these things, or submit to the tradition of the Church in the venerating of images, honoring God and his friends, and following in this the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing that God has made is. Only that which does not come from God is despicable - our own invention, the spontaneous decision to disregard the law of human nature, i.e., sin.

If you dishonor and reject images because they are produced by matter, consider what the Scripture says: "The Lord said to Moses, 'I have called Bezelel of Judah, and filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, understanding and knowledge of many crafts, to make artifacts from gold, silver, brass, marble, precious stones, and various kinds wood.'" [Ex. 31.1-5] This is the glorification of matter, which you call inglorious. How then, can you make the law a pretence for giving up what it orders? If you invoke the law it against images, you should keep the Sabbath, and practice circumcision. "If you observe the law, Christ will not profit you. You who are justified in the law are fallen from grace." [Gal. 5.2-4] Israel of old did not see God, but we see the Lord's glory face to face. [2 Cor. 3.18] God ordered twelve stones to be taken out of the River Jordan, and explained why. "When your son asks you the meaning of

these stones, tell him how the water left the Jordan by God's command, and how the ark of the covenant was saved along with all the people." [Jos. 4.21-22] So how can we not record in images the saving pains and miracles of Christ our Lord, so that when my child asks me, "What is this?" I may say, "That God the Word became man, and that for His sake not Israel alone passed through the Jordan, but the whole human race regained their original happiness. Through him human nature rose from the lowest depths of the earth higher than the skies, and in his Person sat down on the throne his Father had prepared for him."

Discussion Starters

1. How would you summarize John's argument in favor of images?
2. "We receive our habit of mind from God, and know what may be depicted and what may not." Is John saying in this passage that as Christians we instinctively know what is right, despite what the Bible says? If so do you agree? If not, what is he saying?
3. What examples does John find of images being allowed in the Old Testament? What does this prove? Did any of these images ensnare Israel to idolatry?
4. What difference, according to John, has the incarnation of Christ made to the issue of images? Do passages in the New Testament that ban idolatry affect John's argument? John writes "As St Paul said at the Areopagus, 'As we are the offspring of God, we must not imagine God to be like gold, silver, stone, or anything created by humans.' But these instructions were given to the Jews..." In the Bible context, does it appear those instructions were given to Jews or to Greeks? (See Acts 17).
5. What does John say about God using images in creation? Do you think his argument works?

6. What different degrees of worship does John find? What makes some kinds of worship acceptable and others wrong?

7. How are images used in churches you know? Are there right and wrong ways to use images in worship? What are the right and wrong ways, and how do you know? In the modern world, we use images as educational tools and illustrations; is this a safe use for images?

8. How would you define idolatry? Is bowing to an image or kissing it veneration, or is it idolatry? Is there any outward way to tell the difference between the two?

9. John of Damascus argues that Joshua and Daniel worshipped angels. Is this true or is he misreading the Bible? (Joshua 5:13ff; Daniel 8:17ff) Who appeared to Joshua? Was Daniel worshipping or fainting? In a New Testament case, what did an angel say when the Apostle John fell at his feet? (Revelation 22:8-9).

Bible Verses

Exodus 20:1-6

Deuteronomy 4:15-20, 25-31

Isaiah 40:18-20

Acts 17:16-31

Hebrews 1:1-3